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Cooperation, Conflict and Control: Parent-Teacher Relationships in an English Secondary School

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Abstract

In this paper, we present the findings which have emerged from our investigation of parent-teacher conversations at one secondary school in the north-west of England. Data were collected in the form of audio recordings over two years, supplemented by supporting evidence in the form of one-to-one interviews with parents, teachers and students. We analysed our data utilising conversation analysis (CA) and interpreted our findings using politeness theory (Brown and Levinson 1987). Our research revealed that the parents and teachers at this school appeared predisposed towards building friendly, mutually-supportive relationships. They did not, however, jointly decide what their aims would be, share responsibility for learning or engage in meaningful dialogue. Also, teachers tended to assume authority on educational matters whilst parents played a supporting role or acted as passive receivers of information. We discuss these behaviours in the light of the various perspectives from which parent-teacher relationships have been viewed. We also consider the practical implications of our findings for both schools and families, and recommend future lines of inquiry for those wishing to explore this under-researched educational practice.

Introduction

There is a large body of evidence to indicate that parental involvement (PI) has a significant effect on student achievement (e.g. Sheldon and Epstein, 2005; Sirvani, 2007) and that parents would like to become more involved in their children's education (e.g. Peters et al. 2008; Grant 2011). However, establishing effective working relationships between parents and schools may be difficult to achieve in practice (Wanat 2010; Hornby and Lafaele 2011). This paper focuses on the conversations which take place between parents and teachers when they formally meet and what these can tell us about the ways in which they relate to one another. Whilst our study was conducted within one English secondary school, the themes emerging may have wider relevance and provide more general insights into the nature of parent-teacher relationships.

Parent-teacher conferences are widespread and well-established internationally (e.g. Cheatham and Ostrosky 2013; Mattheisen 2015) and have been described as an "optimal opportunity to work with parents as partners" (Lemmer 2012, 93). However, there appears to be little previously-reported research in this area, possibly due to the "formidable" challenges with regard to access and confidentiality (Weininger and Lareau 2003, 377). Indeed, MacLure and Walker (2000, 5) have described parent-teacher meetings as "a black hole in our understanding of educational practices". Those studies which have been published (e.g. Pillet-Shore 2016) tend to focus on early years/primary school education and so are not directly relevant to secondary school settings. Our research addresses this by focusing on parent-teacher conversations in an English secondary school. Moreover, we combine data generated through direct recordings with ethnographic evidence from a range of secondary sources (cf. Matthiesen 2015). This is important since a number of previously-reported studies have been based primarily on interview evidence (e.g. Westergard and Galloway 2010; Inglis 2014). Whilst this research has provided valuable insights relating to the views of those involved, such data carries with it limitations regarding bias and reliability (Bryman 2012).

Literature Review

Models for parent-teacher interaction

Models based on the notion of partnership are well-established within the PI literature (Epstein et al. 2002; Hoover-Dempsey et al. 2005). Within these models, parents and teachers share power and take joint responsibility for the education of students. Parents and teachers also agree mutually beneficial goals (Weiss et al. 2009), recognise and value one another's expertise (Henderson and Mapp 2002; Warin 2009), and engage in meaningful, two-way dialogue (Cox 2005; Harris and Goodall 2008). Moreover, the notion of parents and teachers as equal partners has been actively promoted by both researchers within the field of PI (Wanat 2010; Mutch and Collins 2012) and teachers within schools (Cohen 2008; Mitchel, Foulger and Wetzel 2009). Some researchers, however, have presented evidence to suggest that partnerships do not occur in reality (Hornby and Lafaele 2011; Lemmer 2012)

or that those involved play different and not necessarily cooperative roles (Zaoura and Aubrey 2010). Hornby and Lafaele (2011, 38), for example, have pointed out “clear gaps between the rhetoric on PI found in the literature and typical PI practices found in schools”. Others have suggested that genuine partnership between parents and teachers may be an unrealistic aim (Katyál and Evers 2007; Inglis 2012). This has led to a number of studies which have attempted to explain the absence of partnership in terms of ‘barriers’ to involvement (Desforges and Abouchaar 2003; Hornby and Lafaele 2011). Such explanations imply that closer relationships between parents and teachers could occur were these external obstacles to be removed.

Other studies have considered how the the notion of education as a free-market place have affected PI (McNamara et al. 2000; Addi-Racchah and Arviv-Elyashiv 2008; Inglis 2012). Seen from this perspective, the education of students can be regarded as a service provided by schools for parents. McNamara et al (2000, 475), for example, have started from the notion of teachers as producers, parents as consumers, and educated students as products. They found that “market imperatives” had shifted power and responsibility from schools to families and pointed out that such developments could lead to friction between family members, or feelings of inadequacy where parents felt unable to meet the school’s expectations. Addi-Racchah and Arviv-Elyashiv (2008) have also viewed the positioning of parents as consumers as problematic, noting that the establishment of free-market ideology had given them greater control over both school policy and classroom practice. They suggested that these changes had caused tensions within parent-teacher relationships, thus creating the potential for conflict. Similarly, Inglis (2012) has pointed out that consumerist policies have shifted the balance of power from professionals towards parents. She found that this had made parents more likely to “participate and advocate on behalf of their child” and that teachers viewed this as a challenge to their professional status. Moreover, she argued that such changes had divided parents according to their willingness or ability to promote their children’s interests. It would thus appear that the introduction of free-market principles within education has opened up the possibility of new roles for parents and teachers, though this has not necessarily led to the cooperative relationships envisaged by those researchers who have promoted partnership.

Some researchers have suggested that the aims and values of parents and teachers are fundamentally different, resulting in conflict and tension between them (Attenucci 2004; Addi-Racchah and Arviv-Elyashiv 2008). For example, Attenucci (2004, 67) noted that the roles of parents and teachers carry with them distinctly different expectations, and provided evidence to show how easily the relations between them could “degenerate into finger-pointing and derision”. Weininger and Lareau (2003, 392) have also viewed the relationships between parents and teachers in adversarial terms. They detected ‘clashing assertions of authority’ between middle-class parents and teachers, though the working-class parents they observed tended to be passive during meetings and readily ceded control. They concluded that parent-teacher meetings, far from mitigating the effects of social class,

provided a mechanism through which certain groups of parents could exert their influence. The notion of parents and teachers in opposition is also reflected in the military terminology used by researchers when describing family-school relationships. Baeck (2010, 324), for instance, has referred to the school arena as “a battlefield for power fights between different actors”, whilst Ferrara (2009, 124) has raised the possibility that schools are becoming more like “fortresses”. Others, however, have provided evidence to challenge this way of thinking (Tveit 2007, 2009; Wanat 2010; Markstrom 2013). For example, Tveit (2009) found that teachers carefully designed their utterances so as to protect the feelings of both parents and students. These studies indicate that the relationships between parents and teachers may be more complex than views based solely on hostility or conflict would suggest.

In the ‘expert’ model (Hornby 2011; Kavanagh 2013), parents and teachers adopt separate layperson and expert roles, with the balance of power shifted towards the latter. Teachers act as specialists and providers of information or advice, whilst parents provide indirect assistance and are not expected to make decisions regarding academic learning. Seen from this perspective, parents lack the necessary knowledge and skills to effectively direct their children’s education and play a less important role. Evidence to support this view is provided by a number of researchers within the PI literature (Katyal and Evers 2007; Zaoura and Aubrey 2010), as well as those studies based on the direct observation of parent teacher meetings (Symeou 2003; Cheatham and Ostrosky 2013). It is not clear, however, whether such a demarcation of roles should be viewed in positive or negative terms. On the one hand, Symeou (2003 21) has concluded that parents were “subordinate or kept in subjection by teachers’ expertise and professional knowledge”. Seen in this light, the positioning of parents as supporters or assistants could be viewed as a means to protect the professional status of teachers and would not necessarily be welcomed by parents. On the other hand, Katyal and Evers (2007, 67) have reported that parents did not wish to engage with teachers as equals and that both parents and teachers “shied away from initiating any form of communication that was unscheduled”. Their findings thus suggest a cooperative but not necessarily close relationship between parents and teachers, with both parties willingly adopting separate roles in order to secure the best educational outcomes for students.

Our theoretical framework

We would suggest that politeness theory (Brown and Levinson 1987) provides a particularly useful way to explain parent-teacher interactions. Such an approach has already been used by Pillet-Shore (2015, 2016) to explain why parents and teachers might work to create positive identities for themselves or minimise conflict. According to Goffman (1967), all adults have a public persona, their ‘face’, which they present to others and seek to maintain. Brown and Levinson (1987) have proposed that individuals possess both positive and negative ‘face’ – the former relating to an individual’s sense of self-worth, the latter to a person’s freedom to act unimpeded – and that protecting this is an essential need for individuals in social situations. Face-

threatening acts carry the potential to damage the 'face' of either the person speaking or listening and are an inevitable part of ordinary social interaction. Politeness can be defined as a speaker's attempt to reduce the impact of a face-threatening act (Mills 2003), with individuals having a range of options – politeness strategies – that they can choose from in order to achieve this. Politeness theory assumes people to be rational actors, meaning that a given individual would be expected to choose the same politeness strategy as any other in the same circumstances. Which strategy an individual chooses will depend on the social distance between the participants, their relative social status, and the potential impact of the face-threatening act. A meeting between strangers, for example, might thus be expected to involve greater levels of politeness than a conversation between friends who know one another well.

Methodology

Study design

We have adopted a case study approach (Stake 2005; Baxter and Jack 2008) in which the parent-teacher conversations we recorded formed the basic units of analysis. We based our investigation on direct recordings of parent-teacher conversations in their natural setting, as opposed to interviews or staged meetings between parents and teachers. This allowed us to capture context-dependent features of participants' talk that might otherwise have gone undetected (Heritage 2004). Moreover, our approach allowed us to build up a detailed knowledge of the participants and the research setting that enhanced our ability to interpret participants' conversations (Maynard 2006). It has been argued that the findings generated by case study research are not generalisable (Tight 2010). We would point out, however, that they can provide detailed examples of experiences which others can apply to their own situations (Thomas, 2011). We would also note the cumulative value of case study research (Woodside 2010) and suggest that, when combined with other studies, such findings may form part of a more rounded picture from which general conclusions could be drawn.

Research context

Our study was conducted within a small secondary school (attended by 11-16 year-olds) located in the north of England. At the time of our research, this school served a relatively affluent rural community and was well known for its strong Christian ethos. Formal parent-teacher meetings at the school were staged on five separate occasions – referred to as parents' evenings – during the academic year, with each of these being dedicated to the students of a particular year group. These events were conducted in the main hall at the end of the school day, between 16:00 and 19:00, with the majority of parents being accompanied by their children. The evenings themselves comprised of a series of face-to-face meetings – nominally scheduled to last for five minutes – with parents moving around the hall whilst teachers remained seated at tables. Parents usually met with between five and ten different

teachers during the course of an evening, whilst teachers typically had between twenty and thirty appointments.

Sampling and data collection

Conversations were recorded at ten parents' evenings over a period of two academic years. In the week before each event, we randomly selected two parents (from separate families) and two teachers¹. We then contacted the individuals concerned – parents by telephone, teachers face-to-face – to explain the nature of our research and request participation. This procedure was repeated until two parents and two teachers had agreed to be involved, at which point the relevant students were approached by a non-teaching member of staff. In addition, we intentionally targeted a small number of participants – e.g. a newly-qualified teacher engaging in her first parent-teacher meeting – with the aim of identifying unusual patterns of talk that might inform more routine encounters (Hutchby and Wooffitt 2002). Where agreement from participants was forthcoming, we presented each with a background information sheet/consent form, to be completed and returned on the day of the meeting. Participants were asked to record two of their conversations using a hand-held digital recorder. This resulted in fifty-two recordings, most of which were attended by students. We then randomly selected twenty of these conversations, two from each parents' evening event, for detailed analysis.

Data analysis

We analysed our data using conversational analysis (CA). This is the systematic study of the talk which takes place during ordinary social interaction – i.e. not staged by a researcher – and is based on transcribed recordings of actual conversations (Heritage 2011). CA aims to examine how participants use language to achieve their goals, the emphasis being on how they themselves understand and respond to one another as sequences of talk unfold. This limits common sense interpretations, thus minimising researcher bias and enabling taken-for-granted patterns of talk to be identified (Hutchby and Wooffitt 2002). CA does not, however, admit evidence from beyond the particular part of the transcript being examined, meaning that interview data cannot be considered and wider contexts must be ignored unless referred to by participants (Wooffitt 2005). Since we considered this to be unduly restrictive, we chose to supplement our analysis of transcripts with interview data. This approach is supported by Maynard (2006), who has suggested that investigations can be enhanced by combining CA with ethnography. Moreover, our use interviews allowed the participants in our study to present their own interpretations of conversations (Somekh 2006). We conducted

¹ All of the teachers at the school in which this research took place were individually asked to participate, resulting in twenty-three teachers whose conversations were recorded, 88% of the teaching staff at the school when this study took place.

unstructured – rather than semi-structured – interviews with participants. Our questions were thus not set beforehand, but emerged spontaneously as interviews progressed (Zhang and Wildemuth 2009). We would argue that this approach maximised sensitivity and flexibility, and also to encouraged participants to speak freely (Bryman 2012). During interviews, participants were invited to give their interpretation of the conversation or present any background information that they felt might be relevant. This enabled us to construct a detailed background context to each conversation, thus generating insights that could not have been accessed from transcripts alone.

Findings

In this section, we present the findings which emerged from the twenty parent-teacher conversations which we analysed in detail. These are divided into four major themes: support and cooperation; harm avoidance; competition and conflict; and conversational control. For each theme, we provide a summary of our analysis, followed by excerpts from conversations and interviews. The following abbreviations are used throughout: T = teacher; M = mother; F = father; S = student. Real names have been replaced with psuedonyms.

Mutual support and cooperation

In almost all of the meetings we recorded, parents and teachers tended to support one another, and acted cooperatively to bring about improved educational outcomes for students. Moreover, in cases where students disagreed with or resisted teachers, the parents involved invariably placed themselves in opposition to their child. During the following excerpt, the teacher is discussing a creative writing assignment that he felt had been treated flippantly by the student.

Excerpt 1

- 276 T: So this makes me think >that you're not taking this
277 fully [seriously]<
278 S: [right]
279 T: yes OK it does make you think of zombies or something
280 but take it seriously the=
281 S: =right
282 T: the writing is trying to create an effect on you
283 S: [yeh]
284 M: → [just] take on that idea Danny and you've gone for a
285 random leap (.) somewhere t'=
286 T: =totally random but (0.5)
287 M: (inaudible) effort you know (.) zombie invasion is for
288 pleasure yeah but this is serious learning this is serious
289 stuff isn't it yeh=
290 S: =yeh
291 M: → yeh an' (.) an' it would be a shame if you're not to have

- 292 your X-box ((games console)) wouldn't it
 293 S: yeh
 294 M: because you kept leaping in with this nonsense here
 295 S: right
 296 T: → so keep it

Following the teacher's criticism, the parent moved quickly to position herself in opposition to her child (line 284 and 291-294). The parent's argument was subsequently endorsed by the teacher (line 296), thus returning her support and presenting a unified front to the student. During her interview, the parent described her aims for this meeting.

This meeting was more about "How do we move him forward?" and for [my child] to hear that, 'cos he needs to know that, that we're all on the same page, that there's communication between me and his teachers. Then there's no, kind of, wriggle room for him. He needs to know where the boundary is and I suppose it's a way of reinforcing the line.

Parent

It would thus appear that this parent had wished to make clear the standards of behaviour that she expected of her child in school and show that she fully supported his teachers.

Harm avoidance

The teachers in our study seemed particularly sensitive to the potential for their talk to upset others and employed strategies which served to avoid harm. Indeed, such talk occurred extensively throughout the conversations we recorded. In the following example, the teacher is responding to a question from the parent about the student's homework record.

Excerpt 2

- 62 T: well that's how I see it yeh what I mean yeh that's
 63 fine that's a good question to ask that's excellent erm
 64 we did discuss something about this year there's a bit
 65 of a change from last year y' your organization's not
 66 quite as good as last year >we think< OK? you've had a
 67 couple of occasions where our organisation's meant we
 68 haven't quite got our homework in on time hasn't it yeah?
 69 → and I think that's down to organisation rather than
 70 >thinking am not gonna do my homework< 'cos Clare's
 71 attitude to work is very good and it's not that you're gonna
 72 forget to do it or not want to do it but getting back in the
 73 habit of checking your planner OK the night before

The teacher's initial delay in responding to the parent's question (lines 62-65) indicates his reluctance to discuss this topic. He also created the impression that this was not a serious matter (lines 64-67), before switching pronouns (lines 64 and 66) so as to play down his personal involvement. The teacher also attributed the cause of the student's missed assignments to her poor organisation and made it clear that the problem was not due to her attitude (lines 69-71).

For their part, parents tended to avoid or play down issues that might have reflected negatively on the teacher. The following extract was taken from a meeting involving a parent whose child had a history of misbehaviour during lessons with the teacher concerned.

Excerpt 3

- 425 M: so is he er is is he generally roundabout behaving well
426 in lessons
427 T: (.) er 'cos as long as he avoids this silli[ness]
428 M: [this] silliness
429 [because he's really]
430 T: [the tendency for] silliness which is which is avoidable
431 M: yep
432 T: then he'll be fine=
433 M: =if I give you my mobile my mobile number would you
434 text me if he's been mucking about in the lesson
435 T: >sure< ((doesn't sound particularly keen))
436 M: can we do that (.) literally just a a text saying he was out
437 of order or whatever you know just (.) an' then we can we
438 could talk about it at home
439 T: yeh
440 M: 'cos I want to know what's going on with you
441 S: yeh
442 M: what's going on in lesson time (.)
443 S: OK
444 M: is that OK I don't mean to be a pain but if he's been a
445 pain in lessons then I wanna know

In this sequence, the parent expressed concern over her child's behaviour in class (lines 425-426) and indicated that she saw the problem being with her child (lines 434, 436-437, 444-445). When interviewed, the parent made it clear that she had been particularly concerned with regard to lessons taught by this teacher and appeared to suggest that the teacher might have been partly to blame.

He's improved his behaviour, but there was an incident. I think [this subject] is a bit of a pressure point. I'm not quite sure what, I'm not sure if it's ((deep intake of breath)) but there's obviously an issue there.

Mother

She did not, however, question the teacher during their meeting as to why these problems had occurred in his lessons. Later in her interview, she explained that the teacher had appeared uncomfortable when this issue had been raised and so had chosen not to challenge him directly.

Conflict

In two of the conversations we analysed, the parents involved positioned themselves in opposition to the teacher or the school. In one of these cases, however, the teacher involved avoided confrontation by agreeing with the parent. By contrast, the teacher in the other conversation stood her ground.

Excerpt 4-a

- 65 M: → >you know< now (.) they both were really upset (.) erm at
66 the awards night about being told off for not going
67 T: yeah
68 M: now they didn't go because they have this
69 qualification that they do (.) now because they were at
70 camp ((a residential training event run by the air cadets))
71 T: yeah
72 M: they had to get the qualification to go on the camp
73 T: [yeah]
74 M: [school] was supposed to let them go on the camp (.) and
75 then give them the help with not going to rewards night
76 T: → I think the thing is with rewards night it's one of our
77 biggest nights in the school calendar h erm
78 M: but careerwise for these two

In this sequence, the parent – also a teacher – expressed her dissatisfaction with the way that her children had been treated by the school because they had not attended the school's prize night (lines 65-66). Moreover, the parent also pointed out that her children had missed this event because of competing commitments which were worthwhile, career-orientated activities in their own right (lines 68-72).

For her part, the teacher produced only short, supportive responses (e.g. line 67) during the parent's complaint, giving the impression that she was working to keep the situation calm. She did not, however, accept the parent's argument (lines 76-77), which led to a lengthy exchange between the two in which both parties attempted to justify their positions. The following extract shows the point at which this impasse was eventually resolved.

Excerpt 4-b

- 225 T: → [yeah] but no I'm r' I'm really an' (.) I'm sorry

- 226 if >you know< you've felt about prize night an' that >you
 227 know< you weren't supported but it was just it was just as
 228 a school in a whole you were treated the same as
 229 everybody else [but]
 230 M: [not] very well
 231 T: I know an' >you know< that's where (.) I was probably
 232 well all of us were probably .hh oh ((sounds like
 233 disappointment)) >you know< because we wanted to see
 234 you on the stage getting your prizes that you deserved

Here, the teacher delivered an apology, though she once more justified her actions in terms of her desire to be consistent (lines 228-229) and her disappointment that the students in question were not receiving their due credit (lines 231-234). Whilst the first of these points was firmly rejected by the parent, the second was later accepted. This triggered an extended 'reconciliation' sequence in which both parties worked to restore positive relations.

Perhaps surprisingly, both the parent and the teacher described this meeting in positive terms during their respective interviews.

This meeting ended politely, 'cos you're not gonna not do, you've got your children there, so you're gonna end it, you know .. but it was worth coming in to have that conversation.

Parent

It would thus appear that both parties considered this meeting to have been worthwhile, though the parent's comment suggests that she may have acted differently had her children not been present.

Conversational control

Most of the teachers in our study firmly established and maintained control of conversations. They decided what the aims of the meeting would be, who would speak, and what topics would be raised. The following excerpt was typical of the conversations we recorded.

Excerpt 5

- 1 T: → OK so first of all Darren I'm gonna look over your test
 2 results an' an' then just go through through those quickly
 3 so in your year ten exam (.) you got (4.0) ((sound of
 4 pages being turned)) a grade D
 5 P: yeh=
 6 T: =with sixty percent yeh (.) it was quite close to a C but it
 7 was in grade D (.) and the last two tests you've done
 8 you've been around about the middle to lower end of

9 grade D with the ‘Existence of God’ test and the ‘Evil and
 10 Suffering’ test so that’s why on your report I gave you a D
 11 for your attainment because that’s where you’ve been
 12 → operating at in terms of the tests (.) so we need to think
 13 about how we can shift you from a D to a C which is your
 14 target I do believe you’re perfectly capable of achieving
 15 → your target (.) if we have a look at your actual classwork

In this sequence, the teacher directed the conversation from the outset (lines 1-2), stating what the overall aim of the meeting (lines 12-13) and the first topic (lines 15-16) should be. Moreover, he did most of the talking during the remainder of the conversation and provided few opportunities for the student or his mother to speak. By contrast, neither the parent nor the student attempted to introduce topics of their own, even when they had the chance to do so. During his interview, the teacher noted how one-sided the conversation had been.

I, erm, basically, gave the parents very few opportunities to interact within the conversation, and that, that wasn’t necessarily deliberate policy but I could see how, sort of, reflecting on how the conversation had gone, I could see how I basically gave them a monologue.

Teacher

Neither the parent nor the student, however, seemed concerned about their lack of input and, during separate interviews, stated that they had been happy in their role as passive receivers of information.

I was happy just to sit and listen ‘cos I felt that everything he’d said was relevant and was, erm, yeah, was to the point and, you know, he wasn’t, if he’d have said something I didn’t agree with then I would have said something to him.

Parent

The parent did, in fact, produce two substantive turns during this meeting, both occurring when the teacher had failed to recall key facts. At these points, the parent volunteered the required information, thus getting the teacher out of difficulty and allowing him to resume control of the conversation.

In two conversations, the teachers involved were less clearly in control and parents also selected topics for discussion. The circumstances surrounding these meetings, however, could be described as atypical. In one case, the student had very low self-confidence. In the other, the parent and teacher were ex-colleagues who had worked together at the school some years previously.

Discussion

In our literature review, we considered several different perspectives from which parent-teacher relationships can be viewed. We will now consider how our research findings support or undermine these differing models.

Our research generated a limited amount of evidence to suggest that the parents and teachers were acting as equal partners. Both parties were often willing to forgive transgressions, accepted responsibility for their shortcomings and actively supported one another to improve students' learning (excerpt 1). However, our study also generated evidence to challenge the notion of equal partnership between parents and teachers. In the majority of conversations, the flow of information was predominantly from teachers to parents (excerpt 5). Teachers also selected topics for discussion, decided who would speak and focused on the knowledge that only they possessed. For their part, the parents involved in our investigation typically acted as passive recipients of information or advice and at times appeared reluctant to steer the conversation towards those topics which caused them concern (excerpt 3). Moreover, when they did speak, they often addressed their child rather than the teacher, resulting in little dialogue between the adult participants. Similar behaviour has been previously reported by other researchers across a range of educational contexts (e.g. Inglis 2012; Mattheisen 2015). Additionally, much of the talk we observed appeared directed towards minimising harm or avoiding conflict (excerpt 2), as opposed to improving educational outcomes (cf. Tveit 2009; Pillet-Shore 2016). Such talk suggests that the participants in our study did not count on one another's unqualified support. Our findings thus provide support for those researchers who have observed that partnership between parents and teachers tends not to occur in practice (Hornby and Lafaele 2011; Lemmer 2012).

According to Inglis (2012), the introduction of market-based policies within education has shifted the balance of power towards parents, making them more likely to advocate on behalf of their children, request individual treatment or challenge school policy and practice (Weininger and Lareau 2003; Addi-Raccah and Arviv-Elyashiv 2008). Positioning parents as consumers would also be expected to influence teachers' behaviour since increased parental choice would oblige schools to promote themselves in order to remain competitive (McNamara et al. 2000). Of the conversations we analysed, however, we found only two cases in which parents acted as advocates or made requests (excerpt 3), and no evidence to suggest that teachers were attempting to promote the school. In terms of politeness theory (Brown and Levinson 1987), such talk could be regarded as face-threatening and may have been avoided by the parents and teachers in our study in order to reduce the potential for harm. However, politeness theory also suggests that parents of similar or higher social status to teachers would be more likely to engage in these acts (cf. Weininger and Lareau 2003). Given that the school in question was located in a relatively affluent area in which a high proportion of parents were university educated, some face-threatening acts might thus have been expected. The parents in our study, however, tended not to make requests or advocate, regardless of their status. This could have been

because these parents placed a greater value on maintaining 'face' than on achieving improved educational outcomes for students. Alternatively, they may not have considered it part of their role to intervene in the education of their children (Katyal and Evers 2007).

We found only one example in which the parent and teacher could be described as opponents (excerpts 4-a and 4-b), in contrast to those researchers who have reported frequent challenges between parents and teachers (MacLure and Walker 2000; Weininger and Lareau 2003). The participants in this conversation, however, seemed more interested in resolving their differences than engaging in conflict, and worked to restore friendly relations during the latter part of their conversation. Moreover, the parents in our study tended to support teachers when they were attempting to modify students' behaviour (excerpt 1), and avoided raising issues that might challenge teachers' professional competence (excerpt 3). According to Brown and Levinson (1987), the apparent reluctance of the parents and teachers in our study to challenge one another or engage in conflict could be interpreted as a wish to avoid threats to 'face'. Alternatively, the presence of students in most of the conversations we recorded may have altered the nature of the talk taking place. Tveit (2007), for example, found that student participation made both parents and teachers more tactful and less likely to raise problem issues. A further possibility is that the theoretical frameworks used by others (e.g. MacLure and Walker 2000) may have increased the likelihood that conflict would be detected. The parents and teachers in our study were, however, less cautious when it came to challenging students (excerpts 1 and 3), in keeping with Markstrom's (2013) notion of a generational divide between students and their parents and teachers. This may have been due to students' subordinate status or greater familiarity with their parents and teachers, both of which would have made face-threatening acts more likely.

Two patterns of talk emerged from our study which support the 'expert' model for parent-teacher relationships (Hornby 2011; Kavanagh 2013). Firstly, the large majority of the conversations we recorded involved the uninterrupted flow of information from teachers to parents (excerpt 5). This is in agreement with those researchers who have provided quantitative evidence to show that teachers do most of the talking during meetings (Symeou 2003; Cheatham and Ostrosky 2011). Indeed, parents tended to make their contributions later in the conversation, suggesting that they were reluctant to volunteer information or considered their knowledge to be less important. Secondly, the teachers in our study typically took responsibility for improving students' learning, with parents adopting a supporting role in which they merely endorsed the teacher's message (excerpt 1). Such behaviour is consistent with other studies based on the direct observation of parent-teacher meetings (e.g. Lemmer 2012; Matthiesen 2015) and can be explained in terms of politeness theory (Brown and Levinson 1987). Seen from this perspective, the 'expert' behaviour of teachers could be regarded as a defensive strategy which allowed them to speak on topics where they were unlikely to be challenged. The notion of harm-avoidance would also explain the reluctance of the parents in our study to demonstrate their own expertise as this would

diminish teachers' authority (MacLure and Walker 2000). We found few examples, however, of teachers giving advice to parents, in contrast to Cheatham and Ostrosky (2011). Such talk – which might have been expected within this model – may have been avoided by teachers since it would threaten both the positive and negative 'face' of parents (Pillet-Shore 2015).

Conclusions

General summary

The parents and teachers involved in our research did not jointly decide on their aims, share responsibility or engage in meaningful, two-way dialogue. Our findings thus provide limited evidence to support the notion of partnership in the sense used within the field of PI.

Parents and teachers did not act as consumers and service-providers. Few parents made requests or attempted to advocate on behalf of their children, and teachers did not engage in marketing the school. This may have been because parents and teachers regarded such behaviours as face-threatening acts.

Parents and teachers were rarely critical and worked to avoid or minimise harm. Indeed, they seemed predisposed towards supporting one another and building friendly relationships. We would thus argue that the parents and teachers in our study could not be described as opponents.

Teachers typically positioned themselves as the 'expert' and delivered attainment-related information to parents, who typically adopted a passive supporting role. However, teachers did not give advice to parents, as might have been expected within this model.

Implications and recommendations

Whilst the notion of partnership has been widely promoted within the academic and professional literature, it does not necessarily follow that parents and teachers desire closer working relationships. Our findings raise the possibility that parents and teachers may favour separate but complementary roles. We would thus recommend that schools consult with parents, students and teachers to determine their views before implementing initiatives designed to promote partnership. Since the parents and teachers in our study spent so much of their (limited) contact time avoiding harm, we would also recommend that meetings should be held more often and made less formal. This would foster trusting relationships and reduce the amount of 'cautious' talk, thus allowing parents and teachers to focus on educational matters. We would also suggest that fewer meetings be held on any given day, with more time allocated for each conversation. This would reduce time pressure on teachers and make genuine, open-ended dialogue more likely.

The findings generated by our research were collected in a single secondary school over a fixed period of time. In alternative settings or at other times, very different findings might have emerged. It would therefore be useful to conduct similar studies across a range of differing educational contexts in order to establish whether or not our findings are specific to this school or more general in nature. Our research also identified a number of leads that might be usefully followed by other researchers. The way in which students affected parent-teacher conversations, and the possibility that parents' knowledge of the education system may have altered the balance of power would appear to be particularly interesting lines of inquiry. Additionally, our methodology – in which we complemented the methods of CA with interview data from participants – may be a useful template for other researchers to consider when planning their investigations.

Limitations and Contribution

Our study was conducted within a single, somewhat atypical, school. Whilst this allowed us to acquire a particularly detailed knowledge of the setting and the participants, it also means that our findings cannot be generalised (Stake 2005). The fact that the principle researcher was a teacher within the school would also have made our interpretations particularly prone to personal bias. Moreover, the talk we recorded was not necessarily representative of all the conversations which occurred at the school. Several parents did not wish have their conversations recorded, whilst some teachers requested that potentially difficult meetings were avoided. Conversations were also chosen according to the order in which they appeared on teachers' appointment sheets, resulting in more meetings at earlier times. Additionally, our decision to conduct unstructured interviews meant that participants often wandered onto seemingly irrelevant subjects and that the content of different interviews did not overlap. It could be argued that a semi-structured approach would have elicited more relevant data and enabled us to directly compare participants' responses.

Our study usefully extends what is known about parent-teacher meetings in a number of ways. Firstly, our research appears to provide the only direct observation of parent-teacher conversations in a secondary school context for well over a decade. Whilst other studies based on parent-teacher interaction has been reported, these have been conducted within early years/primary school contexts or did not involve recordings of naturally-occurring conversations. Secondly, our study has generated evidence to confirm previously-identified patterns of talk, most notably the tendency for teachers to control conversations and the prevalence of harm avoidance and identity work. We have also drawn attention to a feature of parent-teacher conversations that does not appear to have been reported elsewhere, this being the propensity for parents and teachers to tolerate one another's shortcomings and work towards building positive relationships. Additionally, our findings challenge existing perspectives from which parents-teacher relationships have been viewed in terms of partnership, conflict or market forces.

Concluding remarks

Our findings suggest that the parents and teachers in our study were neither partners nor opponents. Moreover, we found evidence to suggest that the parents involved were comfortable with their supporting role and did not necessarily want to closer, more equal relationships with teachers. This creates a dilemma for schools who see parent-teacher meetings as a means to bring about partnership. On the one hand, the staging of these events provides an opportunity for parents and teachers to exchange knowledge, work together for the benefit of students, and build trusting relationships. On the other, well-meaning schools may be placing pressure on parents to engage with teachers in ways that they do not welcome. If the considerable resources channelled into parent-teacher meetings are to be used effectively, we would suggest that individual schools should decide for themselves how best to proceed based on the voices of those directly concerned.

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Appendix

Transcription notation (Derived from Jefferson's full system; see Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998):

(.)	Just noticeable pause
(0.3) (2.3)	Examples of exactly timed pauses, in seconds.
.hh hh	Speaker's in-breath and out-breath respectively.
wo(h)rd	'Laughter' within words
end.	Full stop (period) denotes falling, ending intonation.
word?	Question mark depicts rising, questioning intonation.
£words£	Pound signs enclose talk said in "smile voice".
cu-	A sharp cut-off of a prior word or sound.
lo:ng	Stretching of the preceding sound.
(word)	Transcriber's guess at an unclear part of the tape.
run=on	Material that runs on
<u>under</u>	Emphasis using volume and/or pitch.
°soft°	Speech noticeably quieter than the surrounding talk.
>fast<	Talk noticeably quicker than the surrounding talk
over [lap]	Overlapping talk
[over]	
↑word	The onset of a noticeable pitch rise
↓word	The onset of a noticeable pitch descent