

**VOLUME ONE**

**MODELS OF PARENT-PROFESSIONAL COLLABORATION: WHAT DO THE  
PARENTS OF CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS VALUE FROM  
THEIR INTERACTIONS WITH PROFESSIONALS?**

**By**

**Eleanor McNab**

**A thesis submitted to**

**The University of Birmingham**

**For the Doctorate of Applied Educational and Child Psychology**

**School of Education**

**University of Birmingham**

UNIVERSITY OF  
BIRMINGHAM

**University of Birmingham Research Archive**

**e-theses repository**

This unpublished thesis/dissertation is copyright of the author and/or third parties. The intellectual property rights of the author or third parties in respect of this work are as defined by The Copyright Designs and Patents Act 1988 or as modified by any successor legislation.

Any use made of information contained in this thesis/dissertation must be in accordance with that legislation and must be properly acknowledged. Further distribution or reproduction in any format is prohibited without the permission of the copyright holder.

**MODELS OF PARENT-PROFESSIONAL COLLABORATION: WHAT DO THE  
PARENTS OF CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS VALUE FROM  
THEIR INTERACTIONS WITH PROFESSIONALS?**

**Abstract**

In the context of working towards a more equitable society, where emphasis is increasingly being placed on promoting equal opportunities for all those accessing the education system, it has been recognised that parents have the right to be heard on matters relating to their child's special educational needs. Parents play a vital role in contributing to their child's overall well-being, and although professionals may strive to work in partnership with parents, partnership is far from achieved in many cases, with some parents remaining 'voiceless' or seemingly 'unreachable'.

This thesis (Volume One) was produced as part of the written requirements for the Doctoral training in Educational and Applied Child Psychology and comprises four chapters. Chapter one provides an overview of the volume of work, and alerts the reader to my identity as a researcher and a Trainee Educational Psychologist (TEP) and my epistemological position within this. Chapter Two provides a review of the critical literature relating to parent-professional working and looks at the factors that have been identified as contributing to effective partnership. Chapter Three describes a small scale research study that explored parents' lived experiences of

working with professionals in relation to their child's special educational needs, and sought to explore the ways in which partnership working could be improved so that parents felt that they had a voice. The research employed case study methodology to explore participants' lived experiences, and data were analysed using Thematic Analysis. Chapter Four contains final reflections relating to the use of case study methodology as an approach to exploratory research and considers how the study has contributed to my practice as an Educational Psychologist (EP).

**To Simon**

For your continued belief, reassurance and support, and for always making me smile

**To my Mum and Dad**

For being the voice of reason and for always believing in me

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank the following people:

Dr Jane Yeomans at the University of Birmingham for her continued support and guidance as my tutor and for her kind and patient manner which has helped to make my research journey enjoyable.

My placement supervisor, Jane Linton for her ongoing supervision and contribution to my research project.

My fellow trainees (2007 – 2010), for their unwavering support and reassurance, and for helping to preserve my sanity!

And finally, a special thank you to all of the parents who participated in this research study. Without their strength, openness, courage and honesty this research would not have been possible.

## **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

	<b>Section</b>	
<b>Chapter 1:</b>	<b>Introduction to Volume 1</b>	
1	Structure and content of Volume 1	1
2	Reasons for choosing research area	3
3	My identity and position as a researcher	5
4	Working in partnership with parents: The researcher:researchee relationship	6
5	Intended audience for Volume 1	7
	List of references	9
<b>Appendices:</b>		
A1	The British Journal of Special Education: Author guidelines	10
A2	Public Domain Briefing I: Presentation of the Literature Review to the Educational Psychology Service	12
A3	Public Domain Briefing II: Presentation of the Research to the Educational Psychology Service	21
A4	Participants' summary of research findings	36
<b>Chapter 2:</b>	<b>Parent-professional partnership: Context, current literature and directions for future research</b>	

1	Introduction	38
1.1	Aims and focus of the paper	39
1.2	Literature search method	40
2	What do Government reports and enquiries tell us about working with parents? National Policy context	41
2.1	The Warnock Report	42
2.2	The SEN Code of Practice	44
2.3	Together from the Start	45
2.4	The Lamb Inquiry	47
3	Towards a shared understanding: the challenges associated with the conceptualisation of partnership	49
3.1	The influence of personal history	56
3.2	A shared understanding?	57
4	What are the barriers and enablers to parent-professional partnership identified in the literature?	58
4.1	Parent versus professional	59
4.1.1	Power and powerlessness	63
4.1.2	An emotional attachment	67
4.1.3	Types of Parent	70
4.2	Equal Opportunities	75
4.2.1	Social Class	76
4.2.2	Racial and cultural difference and the impact of single parent status	79



	5	Models of partnership and frameworks for collaboration	82
	6	Voice of the parent: Implications for future research	88
	7	Conclusions	89
		List of References	92
<b>Tables</b>	1	Differences between parents and professionals	61
	2	Types of Parent	72
	3	Parent subject positions	73
	4	Three mechanisms through which social class might operate	78
	5	Models of parent-professional collaboration	84
<b>Chapter 3:</b>		<b>Models of parent-professional collaboration: What do the parents of children with special educational needs value from their interactions with professionals?</b>	
	1	Introduction	100
	1.1	National policy context	101
	1.2	Conceptualising partnership	104
	1.3	Barriers to parent-professional partnership	109
	1.3.1	The impact of difference	112
	1.4	A gap in the literature	114
	1.5	The current study	117

2	Methodology	119
2.1	Rationale	119
2.2	Design	122
2.3	Participants	124
2.4	Procedure	129
2.4.1	Multiple sources of evidence: Triangulation	131
2.4.2	Educational Psychologist interviews	132
2.4.3	Documentary evidence: file trawl	133
2.5	Ethical considerations	134
2.6	Reliability and Validity	137
2.7	Data analysis	139
3	Results	142
3.1	Power	143
3.1.1	The powerful professional	143
3.1.2	The powerless parent	146
3.2	Communication	148
3.2.1	I don't understand	149
3.2.2	They just don't listen	153
3.3	Rapport	156
3.3.1	Being sensitive to my needs (as a parent)	157
3.3.2	The personal touch	159
3.4	Documentary evidence	161
4	Discussion	163

4.1	Key findings	163
4.1.1	How do parents of children with SEN experience support from professionals?	164
4.1.2	How do parents of children with SEN feel about their interactions with professionals?	171
4.2	Implications for practice	174
4.2.1	How can professionals increase the value of their interactions with parents of children with SEN?	174
4.3	Limitations	177
4.4	Suggestions for future research	184
5	Concluding reflections	186
	List of references	188

<b>Tables</b>	1	What do government reports and enquiries tell us about working with parents	103
	2	Definitions of partnership	106
	3	Parent-professional differences: Summary of the literature	110
	4	Models of parent-professional collaboration	115
	5	Components of research design	122
	6	Selection of participants	127
	7	Participant characteristics	129
	8	Research questions and interview questions	130
	9	Data collection and data analysis timeline	132

	10	Ethical considerations	135
	11	Case study validity and reliability	138
	12	Phases of thematic analysis	141
	13	Manifestations of power emerging from the thematic analysis	166
	14	How can professionals increase the value of their interactions with parents of children with SEN?	176
	15	Limitations	182
<b>Figures</b>	1	Overarching and subordinate themes	142
	2	Pictorial representation of themes	161
	3	Parents' negative experiences of working with professionals	164
	4	A summary of parents' feelings regarding their interactions with professionals	172
	5	A diagram demonstrating the progression of a working relationship	174
	6	The parent-professional communication model	179
<b>Chapter 4:</b>		<b>Concluding Chapter</b>	
	1	Reflections on research methodology	196
	2	Original contribution to knowledge and theory development	198
	3	Reflections on the contribution of the study to my practice as an Educational Psychologist	199

	4	Impact of the research on the participants	201
		List of references	202
<b>Appendices:</b>	A1	Script used to inform potential participants of why single-parent status was used as part of the selection criteria	203
	A2	Outline of study provided to EP	204
	A3	Script used to outline research to participants	205
	A4	EC2 Ethics form	207
	A5	Pilot Study details	216
	A6	Participant interview schedule	217
	A7	EP interview schedule / exploration of propositions	218
	A8	Informed consent form	219
	A9	Confidentiality script	220
	A10	Illustration of thematic analysis process	221
	A11	Interview transcripts	223

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **INTRODUCTION**

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION TO VOLUME ONE**

#### **1. Structure and content of Volume One**

This volume of work constitutes the first of a two volume thesis completed in line with the written requirements for the Doctorate in Applied Educational and Child Psychology undertaken at the University of Birmingham. Volume One comprises a critical literature review, and a small-scale research study, both of which focus on parents of children with special educational needs (SEN) and the roles available to them when working with professionals. It is structured as follows:

#### **Chapter 1: Introduction to Volume One**

This chapter alerts the reader to my dual roles as a researcher fulfilling the requirements of the Doctorate in Applied Educational and Child Psychology, and as a Trainee Educational Psychologist (TEP) employed by a West Midlands Local Authority during years two and three of my training. It considers some of the tensions and opportunities associated with this dual-identity, and highlights the ways in which my role as a TEP influenced my choice of research domain. The chapter considers my identity as a researcher, and the epistemological position to which I align myself in an attempt to bring transparency to my research. Finally, the chapter considers the intended audience of this volume of work, including implications of writing for a specified journal, namely the *British Journal of Special Education*.

## **Chapter 2: Parent-Professional Partnership: Context, Current Literature and Directions for Future Research**

This chapter provides a critical review of the national policy and literature relating to parent-professional working and looks at the factors that have been identified as contributing to effective partnership. It considers the potential barriers and enablers relating to parent involvement to determine why some parents are more likely to play an active role in their child's education than others. It also explores the extent to which 'parent voice' is situated at the heart of research that advocates a particular approach to working with parents.

## **Chapter 3: Models of Parent-Professional Working: What do the Parents of Children with Special Educational Needs Value from their Interactions with Professionals?**

This Chapter describes a small scale research study, positioned within the interpretive paradigm that explores parents' lived experiences of working with professionals in relation to their child's special educational needs. The study was designed to address gaps in the existing literature relating to parent-professional collaboration, in particular the near absence of 'parent voice' in the development of models to support partnership working. The research study employed case study methodology to explore parents' individual experiences, and the use of semi-structured interviews allowed parents to share their experiences in their own words. The procedure for analysing data is described, and findings are presented in terms of



emerging themes, which are then critiqued in relation to the study's research questions.

The critical literature review presented in Chapter 2, and the small scale research study presented in Chapter 3 have been written as two 'stand alone' papers in line with the written requirements for the Doctorate in Applied Educational and Child Psychology. However, there is likely to be some overlap and duplication with regards to the research studies that have been presented and critiqued in Chapter 2, and those outlined in the introduction to the research study (Chapter 3).

.

#### **Chapter 4: Concluding Reflections**

This final chapter comprises my concluding reflections relating to the research study which were unable to be included within Chapter Three of this Volume of research due to word count restrictions. The Chapter begins with reflections relating to the choice of research methodology, and goes on to consider how the research has made an original contribution to knowledge and theory development, and what the implications of this are in relation to future practice.

#### **2. Reasons for choosing this research area**

Prior to commencing my doctoral training I spent time working in two inner city primary schools as a parent support worker, where my role involved liaising with and supporting some of the most vulnerable parents of children within the school. This role alerted me to the many challenges that parents face, and some of the

frustrations that they can experience in relation to their child's special educational needs and schooling. This interest in parent rights and the systems that have been developed to support parents to play an active role in decisions relating to their children has followed me through my doctoral training, and has remained an area in which I have taken an active interest.

The chosen area of research was also influenced through the Local Authority in which I work as a TEP. On securing employment for years two and three of the doctoral training, University guidelines suggested that TEPs should negotiate the focus of a small scale research study in collaboration with their employing Local Authority. From this perspective, the research was commissioned by the Local Authority and so therefore needed to hold relevance at this level also. My employment commenced at a time where the Local Authority was considering how parental confidence in the SEN system could be increased in light of the recently publicised Lamb Inquiry (DCSF, 2010), and for this reason they felt that a research study exploring parents' experiences of working with professionals would contribute to their knowledge regarding this.

Finally, as a TEP in a team of thirteen Educational Psychologists, discussions relating to how to ensure equitable partnerships with stakeholders, and the means through which the 'voiceless' can be heard have become commonplace within our working environment. These discussions were evident from the earliest stages of my employment and therefore also contributed to my decision to pursue this area of research. As well as influencing my choice of research, these factors are also likely

to have contributed to the way in which I conducted this research study, and the way that I interpreted the data at both a conscious and subconscious level. This will be explored in the following section of this chapter.

### **3. My identity and position as a researcher and as a Trainee Educational Psychologist**

As alluded to in the previous section of this chapter, I bring to this research my own ideas and preconceptions relating to parent-professional working which are likely to have influenced all aspects of the research from the design to the interpretation of findings. In acknowledging that research will be influenced by the values of the researcher, I align myself to the epistemological assumptions of an interpretive paradigm, which recognises the existence of 'multiple realities' that are based on an individual's experiences. This approach to research focuses on subjective human experiences, and the meaning that they attach to such experiences often evident through the language they use to describe and explain such events (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005). In adopting this approach, I therefore position the views of the parents within this research study as being representative of the 'truth' as they perceive it (Gadamer, 1975).

The research study can also be seen to reflect some of my values as a TEP, in particular those relating to freedom of speech and ensuring equal access to services, support and provision. It also reflects my desire to 'give voice' to those groups of

people who are often the most vulnerable, and whose voices, if heard, could make an invaluable contribution to policy development.

#### **4. Working in partnership with parents: The researcher-researchee relationship**

A central tenet running throughout the present study is the idea of 'partnership' and an exploration of how professionals and parents can work together in a relationship that is characterised by mutual respect, equality and collaboration. In the same way that power imbalances can exist between parents and professionals, they can also exist between the researcher and the participants of their research, and it is therefore important to highlight the way in which the current research has been mindful of this. The parents were seen as participants rather than subjects in the research, which reflects a wider change in the approach to research, which acknowledges that researchers are often in a position of power, and therefore need to view those taking part in the research as voluntary participants rather than 'subjects':

'The very use of the terms 'participants' (or 'co-researchers' depending on the precise methodology adopted) rather than 'subjects' emphasised the realisation of the imbalanced power relationships inherent in much research and attempts to address the remedy of such problems' (Tindall, 1994: 175)

An open and transparent approach was adopted, whereby participants were informed of the nature of the research, and the reasons behind their selection, to ensure that there was no hidden agenda. Wolfendale (1999) suggests that a significant threat to the equality of the researcher-participant relationship can emerge as a result of the categorisation of participants without their knowing the category to which they have

been assigned, or that categorisation mapping is a fundamental part of the study. Participants were therefore informed that they were selected on the basis of their social class and single-parent status, and why this was used as part of the selection criteria. The process through which their social class was determined was also shared.

## **5. Intended audience for Volume One**

In line with University guidance, both Chapter Two and Chapter Three of this Volume have been written to journal specification for a publication of my choosing, the *British Journal of Special Education*. This journal is the quarterly publication of the National Association of Special Educational Needs (Nasen), and was chosen as it draws its membership 'from the entire range of professionals who are responsible for educating and supporting children and adults with special educational needs' ([www.nasen.co.uk](http://www.nasen.co.uk)). The Journal welcomes contributions focusing on any aspect of policy, provision or practice that relates to the experiences of those with special educational needs, or those responsible for caring for them. It also contains a research section which 'provides opportunities to publish examples of practitioner or partnership research', which can demonstrate the influence that systematic, practice-founded enquiry can have on the development of practice (guidance taken from [www.nasen.co.uk](http://www.nasen.co.uk)).

The *British Journal of Special Education* provides clear guidance for those wishing to submit an article for publication, making reference to both structure and presentation

(see Appendix One). Whilst I have been mindful of this guidance when writing this volume of research, a slight tension emerged in attempting to adhere to the journal specification whilst at the same time meet the assessed requirements outlined in University guidance. This tension is most apparent in relation to the word count and presentation of Chapters Two and Three, which contain more detail than the *British Journal of Special Education* would allow for.

In line with University requirements, the critical literature review and research study have been presented in different formats to be accessed by a range of different audiences. The findings from the critical literature review and the emerging rationale for the research study were presented to my fellow TEPs at the University of Birmingham during the summer term of my second year (see Appendix 2). This presentation was also shared with EP colleagues during a CPD (continued professional development) event, alongside a summary of the research findings and implications for future practice (see Appendix 3). Participants received verbal feedback about the key research findings, and were also presented with a written research summary that outlined how their participation has contributed to our understanding of effective partnership (see Appendix 4).

## References

- Department for Children, Schools and Families (2010). *Lamb Inquiry: Special Educational Needs and Parental Confidence*. London: DCSF.
- Gadamer, H.G. (1975). *Truth and Method*. London: Sheed & Ward.
- Nelson, G. & Prilleltensky, I. (2005) *Community psychology: in pursuit of liberation and well-being*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Tindall, C. (1994). Issues of evaluation. In P. Bannister, E. Burman, I. Parker, M. Taylor and C. Tindall (Eds). *Qualitative Methods in Psychology: A Research Guide*, Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Wolfendale, S. (1999). Parents as partners in research and evaluation: methodological and ethical issues and solutions. *British Journal of Special Education*, 26 (3) (Research Section). 89 – 94.

## APPENDIX 1: The British Journal of Special Education: Author guidelines

### British Journal of Special Education

[Published on behalf of nasen](#)

**Edited by:**

Richard Byers and Ruth Germain

**Print ISSN:** 0952-3383

**Online ISSN:** 1467-8578

**Frequency:** Quarterly

**Current Volume:** 37 / 2010





**APPENDIX 2: Public domain briefing: summary of literature review**

## Parent-Professional Relationships

To what extent are parental views heard and valued on matters relating to their child's special educational needs? A critical review of the research literature and its findings.

Ellie McNab

June 2009

## Focus of Research

- Initial interest
- The context in Walsall Children's Services (The Lamb Inquiry / Concern within the EP team)
- To explore the nature of parent-professional collaborations from a parental perspective
- To identify the skills and behaviours of professionals that may facilitate a collaborative helping style which fosters partnerships with parents.

Initial Interest in this topic arose during my time working as a child and family support worker, whereby I became concerned that parents (in particular those of parents with special educational needs) views were not often sought effectively.

The Context in Walsall: A number of EPs had raised concerns at EP meetings that they felt that parents often lacked the confidence to speak up in meetings, or the knowledge about their child's special needs. The blame for this was felt to lie with us as professionals for not providing parents with the knowledge they need so that they are well informed and in a position to be able to speak out about their concerns/what's best for their child.

The Lamb Inquiry: Increasing parent confidence in SEN procedures. Initial reading suggested that one of the primary reasons cited relating to parental dissatisfaction was communication and sense of empowerment, as well as concerns relating to the effectiveness of particular professionals.

## Focus of Literature Review

- What do Government reports and enquiries tell us about working in partnership with parents?
- How is the term partnership conceptualised within the literature?
- What are the barriers and enablers to parent-professional partnership outlined in the literature?
- What models of parent-professional practice have been identified in the literature?

## Focus of Literature Review

- To what extent is the 'voice of the parent' represented in research identifying a role for parents in relation to their child?
- This thread ran throughout the paper, identifying the studies where parents were engaged as active participants in the research

## Impetus for Partnership

- The Plowden Report (1967) & The Warnock Report (1978)
- Frederickson et al. (2004)
- The Schools White Paper (2005) & The Education and Inspections Act (2006)
- 'Every Parent Matters' agenda (2007)
- The Lamb Inquiry: SEN and Parental Confidence

- Plowden: Argued for closer relationships between public institutions and their clients and suggested that parents should be consulted on matters concerning their child's education.
- Warnock report: Emphasised the need for parental involvement, and outlined how professionals should view their interactions with parents: *'Professionals need to take note of what they (parents) say and how they express their needs and treat their contribution as intrinsically important'*.
- The Schools White Paper (2005) identified a role for parents in improving standards. Proposed the introduction of 'Parent Councils' which will help to make parents more fully aware of their rights, how they can influence school decisions, and give them an awareness of local complaints procedures.
- 'Every Parent Matters' (2007) 'Parents and the home environment that they create are the single most important factor in shaping their child's well-being, achievements and prospects'. (EPM foreword)
  - Places parents at the heart of public service reform
  - Acknowledges that mainstream services are not as good as they should be at recognising parent needs.
- The Lamb Inquiry: How can parental confidence in SEN procedures be improved? Opportunities for LA's to offer good working models / project work. Has a focus on determining effective practice.

Frederickson et al 2004: The enormous contribution that parents have to make has remained a relegated feature of public policy. The consistent failure of governments to acknowledge this role for parents has meant that multiple perspectives are rarely obtained aside from that of the professional.

## What is meant by 'partnership'

- Easily defined? Very few studies provide an explicit definition
- Characteristics of parent –professional relationships (Bastiani, 1993; Dale, 1996; Gascoigne, 1995; Wolfendale, 1983)

### **Easily defined?**

Bastiani (1993) suggests that relationships should only be described as partnerships under certain conditions.

### **Characteristics of parent-professional relationships:**

Mutual respect, trust and honesty (Dunst et al, 2004). Parents and professionals were asked to list the behavioural and attitudinal characteristics they believed to be important in parent-professional relationships. There was found to be overlap in the characteristics that both parents and professionals considered to be important. (Trust, mutual respect, open communication).

Mutually Agreed-Upon goals: This is seen as the most important characteristic in business partnerships. However, parent-professional partnerships are usually imposed upon the parent, and so goals are often broadly defined (e.g. to support the child) or interpreted differently.

**Those papers written by parents of children with SEN offered a very different account of partnership to those writing from a purely research perspective.**

### **No definition:**

- Because it is so subjective, and because neither parents nor their children are a homogenous group, it makes definition difficult for Educational Psychologists
- The SEN Code of Practice talks of working in partnership with parents, and emphasises that 'partnership with parents plays a key role in promoting a culture of cooperation between parents, schools, LEAs and others' but fails to identify their understanding of the term.

## Barriers to partnership

- Fundamental differences between parents and professionals
- Power imbalance
- 'Types' of parent (Gascoigne, 1995)
- Roles available to parents (Vincent, 1996)
- The impact of difference

- There are fundamental differences that exist between parents and professionals which mean that a lay-professional divide is likely to exist before either party seeks to define their role. Parents have a stronger emotional attachment to the child, and from this perspective, have more invested in the relationship.
- There is often a power imbalance that exists between parents and professionals. Professionals are seen as the 'experts' who hold all the power.
- Discuss how 'parent type' can influence their interactions with parents. Identify the roles that are open to parents (Vincent, 1996; 2000).
- Levels of parental involvement are influenced by race, class, single parent status and to a lesser extent, ethnicity. Some parents are therefore less likely to engage with parents, and are more likely to enter into inequitable relationships.

## Models of parent-professional practice

- Cunningham & Davis (1985) – why it is important to have models/frameworks to guide our practice
  - The Expert Model (no partnership)
  - The Transplant Model (Junior partner)
  - The Consumer Model (Partner)

\*Equality is not seen as a necessity\*

Cunningham and Davis (1985) still holds credibility to date, as no one has really been able to effectively challenge their model.

- Aside from their professional training, all professionals working with parents require the skills and knowledge to establish effective relationships with parents so that their expertise can be implemented fully.
- Interactions with parents can be improved if we make explicit the models or frameworks that guide our practice with parents. These frameworks guide our practice.
- The nature of relationships is largely determined by the model used.
- The three models differ in the extent to which they acknowledge the need for, and seek to establish a collaborative relationship.
- The major differences in the model relate to the acknowledgement of expertise and responsibilities and rights of each to the benefit of the child.

Since this time, other models have been introduced that develop some of the features outlined in the consumer model in attempt to make the partnership more equitable (e.g. negotiation model and Empowerment Model and Family Model).

**These models have arisen from observation and researcher perception. To my knowledge, there is no research that has focused solely on parent voice and explored their experiences of parent-professional working to see if it fits in with these models, or whether a new model should be developed. There is lots of research that has explored what parents value from their interactions with professionals, but how does this translate in to a model/framework?**



## Voice of the Parent

- The voice of the parent is not a central feature in research that has identified parent-professional frameworks or explored the optimal conditions for partnership working

**APPENDIX 3: Public domain briefing: summary of research findings**

Models of parent-professional  
collaboration: what do the parents  
of children with SEN value from their  
interactions with professionals?

Summary of research findings  
presented to EP colleagues

## Rationale

- Lack of shared understanding regarding what partnership means
- Near absence of research studies that engage parents as active participants in the research
- Models of parent-professional working are based on theory rather than parent experience
- Criticisms of purely anecdotal research

- Lack of shared understanding: No definition of partnership has been accepted as definitive. This raises questions relating to accountability and makes it difficult for LAs to determine the extent to which professionals are working in partnership with parents.
- There is an absence of 'parent voice' in research studies that attempt to articulate the 'key conditions' of partnership working. Researchers identify the principles of partnership working based on findings within the extant literature or based on existing theory.
- There are numerous models of parent-professional partnership (Expert, transplant, consumer, empowerment, negotiation) but none have been based on research that has engaged parents as active participants.
- Research involving parents is often criticised on the grounds of it being anecdotal. What is therefore needed is an approach that moves research with parents beyond the merely anecdotal.

## Research Questions

- How do the parents of children with SEN experience support from professionals?
- How do the parents of children with SEN feel about their interactions with professionals?
- How could professionals increase the value of their interactions with parents of children with SEN?

## Participants

Participants were selected by asking EP colleagues to identify parents that they had worked with in the past 12 months, who met the following criteria:

- their child has undergone the Statutory Assessment process in the past 12 months;
  - they are of single-parent status and;
  - they are considered to be of low socio-economic status
- Purposive sample: participants were selected on the basis that they hold particular characteristics. This was determined based on findings from the critical literature review.

## Reason for selection

- Parents of children with SEN are not engaged as active participants in research
- Parents of 'low' socio-economic status and single parents are less likely to play an active role in their child's education
- Concerns within employing LA relating to this group of 'hard to reach' parents

- It was decided to focus the research study on a particular group of parents who were identified as 'voiceless' within the literature.
- This also tied in with LA concerns about this group of parents, and concerns that they were more likely to be victims of professional dominance.

## Methodology

- Case study methodology offers a systematic means of exploring a particular phenomenon that moves beyond the 'anecdotal'
  - Allows for the selection of cases that are likely to predict similar (literal replication) or contrasting (theoretical replication) results
  - Multiple case studies (exploratory)
  - Epistemology and identity of researcher
- 
- Case study research will allow for an exploration of the 'lived experiences' of participants that will take their account above the merely anecdotal.
  - Allows a replication logic to be followed.
  - Aligns itself with an interpretive epistemological framework whereby parent views will be seen to represent the truth as they perceive it. The world is therefore not seen to be 'objectively knowable'.
  - This approach to research acknowledges that a researcher cannot abstract themselves from their own interpretive framework, and they therefore bring with them, their own interpretation and preconceptions regarding the phenomenon.

## Data collection methods

- Parent interviews
- Documentary evidence
- Educational psychologist interviews

- Parent interviews were the main source of data collection, but information obtained in the interviews was explored through the other two sources. This is due to the need to pursue multiple sources of evidence (Yin, 2009) to increase the reliability of findings and to allow for threads/patterns in the data to be explored further.
- The EP interview schedule was therefore drawn up after the parent interviews had been carried out to explore 'converging lines of inquiry' (Yin, 2009). The 'file trawl' allowed the intelligibility of communication to be explored.



## Data Analysis

- Cross case analysis
- Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

- Thematic analysis was chosen as a means of analysing the data as it allows the data to speak for itself.
- Prevalent themes were identified across the data set using a 6-stage process identified by Braun & Clarke (2006).

1. Familiarising yourself with the data: all interviews were transcribed one-by-one. They were read and re-read and initial ideas were noted.

2. Generating initial codes: interesting features of the data were coded systematically across the three interviews. Data were collected that were relevant to each code.

3. Searching for themes: codes were then collated into potential themes, and all data were gathered relevant to these themes.

4. Reviewing themes: A 'thematic map' was generated to check that the themes could be supported in terms of the coded extracts (see Appendix 13), and the data set as a whole.

5. Defining and naming theme: Clear definitions and names for each theme were generated.

6. Producing the report: Compelling extract examples were selected and links made explicit between how the analysis links with the study's research questions and literature.

## Results: Themes

- Three overarching themes emerged from the data set (each with contained 2 sub-themes)
- **Power**
  - Powerful professional
  - Powerless parent
- **Communication**
  - I don't understand
  - They just don't listen
- **Rapport**
  - Understanding my needs (as a parent)
  - The Personal touch

- Explain what the themes represent in more detail.

## Results: Key Findings

- Parents' experiences of working with professionals are largely negative
- They do not feel listened to
- They are frustrated by professionals use of jargon, and explaining things in a way that they do not understand
- They feel embarrassed to speak out

## Findings

- They see professionals as holding the power (this manifests itself in a number of ways)
- They feel powerless to affect change
- There are occasions where parents have felt empowered, and this was seen as a positive

Manifestations of power:

### **The Powerful Professional :**

Withholding information

Assuming the position of 'expert'

Failing to inform parents about the nature of their (professional) involvement

Failing to empower parents or share their skills

### **The Powerless Parent :**

Not feeling empowered to meet their child's needs

Not knowing why professionals are involved with their child, or what their role is

Dominated by professionals and their 'superior knowledge'

Not having access to necessary information about their child

## Findings

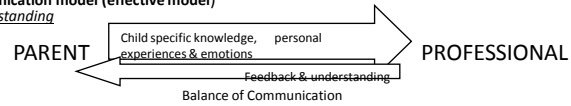
- Parents value those professionals who show genuine empathy and understanding
- They value the personal touch
- They are frustrated by those professionals who treat them like 'just another parent'

- Share parent quotes relating to the theme: 'Rapport' to demonstrate what parents value, and what they do not.
- Highlight that EPs talked about it being difficult to show genuine empathy. How can this be achieved without appearing patronising or disingenuous.

## Parent-Professional Communication Model

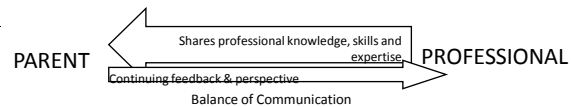
### Two stage communication model (effective model)

#### Rapport & understanding



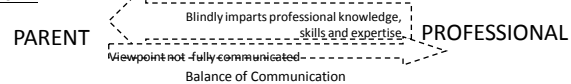
**Outcome:** Parent feels understood & empathy established.

#### Knowledge share



### Single stage communication model (ineffective model)

#### Knowledge share ONLY



**Outcome:** Communication breakdown. Non-specific knowledge offered to a discouraged and largely unreceptive parent.

- Explain how the model was developed and what it means for professionals working with parents.
- The two-stage communication model is desirable as acknowledges that parents initially need to be supported to share child-specific knowledge, concerns etc with professionals. Professionals need to show that they have understood this information, and that they are understanding of the parent's position.
- Establishing this initial stage will then enable the professional to share their professional knowledge.

## Implications for practice

- Implications for EP training route
  - Supervision: regular opportunities to reflect on work with parents
  - There is a need to regularly seek parents' views to inform practice
- 
- Although many Educational Psychologist training courses emphasize the importance of teaching effective communication skills (CWDC Handbook, 2009), it is important to consider how much time is spent on developing trainee's interpersonal skills, or whether these skills can even be taught. An awareness of this is important as evidence from the current study suggests that these skills are what parents' value the most and that partnership will be difficult to achieve if the professional is not able to relate to the parent at a personal level.
  - Regularly seeking parent views to inform practice to ensure that interventions etc hold relevance to the people that matter.

## Future directions

- There is a need to explore the application of the 'parent-professional communication' model
- Exploring the experiences of other parent populations (e.g. Fathers)
- Exploring the extent to which social class does impact upon parent-professional partnership

- In order to be able to make more general claims about parents' experiences of working with professionals, and the type of support that they value, the results of this exploratory study need to be explored in other parent populations. Similar studies with different groups of parents might serve to enrich our understanding of parent-professional working, and add insight to our understanding regarding whether 'parent status' affects their interactions with professionals.
- It would be interesting to explore whether social class or single-parent status directly affects parents' experiences of working with professionals. Although the current study engaged participants of a specific social class and marital status, the methodology employed (literal replication logic, Yin, 2009) did not allow for an exploration of whether or not these factors directly affected parent-professional working relationships.



## **APPENDIX 4: Summary of research findings for parent participants**

This written summary was produced to accompany the verbal feedback that parents were given regarding their involvement in the study and the overall outcomes. All parents expressed that they would prefer feedback to be given verbally, and so this was written as a supplementary document.

Thank you for participating in this study. Your openness and honesty in sharing your experiences has enabled me to consider the ways in which professionals can improve their work with parents of children with special educational needs.

### **Key findings:**

- You are often frustrated by your interactions with professionals, and the experiences that you shared with me were largely negative;
- where positive experiences were identified, this was used to consider the ways in which working relationships can be improved;
- you do not feel listened to, and professionals often communicate in a way that you don't understand. They use technical terms, when all you want to know is what their involvement means for your child;
- you do not feel that you have a voice, and are sometimes scared to speak out as you feel that you will be judged or laughed at;
- you feel that professionals hold the power, and that you are sometimes powerless as a result;
- you feel that professionals sometimes abuse this power by not giving you all of the information that you need;
- there are also times when you want professionals to hold the power. You want them to use their expertise and knowledge to make the best decisions for your child. In this situation, it is important that you are kept involved;
- you value those professionals who take time to know you and attempt to understand your position as a parent of a child with special educational needs;
- the 'personal touch' is important. Professionals need to treat you as an individual rather than 'just another parent';

**These are some of the things that I have suggested as a result of listening to your experiences:**

- Professionals need to be aware that there is a power imbalance and they need to take steps to address this;
- professionals need to empower parents to have the confidence to speak out and ensure that they are not voiceless;
- professionals need to treat all parents as individuals;
- parents should be encouraged (by professionals) to play an active role in decisions relating to their child from the earliest stage possible;
- parents need to be kept informed of all issues regarding their child, and the procedures surrounding their special educational needs (SEN code of practice etc);
- parents should be communicated to in a way that is accessible. Professionals should avoid the use of jargon and explain things in terms of what it means for their child;
- professionals should make it clear to parents what they perceive their role to be. Do they see parents as active partners or helpers? If they make parents aware of this at the earliest stage, the parent knows what is expected and they are then in a better position to be able to challenge anything they disagree with;
- professionals need to offer support for parents as well as their child;
- there is a need for professionals to be sensitive to a parents needs, and the emotions attached to having a child with SEN;
- professionals need to adopt a more sensitive and personable approach that makes parents feel more comfortable and confident to speak out.

These factors have been taken into consideration and I have developed a model that can be used by professionals to guide their work with parents. A genuine understanding of what it feels to be a parents of a child with SEN, and the importance of being personable are at the heart of this model, and should that parents are respected and listened to (share model with parents

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **PARENT-PROFESSIONAL PARTNERSHIP: CONTEXT, CURRENT LITERATURE AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

# **PARENT-PROFESSIONAL PARTNERSHIP: CONTEXT, CURRENT LITERATURE AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

## **Abstract**

The concept of parent-professional partnership as it applies to working with parents of children with special educational needs (SEN) has been studied extensively from both research and theoretical perspectives. Researchers have sought to identify the principles of effective partnership working, and the conditions under which 'true' partnership is likely to be achieved. Despite these attempts, no definition of partnership has been accepted as definitive. Parents are far from a homogeneous group, and differences between them mean that they are likely to experience support from professionals in different ways, and have differing ideas about how they would like to work with professionals.

This paper presents a critical review of the literature that has examined the nature of parent-professional collaboration, and considers the utility of such research in furthering our understanding of effective parent-professional working. It explores the differences that exist between parents and professionals, and considers how this can lead to the establishment of relationships characterised by an imbalance of power, with many parents entering into inequitable partnerships. The paper argues that the absence of 'parent voice' in research studies that advocate a particular mode of partnership poses a significant threat to the validity of research findings.

This paper advocates a qualitative approach to researching parent-professional relationships, which engages parents as active participants in the research process and moves beyond obtaining a purely anecdotal account of their experiences. Adopting such an approach should help to ensure that future research, intervention and practice are grounded in parents' own experiences and interpretations of partnership working, thus increasing the relevance of findings for all concerned.

## **PARENT-PROFESSIONAL PARTNERSHIP: CONTEXT, CURRENT LITERATURE AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

### **1. Introduction**

In recent years, there has been an increasing onus placed on professionals to work more collaboratively with parents on matters relating to their child's special educational needs (DfES, 2001; 2002; 2003; 2004, DCSF, 2010). Due to the training that many professionals receive, a lay-professional divide can be said to exist before either party seeks to define their role (O'Connor, 2008). As a result, professionals are often placed in a position of power, and by failing to address this power imbalance parents can become 'voiceless', and their potential expertise can lie dormant (Todd & Higgins, 1998). The recognition of parents' relative competence and the subsequent invitation for them to play an active role in their child's development has therefore become enshrined in recent Government guidance (O'Connor, 2008), and there now exists an expectation that parents will be consulted on all matters relating to their child's education. From this perspective, parents are no longer seen as powerless or subordinate, but are accorded an equivalent status within their relationships with professionals. Difficulties emerge in translating this theory into practice as parents are far from a homogeneous group, so it is difficult to implement a generic model that will ensure that all parents are part of an equitable

partnership. Where some parents are well equipped to challenge professional dominance and to speak out regarding how their child's needs can best be met, others do not possess the skills or the confidence to express their viewpoint and so equity is more difficult to achieve (Hallgarten, 2000).

.

### **1.1 Aims and focus of the paper**

This paper presents a review of the literature that has examined the nature of parent-professional collaboration, and considers the utility of such research in furthering our understanding of effective parent-professional working. Within this paper the term 'professional' is wide-ranging, and will be used to describe any member of a profession which is founded upon specialised training, and so will include teachers, Educational Psychologists and Doctors among others. As a prelude to this, the paper examines literature relating to parental involvement, and identifies some of the barriers and enablers to participation and partnership identified in the literature. This literature review will be underpinned by a consideration of the ways in which parental views are elicited within the different research papers, and the importance that 'parent voice' appears to be given within the literature looking at how to improve outcomes for children with special educational needs. This review will therefore address the following questions:

- What do Government reports and enquiries tell us about working in partnership with parents?
- How is the term partnership conceptualised within the literature?

- What are the barriers and enablers to parent participation and parent-professional partnership outlined in the literature?
- What models of parent-professional practice have been identified in the literature?
- To what extent is the 'voice of the parent' represented in research identifying a role for parents in relation to their child?

## **1.2 Literature Search Method**

Using the University of Birmingham eLibrary service, the bibliographic databases "British Education Index" (1975 to date), "ASSIA" (1966 to date), "ERIC" (1966 to date), "psycOVID" (1975 to date) and "psychINFO" (1990 to date) were searched for articles containing the following keywords: 'parent', 'partner', 'parental involvement', 'parent voice', 'parent partnership' and 'parent professional models'. Where initial searches produced too many results to read through and select relevant articles, they were combined with additional key words such as 'educational attainment', 'schools', 'special educational needs', 'parent-teacher relationships' and 'inclusion'. Government legislation and guidance were searched for using the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) website and "Google" search engine. In total, more than 106 articles and papers from a range of different journals were identified and examined in greater detail to determine their relevance to the research area being considered.



## **2. What do Government reports and enquiries tell us about working with parents? National Policy Context**

The potential importance of parents being involved in decisions relating to their child's special educational needs was first emphasised by the Plowden Report (1967, Central Advisory Council for Education, CACE) which highlighted that the reform of home-school relationships was important (Murray, 2000). Whilst not always readily accepted in the intervening years, it is important to acknowledge as it signifies one of the first formal mentions of parental consultation and participation (Crozier, 1999). Plowden argued for a closer relationship between public institutions and their clients, and made it clear that parental exclusion was no longer acceptable. This should be considered a significant turning point, as it highlighted the importance of parents being consulted on matters concerning their child's education, and paved the way for later decisions that saw parents' being given the right to decide which school their child attended, and to enter into regular dialogues relating to progress (Crozier, 1999). The publication of this document was said to have led to a slow but steady growth of parental involvement, with parents beginning to discuss their rights in the public domain for the first time (Crozier, 1999). Although Plowden's (1967, CACE) report clearly identified a role for parents in their child's education, it does not make specific reference to the parents of children with special educational needs, and this will now be explored.

## 2.1 The Warnock Report

The Warnock Report (DES, 1978) is most commonly cited with reference to formalising the concept of need through its recommendation that children with special educational needs should be identified, and distinguished from those children who do not have such needs on the basis of appropriate provision rather than ontogenetic factors. However, the Warnock Report also recognised the importance of parents playing an active role in any decisions made regarding their child, and emphasised a need for parents to work in partnership with professionals:

‘The successful education of children with special educational needs is dependent upon the full involvement of their parents: indeed, unless the parents are seen as equal partners in the educational process, then the purpose of our report will be frustrated.’ (DES, 1978, para 9.1)

The Warnock Report showed early signs of acknowledging the power imbalance that can exist between parents and professionals, and offered guidance regarding how professionals should view their interactions with parents. It highlighted the need for ‘professionals to take note of what they [parents] say and how they express their needs, and treat their contribution as intrinsically important’ (Warnock Report, 1978, para. 9.6). Although the Warnock report highlights the importance of parents working in partnership with professionals, it has been criticised for its model of partnership, which places professionals as holding the knowledge and expertise, and places disability as the deficit of the child (Murray, 2000). This model is thought to run

counter to the true essence of partnership working, as does not emphasise the importance of equality, and therefore places parents as subordinate.

Despite the Warnock Report's clear stipulations, the enormous contribution that parents have to make regarding their child's education is said to have remained a somewhat relegated feature of public policy since this time (Frederickson et al. 2004). Frederickson et al (2004) argue that the consistent failure (of government policy) to acknowledge this role for parents, has meant that multiple perspectives relating to a child's needs are rarely obtained, therefore resulting in an over-reliance on the views of the professional at the expense of the parent.

It could be argued that six years on from the publication of Frederickson et al's paper, recent policy has sought to 'redress the ostensibly peripheral position of parents' (O'Connor, 2008: 256) and that initiatives and legislation are being introduced that place parents at the centre of their child's education. Close examination of Government documents produced before this time, will also help to determine the extent to which Frederickson's claim is accurate. This will be explored through a critique of current policy that has acknowledged the need for discourses around parent-professional collaborations in relation to children with SEN. The documents critiqued are by no means exhaustive, and were selected as holding relevance to the current critique through their explicit mention of partnership working. In exploring this, consideration will be given to the impetus for such discourses to determine whether they are in fact parent focussed, or whether they are more accurately described as 'a philosophical rubric of academic discourse or as an integral feature of

wider governmental agendas on social policy and reform' (O'Connor, 2008:259). Although some may consider this a somewhat cynical approach, O'Connor suggests that policy can often be underpinned by hidden agendas, and that researchers therefore need to be mindful of what the alternative 'drivers' behind policy might be.

## **2.2 The Special Educational Needs Code of Practice**

'Paradoxically, the very advent and existence of the Code of Practice will test the parent-practitioner relationship to the full, in terms of attitudes, commitment and translation of the principles into action. The paradox lies in the fact that the parental involvement in assessment and intervention has come so far as to be codified within a legislative framework and yet in being thus codified, the parent-professional relationship is now exposed. Pious hopes will be tested in reality, the scope and limitation of 'having regard for the provision of the code' as well as the existence of new appeal arrangements will be explored by all concerned.' (Wolfendale, 1995: 19)

The above quote highlights the significance of the Special Educational Needs Code of Practice (DfES, 2001) in terms of its attempt to articulate how professionals should work in partnership with parents. It acknowledges that parents have a critical role to play in their child's education, and have unique strengths, knowledge and experience to contribute to a shared understanding of their child's needs. The document suggests that all parents should be treated as partners and should be empowered to:

- recognise and fulfil their responsibilities as parents and play an active role in decisions relating to their child's SEN;
- have knowledge of their child's entitlement within the SEN framework;
- make their views known about how their child is educated and;

- have access to information, advice and support during assessment and any related decision-making processes about SEN provision.

Although the principles of parent-professional collaboration listed within the code of practice appear good in theory, the document does not make practical recommendations regarding how they can be achieved. For some parents, recognising and fulfilling their responsibilities as parents, and playing an active role in any decision-making will be an extremely daunting task, and one in which they are likely to need considerable support. Where some professionals are likely to be proactive in helping parents to fulfil this role, others may not see it as their priority to empower parents, therefore putting these parents at risk of professional dominance. From this perspective, the emphasis that the code of practice places on professionals to empower parents could actually serve to disadvantage some parents, and raises questions regarding the extent to which the code of practice sees equality as an integral feature of parent-professional partnership.

### **2.3 Together from the start**

'Together from the Start' (DfES, 2003) and the recommendations that it makes for working with parents can be seen to address some of the concerns outlined in relation to the SEN code of practice (DfES, 2001) regarding its failure to consider the practicalities of how partnership is achieved. It offers practical guidance for professionals working with the parents of disabled children (birth to three years), and outlines the following key principles for working in partnership with parents:

- professionals have a duty to acknowledge and understand the unique role and relationship each parent has with their child;
- parents have unique knowledge about their child and have the right to be respected as the primary caregiver;
- parents have the right to be provided with unbiased, accurate and up-to-date information in order to make informed choices;
- professionals should acknowledge that each family is unique. Families can be diverse in terms of their experience, resources and expectations as well as their cultural, religious and linguistic influences;
- parents should be valued as equal partners.

The guidance incorporates the principles of respect, informed choice, individuality and equality to outline how professionals should view their interactions with parents. Although the emphasis is still placed on professionals to ensure that partnership is achieved, its mention of 'parent rights' reminds the professional that partnership is a two-way process, and that the professionals have a duty of care to ensure that a parent's contribution is respected and valued. The guidance contained within this document and the SEN code of practice (2001) therefore challenge Frederickson et al's (2004) claim that the contribution that parents have to make is not acknowledged within Government policy. Parental rights and the unique knowledge and skills that they have regarding their child is a central feature of 'Together from the Start', and professionals are actively encouraged to respect and utilise parental expertise and work in partnership with parents. Despite the positive message that these documents give regarding parent-professional working, it is important to consider the

extent to which these principles can be observed in practice. Although many professionals would claim to adhere to the principles outlined in this documentation, to confidently assert the policy's success, research would need to be carried out with parents to explore whether their experiences confirm this. The importance of listening to parents both from an evaluative perspective, and in the development of policy has more recently been acknowledged, and parents are now beginning to be consulted regarding the services that are available to support their child's SEN. The Lamb Inquiry is one example of this.

#### **2.4 The Lamb Inquiry (DCSF, 2010)**

The Lamb Inquiry can be seen to represent the Government's awareness that the current SEN process is not as accommodating of parent's needs as it could be, or as equitable as parents would like. The purpose of the inquiry is to investigate the ways in which parental confidence in the SEN process might be improved, as recent research has shown that parents often feel ill-informed, or misguided when it comes to their child's special educational needs (Russell, 2003; Keen, 2007).

This inquiry is of particular interest to the current discussion, as it is often the parents of children with SEN that are the most vulnerable, and at risk of entering into inequitable partnerships due to their greater reliance on professional services. This can potentially put them in a difficult position when it comes to challenging this support, and some authors have suggested that parents may feel unable to question the advice that professionals have given, through fear that they may be

disadvantaged as a result (Simmons, 1997). The inquiry recognises that parental confidence is 'a key issue in making provision for children with SEN' (DCSF, 2010: 1), and has therefore provided opportunities for Local Authorities to explore how parental confidence can be increased through commissioning 'innovative projects', and sharing good practice. The inquiry also intends to take full account of previous research endeavours that have focussed on parents' experience of SEN provision, to ensure that 'parent voice' is situated at the heart of any future recommendations. Both of these approaches to 'information gathering' should be considered positive, as they increase the chance that any changes to procedures and provision will take place as a result of what we have learned from effective practice rather than being developed directly from academic discourses or Government rhetoric.

The very nature of the Lamb Inquiry, with its focus on determining effective practice can therefore be said to challenge Frederickson et al's (2004) earlier claim that the contribution that parents have to make remains a somewhat relegated feature of public policy. Over recent years, it appears that the Government has begun to realise the importance of services working collaboratively with parents to effectively meet their needs, and has therefore started to take steps to rectify what has in the past been considered to be a model of practice dominated by professionals (Case, 2001).

Despite increasing recognition that professionals and parents need to work in partnership with one another, our understanding of the term partnership remains unclear, and its use does not necessarily mean that the author is referring to an



equal or equitable partnership. Within the legislation critiqued, there is not a universal definition of partnership, and authors' appear to assume that the reader is aware of what type of partnership they are referring to without clarifying their understanding of the term. The following section of this paper will therefore review some of the definitions of partnership available in the literature, and critique the extent to which they are helpful in ensuring that parents are considered as equal partners, whose views are sought and valued.

### **3. Towards a shared understanding: the challenges associated with the conceptualisation of 'partnership'**

'...partnership remains a loosely defined although fashionable concept whose boundaries are fluid and permeable. It is hailed as the answer to all ills' (Calder, 1995: 753)

The above quote highlights how the term 'partnership' has become fraught with definitional inconsistencies, making it somewhat difficult to determine the extent to which partnership is achieved, or the behaviours that an author is referring to when they talk of partnership working. 'Partnership' is often positioned as the solution to engaging 'hard-to-reach' parents (Gascoigne, 1995: 27) and as a means of working with parents to give them greater say in matters regarding their child, but the key dimensions are not delineated or agreed upon. Without a shared understanding of what constitutes a 'partnership' it is difficult to evaluate the steps that Local Authorities and professionals are taking to make sure that true partnership with parents is achieved. It is also important to note, that it is not uncommon for research and government papers to refer to 'partnership' without clarifying their understanding

of the term (Beveridge, 2005; Gascoigne, 1995). In doing this, they assume that they reader will bring with them their own understanding of what it means to work in partnership. For example, although the SEN Code of Practice (2001) clearly advocates parental partnership, and makes repeated reference to its importance; at no point does it attempt to provide the reader with a definition.

Gascoigne (1995) cautions that assuming a shared understanding of 'partnership' 'is at best misleading, and at worst quite dangerous' (p.39), as although people may instinctively know what partnership means in the course of a normal conversation:

'its specific and particular use in the context of special educational needs and parental partnership must be defined before the debate can proceed about its implementation, otherwise it risks becoming just another piece of jargon that serves only to obfuscate rather than clarify' (Gascoigne, 1995: 39).

Gascoigne (1995) suggests that arriving at a universal definition of partnership is not readily achieved, as numerous research papers and published Government documents make the assumption that 'partnership with parents is a one-to-one link' (p. 40), when this is not always the reality. In the same way that parents are not a homogeneous group, differences in professionals also exist, which means that partnerships often need to be cultivated between professionals before they can be formed with parents. This is supported by the earlier critique of the national policy context, whereby partnership was consistently referred to as a relationship between professionals and parents, and the differences between professionals were not acknowledged. Gascoigne (1995) therefore suggests that the term 'partnership' is more helpfully defined in a way that acknowledges the existence of multiple

partnerships, that require more than just one link between the professional and the parent. From this perspective, Gascoigne (1995) suggests that a working definition of partnership is useful, whereby the following conditions should be met:

- each partner recognises the different skills, experiences and knowledge of each of the other partners;
- each partner values the skills, experiences and knowledge of each of the other partners;
- all partners recognise the need for the input of each of the partners;
- each partner feels valued.

Although Gascoigne's (2005) definition provides an alternative insight into partnership working that acknowledges the existence of multiple partnerships, it could be criticised due to its somewhat idealistic nature, in that it outlines the necessary conditions for partnership without making explicit how such relationships can be achieved. For example, although the 'mutual valuing' of skills could lead to effective partnership working, without a discussion relating to how practitioners can be supported to achieve this, the utility of this definition is challenged.

Partnership has therefore been explored both as a concept, and as an element of practice, whereby studies have examined the circumstances under which effective partnership is likely to occur (Fylling and Sandvin, 1999). One further difficulty in defining partnership arises due to the vast amounts of practice, and the different areas in which parents can be considered partners. For example, parents can be

seen as partners in the 'concrete process of helping children learn' (Fylling and Sandvin, 1999: 147) or at a more strategic level as partners in the decision-making process relating to schools or other education systems (Vincent, 2000). Offering one definition, Bastiani (1993) suggests that partnership should be limited to relationships in which there is:

- sharing of power, responsibility and ownership – though not necessarily equality;
- a degree of mutuality, which begins with the process of listening to each other and incorporates responsive dialogue and 'give and take' on both sides;
- shared aims and goals, based on common ground, but which also acknowledge important differences;
- a commitment to joint action, which parents, pupils and professionals work together to get things done

It is important to note that Bastiani (1993) does not appear to see equality as an integral component of parent-professional partnerships, but does acknowledge that power needs to be shared. This could attract criticism from those who believe that partnerships should be equal, and therefore defined as such, but will be deemed by others to offer a realistic definition of the term that takes into consideration the fact that partnerships will not always be equal. Bastiani (1993) suggests that parents might not always desire an equal partnership, or that professionals might not be proactive in giving parents an equal say in any decision-making processes, which is why 'equality' cannot always be viewed as a prerequisite to partnership working.

Despite this caution relating to equality, Bastiani's definition can be said to offer a conceptualisation of partnership that emphasises the need for a reciprocal relationship whereby all parties work collaboratively to ensure that shared goals are achieved.

Bastiani's (1993) position regarding equality is not uncommon, and is echoed by a number of authors who suggest that it is naive to only think of partnership in terms of equal relationships. Todd and Higgins (1998) suggest that 'the notion of equality might be a connotation or implication of the term 'partnership', but is clearly not a requirement' (p. 228). They go on to suggest that a discourse of equality as applied to partnership working actually serves to obscure such relationships, 'by talking as if they do not exist' (p.228). They believe that partnership between parents and professionals can never be equal, and that practitioners should therefore seek to avoid defining it as such.

Vincent (2000) also questions the extent to which entering into a partnership guarantees access to an equal relationship with mutual respect and shared responsibility. She suggests that the term 'partnership' has evolved in such a way that it has become synonymous with the term equality, when in reality; equality within partnerships is rarely achieved. She urges caution to those who make this assumption, and goes on to suggest that 'partnerships, with the connotations of equality inherent in the term, are often legitimating devices used by schools to encourage parental support for their aims and objectives' (Vincent, 2000: 5). Whilst this can be considered a somewhat cynical approach, it highlights how our

understanding of the term 'partnership' has developed, and further highlights the need to provide a clear definition to avoid any misconceptions.

Although Gascoigne (1995) and Bastiani (1993) can be commended for their attempts to define 'partnership' where others have failed to do so, neither author makes explicit the means through which their definition was developed. The utility of a definition that appears only to represent the authors own personal understanding of the term 'partnership' is therefore questionable in terms of its application to different contexts. If the authors had identified the process through which they had arrived at their definition, or the context in which it was developed, then its use could be asserted with greater confidence. An example of a more transparent approach can be found in Wolfendale's (1983) definition of partnership which was based on first hand participation in a project with parents. By working with parents and focusing on their participation in their child's development and education, she defined partnership as being characterised by parents who are:

- active and central in decision-making and its implementation;
- perceived as having equal strengths and equivalent expertise;
- able to contribute to as well as receive services (reciprocity);
- able to share responsibility so that they and professionals are mutually accountable.

(Wolfendale, 1983: 15)

By outlining the context through which her definition was developed the reader is alerted to the fact that the definition was borne as a direct result of her work with parents. This arguably gives the definition greater credibility than those definitions whose origins are 'hidden'. However, in defining 'partnership' in terms of how parents should be perceived and treated by professionals, she places onus on the latter, therefore removing any responsibility on the part of the parent. Although parents can often find themselves in a position of perceived or actual powerlessness when working with professionals (Todd and Higgins, 1998), one could argue that in offering a definition of partnership that does not acknowledge the role that parents play; this can contribute to inequality at a different level.

As Wolfendale's (1983) definition is developed from parents' firsthand experiences of working with professionals it is interesting to examine how it differs from those definitions that have emerged from the extant literature that have not arisen from the lived experiences of parents. Wolfendale's (1983) definition focuses primarily on the idea of reciprocity and mutuality and does not make specific reference to the need for partnerships to be equal. The definition therefore acknowledges that both parties have a role to play and are mutually accountable for their actions, but that the positions that they occupy in the partnership may not always be equal. This is interesting to note, as it suggests that from a parental perspective, equality is not seen as a pre-requisite to effective partnership working.

### 3.1 The influence of 'personal history'

Having begun to explore the ways in which authors have attempted to define partnership, it appears that their definitions are at times inextricably linked to their personal or professional experiences of such relationships. Those papers that are written from a parental perspective (e.g. Murray, 2000; Carpenter, 2003) can be said to offer a more 'personal' definition of partnership, which appears to have emerged from their own experiences of working with professionals, rather than emerging from the extant literature. An example can be found in the following definition of partnership offered by Murray (2000), a lecturer at the University of Sheffield who has a disabled child:

'In using the term here, I am referring to the relationships within which my son was positively valued in addition to being central and of foremost importance; where in light of his medical condition, his learning and communication difficulties, my parental knowledge was seen as crucial to forming and maintaining a relationship with him; where different roles with regard to my son were recognised and the boundaries between those roles respected by all parties; and finally, and most importantly, they were relationships with which my son was happy' (Murray, 2000: 683)

From an epistemological viewpoint, the definition of partnership offered by Murray is most helpfully viewed through the lens of an interpretive paradigm, whereby an individual is not thought to be able to abstract him or herself from the world in which they live. As Robson (2002) aptly highlights: 'people, unlike objects of the natural world, are conscious, purposive actors who have ideas about their world and attach meaning to what is going on around them' (p. 24). Murray's definition of partnership therefore raises questions regarding whether or not it is appropriate to construct a



universal definition of 'partnership' as it applies to parent- professional working. Instead, it is perhaps more beneficial to explore parents' individual understanding of the term 'partnership' to gain insight into the ways in which they would like to work with professionals, and to determine the extent to which they construct their definition of partnership as 'equal'.

### **3.2 A shared understanding?**

From the definitions critiqued thus far, there appears to be a lack of consensus regarding the components and behaviours that constitute true 'partnership' working. The constructions of partnership in the extant literature can be seen to vary in:

- the emphasis they place on the importance of partnerships being 'equal';
- the rationale through which the definitions are developed (anecdotal evidence, firsthand participation, previous research / literature, personal experience);
- the extent to which they acknowledge that differences between parents and professionals exist that will influence the partnership;
- the extent to which they view partnership as a one-to-one link or whether they acknowledge the existence of multiple partnerships and;
- the extent to which they view the professional as being responsible for ensuring (equal) partnership working.

Although many of these differences could be described as subtle, they all contribute to our varied understanding of what it means for parents and professionals to work in

partnership with one another. It has already been suggested that a universal definition of partnership may not be appropriate, because individuals bring with them different expectations and understanding of what it means to work in partnership which cannot be ignored. However, without some degree of shared understanding it becomes impossible to evaluate the extent to which 'partnership working' is achieved, and also raises issues regarding accountability and responsibility. It is therefore proposed that a context-specific definition be developed, which is workable and meaningful for those practitioners and parents working together in that particular setting (for example, within Children's Services). This definition should be developed in consultation with partners to ensure that it holds relevance to all involved and allows for progress towards partnership working to be monitored and evaluated.

#### **4. What are the barriers and enablers to parent-professional partnership identified in the literature?**

Despite the attempts to define 'partnership' outlined above, it is important to note that although there are occasions where the term is used to define an *actual* collaborative working relationship between a professional and a parent, more often than not, it is a term used to describe an 'intended' or 'ideal' relationship (Vincent, 2000: 5). For some parents and professionals, 'partnership' in the true sense of the word is difficult to achieve for reasons that will be explored in the next section of this paper. This is highlighted through a critique of the literature that outlines the differences between parent and professional roles and considers how an awareness of this can contribute to a more detailed understanding of partnership working. Within this, factors relating

to 'power', 'emotional attachments' and 'types of parent' are explored in terms of how they enable some parents to enter into equitable partnerships, but act as a barrier to others. The section ends by examining the impact of 'difference' on partnership working, in particular the ways in which social class, ethnicity and single-parent status can act as a barrier to parental participation.

#### **4.1 Parent versus professional**

In attempting to understand the complexities of partnership working, and to establish why partnership is more easily achieved for some parents than others, it is first useful to consider the different positions that parents and professionals occupy in relation to the child. Todd and Higgins (1998) argue that the parent has a much greater stake in the partnership than the professional does, due to their longer term commitment and the emotions attached to entering a partnership that is based around the needs of their child. Gascoigne (1995) echoes this view by providing an outline of how parents see the differences between themselves and the professionals they work with (see Table 1).

Some would argue that the distinction that Gascoigne (1995) makes between parents and professionals is rudimentary, and therefore fails to take into consideration complex individual differences that exist both between parents and between different professionals (Alexander and Dore, 1999). It also makes a number of assumptions about the way in which professionals work, and constructs them as being in a position of superiority and experience when this is not always the case. The context of the 1993 Education Act (HMSO, 1993) and the Special Educational Needs Code

of Practice (DES, 2001) place a different construction on the term 'experience', which recognises that the parent is often the most experienced partner in relation to their child's SEN, not the professional. The failure to recognise this could reflect the fact that the parent-professional distinctions reported in Table 1 represent a parental perspective, and it is therefore likely that if they were produced by professionals, the differences would be constructed in an alternative way.

*Table 1: Differences between parents and professionals (adapted from Gascoigne, 1995: 38)*

<b>Parent</b>	<b>Professional</b>	
Unpaid	Paid	This is one of the most significant and easily identified differences between parents and professionals. This can often be a cause of resentment among parents, as professionals get paid regardless of whether they do their job efficiently.
Compulsory	Voluntary	Parents do not volunteer to be the parent of a child with special educational needs; their role is compulsory. The professionals working with children with SEN do so out of choice. They have chosen their career path, and also have the right to choose not to become involved.
Permanent	Part of a career development	A parent of a child with SEN remains in this role for the duration of their lives, and therefore become the only people who have a truly long-term perspective on their child's development. They are the only members of the 'partnership' who will be there throughout every assessment and through all of the highs and the lows. For the professional, their involvement is temporary and often episodic.
Continuous	Sporadic	A parent's responsibility for their special needs child is continuous, whereas professionals work with the child and family for a comparably short period of time.
Untrained	Trained	Parents of children with SEN are often left to find out for themselves how to deal with the difficulties that they might encounter, whereas all professionals working with children with SEN have undertaken a specialist qualification to start them in their chosen career, and have access to ongoing professional development.
Inexperienced	Experienced	In its crudest sense, professionals are positioned as being highly experienced in their field, whereas parents are said to lack experience in certain specialist areas.
Isolated	Network of colleagues	Most professionals have the opportunity to share their concerns, ideas and experiences with an appropriate peer group. Although some parents are members of voluntary organisations and support groups, many parents do not have access to any form of support network.
Subjective	Objective	Parents are passionate, emotional and subjective about their child's future, whereas professionals are able to bring objectivity to each case, as they are not involved emotionally.
Whole Child	Focused on one aspect	Many parents become bewildered by the fact that professionals often focus on just one aspect of their child (e.g. education), whereas parents are said to view their child in a more holistic way, rarely separating educational, social and health issues.

Whether we agree or disagree with the distinctions made in Table 1, they provide interesting insight into the ways in which parents might view professionals and their interactions with them. From this perspective, the accuracy of the definition becomes less important, as even if policies and procedures are in place to support parents and to address any power imbalances that may exist, if parents do not perceive the support in this way, then further work needs to be done. Gascoigne (1995) suggests:

‘It is important that these differences are recognised and accepted in the development of partnership between professionals and parents. They do not provide reasons for avoiding the partnership, but provide a foundation on which meaningful partnership can be developed.’ (Gascoigne, 1995: 38).

Todd and Higgins (1998) offer a social constructionist perspective of the roles of parents and professionals, as they apply to children with SEN. They argue that the roles of parents and professionals have been constructed over time to create a distinction between them, but that in reality, if one tries to define the knowledge that parents and professionals have in relation to any given child, the list would actually contain a number of similar items ‘making statements about knowledge difference problematic’ (p. 228). They suggest that distinctions are more usefully made between the number of children that professionals and parents have responsibility for, and the emotions that are attached to such relationships. Rutman (1996) also comments on the social construction of roles, and suggests that the construction of the parents’ role renders them with less power than professionals, and that they are therefore less likely to be able to effect change. This construction will now be explored.

#### 4.1.1 Power and Powerlessness

Investigating the 'parents as partners' principle, Alexander and Dore (1999) highlight the ways in which traditional practice of working with children with SEN creates a distinction between the professional, as the 'knower and provider' of services, and the family as the 'receiver' of services (p.257). This has the effect of creating a power imbalance between both parties before they potentially even enter into a relationship. Todd and Higgins (1998) suggest that the discourse underlying most constructions of parent-professional relations within the literature subscribe to this construction of the 'powerlessness of parents' (MacPherson, 1993; Vincent, 1996), and that this is manifested in two different ways:

- an overrepresentation of literature on parent-professional relationships from the perspective of the latter and;
- by imputing pathology, or some kind of deficit, on the part of the parent

(Todd & Higgins, 1998; 229)

The extent to which this manifestation was observed as part of the current review of literature is questionable. In examining the perspective from which the majority of articles and texts were written, a disproportionate amount are written by academics and professionals, thus supporting Todd and Higgins' first assertion. Although many of these papers refer to a 'parental perspective', often parents did not appear to be engaged as participants in the research, and these papers are therefore best described as offering a 'professional' perspective. This is not to say that this perspective should be disregarded, as many of these papers provide valuable insight

into professionals' constructions of their work with parents. However, it highlights the importance of being aware of 'author identity' when exploring issues relating to power and powerlessness. It is the second manifestation of powerlessness that was less apparent within the literature searched. A small number of studies reviewed, that focused solely on home-school relationships could arguably fall into this category, whereby the parental factors and behaviours that they believe to be associated with low levels of parental involvement were explored (France et al, 1993; Sandow, 1994) and consideration was given to how these factors could be overcome (e.g. limited parenting skills, negative past experiences of education). Aside from this type of study, there was not found to be an abundance of research that imputed pathology, and studies tended to consider the role of environmental and practical factors as well as exploring factors associated with individual parents and professionals (Roll-Petterrsson, 2003).

Fylling and Sandvin (1999) also highlight issues relating to power when exploring the notion of partnership, and conclude that there is a socially defined power relation between laypersons and professionals, which means that partnerships will always be inequitable. They carried out interviews with parents and teachers regarding the role of parents in special education, and relate their analyses to the notion of partnership described within the existing literature. They conclude that there are two roles open to parents: 'parents as implementers', whereby their role is to implement aims and strategies initiated by the school, and 'parents as clients' whereby parents are seen to be part of the problem and are therefore included in any support provided. Both of



these roles place parents in subordinate and powerless positions, and is said to be representative of a strong inequality of power between parents and schools.

Although Fyelling and Sandvin's (1999) research provides interesting insight into the ways in which they have chosen to categorise the data, there are a number of limitations relating to their methodology. Firstly, the recruitment of participants was based on 'self-selection' (p. 145), whereby all parents of children with SEN were invited to participate, of which 14 parents consented. This sample can therefore not be considered to be representative, and may only represent the views of those parents who are more likely to engage with professionals in the first place, which tells us little about the experiences of those parents who do not play an active role in their child's education. They also fail to make explicit the process through which the data were coded, and the different themes identified; a lack of transparency which makes accepting their assertions more difficult.

In developing their concept of partnership, Todd and Higgins (1998) challenge the 'parents as powerless' and 'professionals as powerful' discourse through the use of an illustrative example: the evaluation of an 'educational achievement strategy' (EAS). As part of the EAS, teacher views regarding parental participation were sought, with an emphasis placed on what they considered the barriers and enablers to participation to be. Todd and Higgins (1998) suggest that teachers' comments about parental participation demonstrate a clear perspective on power as it applies to their relationships with parents. Teachers spoke of parental participation using language that implied the parents' powerlessness and considered partnership from

their (teacher) perspective only, which further fuelled the parents as powerless and professionals as powerful dichotomy. Todd and Higgins (1998) argue that if one looks beyond the language that the teachers used, it becomes apparent that parents were not devoid of power, but that their power received no recognition:

‘Parents were indeed interested in education, views had been expressed to researchers about their aspirations, they had even said something about the kind of involvement wanted (for some, a room to meet where they were also able to smoke), but this was rendered invisible and unacceptable since it was culturally inconsistent with teachers’ understandings of parental involvement and constructions of the parents as powerless’ (Todd and Higgins, 1998: 232)

Parents were therefore powerless in the eyes of professionals, but not in reality. This suggests that there is not always an *actual* power divide between parents and professionals, but that the abovementioned dichotomy is instead based around ‘perceptions’. They suggest that the idea of ‘power’ as it applies to parent-professional relationships, serves a function for both parties, which is why it has not previously been challenged. It allows professionals to assume a particular model of working, and also makes them more accountable for their actions; a position that many parents value (Evans and Vincent, 1997). Although Todd and Higgins make an important point in alerting the reader to the idea that power imbalances do not always exist; the current paper would suggest that they underestimate the importance of ‘perceptions’, which in some cases may be harder to change than actual behaviours. If a parent perceives that there is a power differential between them and the professionals they work with, then regardless of whether this is true, the fact that they view the relationship in these terms needs to be challenged.

Whether one chooses to align themselves with the dominant viewpoint of 'parent as powerless' or instead acknowledges Todd and Higgins (1998) argument that the power dichotomy between parents and professionals is socially constructed and somewhat misleading, we begin to understand how issues relating to 'power' can pose a barrier to partnership working.

#### **4.1.2 An emotional attachment**

Although a number of distinctions between parents and professionals are highlighted within the literature, it is the idea of 'emotional attachment' that gains the most attention. There is a wealth of literature that has focused on the emotional impact that a child's SEN has on their parents life (Carpenter, 1997; Dale, 1996; Hornby, 1995; Peck, 2002; Randall & Parker, 1999), and emphasises how it is important for professionals working with such parents to have the ability to abstract themselves from their professional role in order to see 'the child through the eyes of the family' (Carpenter, 2003; 4). From this perspective, a failure to acknowledge the parents viewpoint can pose a barrier to effective partnership working, as parents may feel that professionals are being unsympathetic or disingenuous (Carpenter and Carpenter, 1997) which is likely to affect their willingness to engage.

In critiquing this literature, it became apparent that those papers and texts that emphasise the need for professionals to be mindful and supportive of the parents' emotional state, were written by parents, and often those parents who have disabled children (e.g. Birkett, 2000; Gascoigne, 1995; Murray, 2000; Wills, 1994). Some

authors were open in alerting their reader to their identity as a parent with SEN, whereas others introduced their role in a more subtle manner and it is also likely that some chose not to disclose their identity and relationship with the 'object' at all.

The idea of parents of children with SEN writing about working with professionals can be viewed in at least one of two ways. The first, and one that the current author would subscribe to, is that these parents are well placed to talk about this subject as they have lived experiences that they can share with the reader (Case, 2001). These parents are the only people who can truly alert professionals to how it feels to be a parent of a child with SEN, and what type of support they value. In highlighting their experiences, both positive and negative, professionals can learn from what they are hearing and adapt their practice accordingly to ensure that they work more collaboratively with parents (Lacey, 2001; Martin et al, 1999). The second interpretation relates to the extent to which parents of children with SEN can be objective when writing about parent-professional working. Where parents talk directly of their experiences, then objectivity is not important; it is only when authors are not transparent about how their ideas and assertions are developed, that issues relating to objectivity become more pertinent. This is perhaps best highlighted through the work of Gascoigne (1995), who shares with the audience that she is a parent of a child with SEN, but also uses terms such as 'parents' in its plural sense to suggest that her ideas and experiences are representative of *all* parents of children with SEN.

Carpenter (2003) suggests that there are a range of emotions present within the families of children with SEN which may influence how they engage with professionals. When a child with SEN is born, parents can find their expectations of becoming a parent challenged. Emotionally, many parents will need support to adjust to their new-found situation, and to ensure the continued care of their child (Russell, 2003) and professionals therefore need to be appreciative of this. It has also been suggested that some parents of children with SEN display signs of grief or sorrow (Roll-Pettersson, 2001), and there is an increasing body of research that has explored the impact of a child's SEN on the wider family network (Hornby and Ashworth, 1994; Meyer and Vadasy, 1997; Miller, 2001; Mirfin-Veitch & Bray, 1997).

A frequent criticism directed towards 'parent research' is that it is often 'anecdotal', and therefore lacking in rigour (O'Connor, 2008). In using this term, O'Connor is referring to the 'narrative accounts' that are often obtained from parents that are not underpinned by methodologies that allow for further exploration of their experiences. From this perspective, it is not always thought to be representative of parents' *actual* experiences (merely their perceptions) or applicable to the wider population. The difficulty here is that, in criticising research for being 'anecdotal', the relevance of that parent's experience is potentially devalued and could imply that their views are not worthy of being listened to. If we were to ignore the voices of the parents critiqued in this part of the literature review, then we would not be aware of the importance of understanding parents' emotions when trying to work in partnership to meet their child's needs. We may assume that an empathetic approach is important; but without listening to parents, we could not know this for certain, thus highlighting the

importance of giving a voice to those who have directly experienced the phenomenon that is being explored.

The above critique of research identifying the emotions that parents experience when their child has special educational needs suggests that what is needed is an approach to researching parent-professional partnership that places 'parent voice' at the centre of the research. Although many studies have attempted to achieve this, evidence is often anecdotal and therefore cannot confidently be used to further our understanding about parent-professional partnerships. Case study methodology would lend itself to such an approach as it offers a systematic means of exploring a phenomenon in a real life context (Yin, 2009), that seeks to illuminate and deepen our understanding of the given phenomenon (Stake, 1998). It also allows for multiple chains of evidence to be obtained, which provides a means of triangulating the data obtained from parents to determine its reliability, whilst at the same time acknowledging the importance of allowing parents to tell their story in their own words.

#### **4.1.3 Types of parent**

A further factor influencing parent-professional relationships identified within the literature relates to 'types' of parents, and how this is likely to influence the way in which they interact with professionals. It has already been highlighted that the term 'professional' is wide-ranging and therefore does not refer to a homogeneous group, and the same can also be said about parents. Although the term 'professional' can

be further refined to include an individual's title and job description, the term 'parent' does not lend itself to the same level of refinement meaning that differences between them are not always highlighted.

Gascoigne (1995) suggests that there are distinct groups of parents who have common behaviour patterns in their interactions with professionals (see Table 2). Where some of these behaviours will enable effective communication and more fruitful relationships with professionals, they can act as a barrier to others. Some parents will be more confident to speak out in their communications with professionals, whereas others will be more comfortable playing a more passive role in the partnership. An awareness of parent 'type' is arguably important as this may allow professionals to adapt their style of working to ensure parent understanding, and to increase the likelihood of partnerships becoming equitable.

*Table 2: Types of parents (adapted from Gascoigne, 1995)*

<b>Type of Parent</b>	<b>Description</b>
The articulate, assertive, educated parent	Confident when speaking and appear to understand what professionals are talking about and 'approach any discussion about their child with equanimity and assertiveness' (p. 26)
The angry, knowledgeable parent	Well-informed, yet unable to approach their discussions with professionals in a quiet manner. 'They are more likely to harangue the professionals they meet, viewing them with some contempt because their own 'expert' knowledge exceeds that of the experts they meet' (p. 28)
The acquiescent or submissive parent	Will do almost anything that the professional suggests. They do not actively pursue independent advice from other specialists, or challenge what the professional says.
The 'uncaring' parent	These parents do not place education at the top of their agenda for their child and therefore come across as 'uncaring'. They may seem to be unconcerned that their child is falling behind and place the responsibility on the teacher/professional to make sure their child achieves.
The angry, ill-informed parent	These parents are likely to have a confrontational manner. Appeals to reason with them may not be responded to and the professional is likely to be on the receiving end of some angry exchanges. These parents will express their dissatisfaction at any given opportunity.
The fighting parent	These parents may appear more interested in the 'fight' than in their child's special needs. The 'take delight in pursuing their argument, whilst losing sight of the underlying objective' (p. 32)
The special needs parent	There are a specific group of parents (of children with SEN), who also have special needs themselves. This may not always be immediately apparent, but where possible professionals need to be aware of this.

The process and methods through which Gascoigne (1995) arrived at these definitions is not made clear, and should therefore be considered to represent 'types of parents' from her individual perspective. The utility of grouping parents in this way should also be questioned, as parents are after all individuals (Crozier, 1999), and by her own admission, Gascoigne suggests that the list is not exhaustive, nor does it exclude movement between sub-groups. It is therefore arguably more useful to consider the different roles that are open to parents in their interactions with professionals, as in doing so, it is acknowledged that parents are a heterogeneous group, and one is able to differentiate between them in terms of the roles that they



can occupy rather than individual traits. Vincent (1996; 2000) identifies four different 'subject positions' that are open to parents: 'parent as supporter/learner', 'parent as consumer', 'parent as independent' and 'parent as participant' (see Table 3) the first two of which are said to be the most prevalent within the extant literature.

*Table 3: Parent subject positions (adapted from Vincent, 1996; 2000)*

<b>Subject position</b>	<b>Function</b>	<b>Mechanisms</b>	<b>Focus</b>
Supporter / Learner	To support professionals and adopt their concerns and approaches	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Curriculum support via professionally run schemes</li> <li>• Attending school educational events</li> <li>• Supporting/organising school events</li> </ul>	<p>For attainment issues – individual child</p> <p>For extra-curricular and fund raising activities – whole class / school</p>
Consumer	To encourage school/professional accountability and high standards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Choosing a school using league tables</li> <li>• Receiving information as detailed in government guidance</li> </ul>	<p>For attainment issues – individual child</p> <p>Limited involvement in management issues e.g. voting for changes in school's status</p>
Independent	To maintain minimal contact with the school/professional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Little home-school communication or interaction.</li> <li>• Parents may provide alternative forms of education e.g. supplementary classes</li> </ul>	Individual child
Participant	To be involved in governance of the school as well as the education of their own child	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parent governors</li> <li>• Statutorily based parents' groups</li> <li>• Membership of local/national education groups and organisations</li> </ul>	<p>Potential focus on all aspects of education on range of levels:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Individual child</li> <li>• Whole school</li> <li>• Local and national educational issues</li> </ul>

Within the 'parent as consumer' role, Vincent (2000) suggests that there can often be a mismatch between what parents want, and the schools' perception of what they want therefore making 'consumerism' difficult. Parents are not seen as equal

partners in their relationships with schools and the professionals within them, and are instead seen as service-users who are able to make choices regarding their child's education. An example of this would be the idea that parents are now allowed to choose a school for their child, where they were not previously allowed to do so, and also have increased access to teacher assessments and information contained in league tables. Despite providing parents with more choice, Vincent (2000) cautions that the role of 'consumer' does not necessarily equate to the parent acquiring more power in their interactions with professionals, and in this role they are unlikely to effect change at a level other than the individual.

Vincent (1996; 2000) suggests the 'parent as supporter/learner' role best describes the actual, intended, or more often, ideal partnership relationship between parents and professionals. She believes that 'supporter/learner' is a more accurate description of what most authors refer to as 'partnership', as parents are not equal partners, but are seen to be working in partnership when they support the professional's agenda. Vincent argues:

'The subject positions of 'consumer' and 'partner' channel parental activity with regards to schools into particular limited modes of action, which allows the individuals involved little agency' (p. 20)

Whether we find the typology of parents developed by Gascoigne (1995) to be accurate, or the subject positions identified by Vincent (1996, 2000) to be useful, they serve a function in alerting the reader to the ways in which differences between parents can affect their levels of participation in education and their relationships with professionals. The extent to which parent 'differences' impact upon partnership

working will be explored in the next section of this paper, through a critique of studies that have looked at the role of class, race and single-parent status.

#### **4.2 Equal Opportunities: The impact of difference**

As Crozier (1999) highlights, some parents are more likely to play an active role in their child's education, and enjoy more mutually fulfilling relationships with professionals than others, but why is this the case? Much of the literature exploring this relates to parental involvement, and the factors that appear to be associated with higher levels of participation. Desforges and Abouchaar (2003) carried out a review of the literature published on parental involvement in England and concluded that levels and type of parental involvement is strongly influenced by: family social class, maternal level of education, maternal psycho-social health, single parent status, and to a lesser extent, ethnicity. Therefore, despite an increasing onus placed on partnership working, and parents being given more choices regarding their child's education, there has been a growing body of research which demonstrates that educational markets are class biased (Ball, 2003) and that some parents are disadvantaged as a result. Reay (2005) takes this idea further, by suggesting the following:

*'The current enthusiasm for yet more and more parental involvement among policy makers has failed to take into account the dangers some kinds of parental involvement pose to pupils' equal opportunities for educational resources. Aspects of parental involvement and schools' accountability to parents may work against equal opportunities. First, parents' personal histories and their educational experiences influence their involvement in their children's schooling, particularly their effectiveness in dealing with teachers. Such differences are rooted in social class, ethnicity and race. Where*

*children's class and cultural background bears little resemblance to that of their teachers, connections between home and school may be minimal and tenuous.' (p.26)*

In adopting this viewpoint, Reay (2005) appears to be suggesting that local and national attempts to increase parental involvement, rather than being a positive move, can in fact serve to disadvantage and alienate some parents and their children. This view is echoed by Henderson and Mapp (2002) who conclude that parental involvement can reinforce the existing power divisions between parents and professionals rather than help to breakdown existing educational inequalities relating to class, single parents status and ethnicity.

#### **4.2.1 Social Class**

The impact of parental social class positioning has been widely researched within the literature. We live in a society in which social class can have a significant impact in people's lives, in particular the resources that they have at their disposal which is why social class is often explored by those researchers looking at parent-professional interactions. Discussions regarding parental social class often highlight difficulties associated with defining different social classes. In the past parents have been categorised as belonging to either the upper, middle or working classes, but many would argue that this definition is no longer useful in modern day society (Vincent, 2000). This is due to the determinants that are often used (such as money and occupation) to assign social class which do not always accurately reflect differences between parents. Despite this, people are still positioned within society based on these factors alongside their level of education, housing and in some cases

their attitudes and behaviours, which means that discussions regarding class are still relevant. Within the literature there appears to be a consensus that middle class parents are able to effect change in relation to their child's education to a greater extent than many working class parents (Ball, 2003; Jordan et al, 1994; Reay, 2005). In examining the research papers to establish what it is about 'middle class' parents that enable them to play a more active role, and to have greater say over their child's education, support and care, the following factors were identified:

- higher levels of anxiety about their child's educational achievement;
- relative affluence;
- more positive experiences of education;
- the ability to compensate for perceived gaps in state provision by providing tutors etc;
- higher levels of education and;
- higher levels of confidence

(Taken from Ball, 2003; Jordan et al, 1994, Metso, 2004; and Reay, 1998; 2005)

It is important to note that many of these studies base their conclusions on the findings of previous research papers, and do not carry out their own research that enables hypotheses relating to social class to be tested. They also fail to make explicit the means through which they define social class when they refer to middle class or working class parents. Although the studies critiqued as part of this review are not exhaustive, there was a near absence of studies that had employed experimental research designs that allowed for the comparison of parents from

different classes, and how this impacted upon their levels of participation in their child's education. Authors make crude distinctions between parents of different classes, without always alerting the reader to how these distinctions have been made.

A study conducted by Reay (1998) was the exception to this, which looked at parent-teacher relationships in a middle and working class school in London. Women across the sample, regardless of class, were engaged in their child's education, and were monitoring progress and offering support. Differences between middle and working class parents were however observed in terms of the resources that they had available to them. Lower incomes, fewer educational qualifications, less educational knowledge and information about the system did not directly affect their willingness to become involved in their child's education, but did lead to less effective practices in terms of having their voice heard and influencing change:

'Working class women found it difficult to assume the role of educational expert, were less likely to persuade the teachers to act on their complaints and were ill-equipped financially, socially and psychologically to compensate for the deficits they perceived in their children's education.' (Reay 1998:163).

In critiquing the literature relating to social class and parental participation, it would appear that there are three possible mechanisms through which social class might operate (Nechyba et al, 1999). See Table 4 below for a summary.

*Table 4: Three mechanisms through which social class might operate (adapted from Nechyba et al, 1999)*

1) 'A culture of poverty' exists in which working class parents place less emphasis on the
--

importance of education, and are therefore less likely to participate.

2) The second mechanism relates to '*social capital*' and suggests that working class parents do not know the types of people who can influence change, or possess the skills necessary to do this themselves.

3) The third barrier implicates '*institutional barriers*' whereby many schools can be seen to represent middle class institutions with their own set of 'class values'.

Although Nechyba's classification is useful in helping to categorise the extant literature, their theories are almost impossible to test and cannot account for why some working class parents are fully involved in their child's education and some middle class parents are not.

#### **4.2.2 Racial and cultural difference and the impact of single parent status**

Racial and cultural differences between parents and professionals have been identified as a barrier to partnership working within the literature (Cross, 1996; Fine, 1993; Singh, 1998). Differences in styles and patterns of communication, family norms and values and spiritual beliefs, have all been found to influence the equity of working relationships between parents and professionals from different ethnic backgrounds (Alexander & Dore, 1999). Crozier (2005) carried out research with 'ethnic minority parents' exploring their views regarding their children's education, and suggests that the 'black' parents in her study invested considerable time into their child's education at both an emotional and professional level. Overwhelmingly, parents felt that their involvement in their child's education was essential and demonstrative of them taking a stand against 'a system that pathologizes their children and has them marked out as failures' (p. 54). From this perspective, their

ethnic origin was not a barrier to their participation, but instead encouraged them to play a more active role to ensure that their child was not victimised as a result of their skin colour. This viewpoint can be seen to reflect a wider debate regarding the labelling of black children (Mirza, 1997), and the acceptance of dominant educational discourses which see black children as underachieving and disruptive (Vincent, 2000).

Reay (1998) offers a different perspective regarding the relationship between race and parental participation. She explored mothers' involvement in their child's schooling and described the alienation felt by many black mothers in trying to engage with their child's primary school. The black parents compared themselves to the white middle class parents in the school, and felt that they did not have the resources or the confidence to compete with these parents, meaning their voices often went unheard. Although Reay's (1998) study provides interesting insight into the experiences of black mothers, she does not clearly identify the ethnic composition of the schools that their children attend. Access to such information is likely to shape our interpretation of results, as if the participants' children were attending predominately white schools then we begin to understand why they might feel 'voiceless' and in the minority. However, if the schools have a large proportion of children from ethnic minorities then factors other than race are likely to play a role, and would warrant further exploration.

As highlighted thus far, there are large differences between parents in the degree to which they see a role for themselves in their child's education and in the degree to



which they feel confident to speak out and affect change (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003). A final factor influencing this that has emerged from the literature is that of single-parent status. Kohl et al (2000) reported a study of family factors (parental education level, maternal depression and single parent status) which potentially act as a barrier to parental participation. Single parent status was found to be negatively related to: parental involvement, the teacher's perception of the parent, and the quality of the parent-teacher relationship (Kohl et al 2000). Kohl et al's study offers two explanations; firstly single parents often focus their energies within the home and are therefore less inclined to play an active role in their child's education in terms of their physical attendance and participation. Secondly single parents have to overcome the practicalities associated with trying to play an active role in their child's education whilst juggling child care arrangements and being the sole primary caregiver within the home. These findings coincide with those reported by Anning (2000) and Standing (1999) who suggest that lone parents appear to see the main restrictions of their involvement as arising from their own limitations, especially in respect of time available and child care.

From the literature critiqued thus far, 'the impact of difference' on parental participation and partnership working can be evidenced through an exploration of factors related to social class, single-parent status, and to a lesser extent, ethnicity. It appears that some parents are less likely to play an active role in their child's education, and in turn, are therefore less likely to engage with professionals or work in partnership. From a social class perspective, difficulties emerge in trying to apply these findings to the wider population, as the basis on which their definitions of social

class were arrived at is not made clear. Social class can be determined on a range of factors such as economic resources, level of maternal education and free school meal eligibility, all of which are likely to categorise people in different ways. What is therefore needed is a means of exploring the views of certain groups of parents from different social classes, whereby the method of categorisation is made clear so that findings hold relevance outside of the particular research study. The literature also fails to make clear the impact of 'difference' on the parents of children with special educational needs. Further research is therefore needed to capture the experiences of parents who have children with SEN from specific social classes or ethnic groups to explore how this affects their desire or ability to work in partnership with professionals and engage in their child's education. Having considered some of the potential barriers and enablers to parent participation outlined in the literature. It is now important to outline steps that have been taken to support professionals to make partnerships more equitable, and their approach to working with parents more transparent.

## **5. Models of Partnership and Frameworks for Collaboration**

Cunningham and Davis (1985) suggest that professional interactions with parents can be improved considerably if they are underpinned by models or frameworks that guide practice. Cunningham & Davis do not suggest that these models introduce new and novel ways of working, but feel that they are often implicit, and need to be brought to the forefront to make existing knowledge more meaningful. They also propose that these models of collaboration should be testable, in that they should

enable reliable predictions to be made and evaluated (Dale, 1996). Fundamental to the development of such models is the acknowledgement that the relationship between parents and professionals will, to a large extent be influenced by how professionals view their role in working with parents. From this perspective, it is likely that different professionals will hold different views and will therefore work with parents in different ways, and it is therefore unlikely that any profession will be consistent in using the same model.

A summary of the frameworks of parent-professional collaboration found in the extant literature is presented in Table 5. These models of parent-professionals relationships have been formulated from the perspective of provision for children with SEN, but their influence has also been significant in the development of thinking in mainstream contexts (Beveridge, 2005: 97). The frameworks appear to follow a natural progression whereby each model was developed and adapted to address a limitation or concern in the previous model. From this perspective they can be seen to represent 'an evolving relationship that graduates parents from positions of clients, to partners who collaborate with professionals on decisions relating to their child's education' (O'Connor, 2008: 255). The utility of these frameworks should be considered at two levels. Firstly, the frameworks can be seen to represent a means of conceptualising current professional practices as observed by researchers. Secondly, in some cases they represent an ideological way of working, and so can be used as a framework to guide future practice rather than simply being used as a means of defining current ways of working.

*Table 5: Models of parent-professional collaboration: frameworks to guide professional working practices*

<b>Author(s)</b>	<b>Model</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Critique</b>
Cunningham & Davis (1985)  Mittler & Mittler (1982)	<i>The Expert model</i>	Within the expert tradition, professionals rely almost exclusively on their own professional judgements about appropriate interventions for children with special educational needs.	Within this model, professionals may ask parents for information, and may inform them of what they have decided, but their decisions take little account of parental views.
Cunningham & Davies (1985)  Mittler & Mittler (1982)	<i>The Transplant model</i>	Parents are enlisted as co-teachers and co-therapists and are instructed (by professionals) in the necessary techniques that they should use with their children. The techniques are 'transplanted' onto parents, so that they could become more involved.  An example of this can be found in schemes that encourage parental involvement in reading whereby professionals share the model and skills that they would like the parent to use to support their child's	Although parents were able to play a more active role in their child's support; this is on the terms of the professional, and so therefore does not lead to equitable relationships.  This model suggests that parents are in need of professional direction to be able to meet the needs of their children, and therefore does not acknowledge the skills that they have (Beveridge, 2005)  Parents are viewed as lacking in skills, rather than recognising their unique contribution as parents (Hatcher & Leblond, 2001).
Cunningham & Davis (1985)	<i>The Consumer model</i>	Within this model, parents are encouraged to use their in-depth knowledge and experience of their own children in order to decide upon the services and interventions that were most appropriate for them (Beveridge, 2005)	Since this model was proposed, there has been a great deal of caution about the type of consumerism that they espoused. This is related to the inequities that arise when so little choice is actually available for the majority of children and their families.  This approach is premised on a recognition of parental rights with respect to information and involvement in decision-making processes. However, the model does not take into account the importance of appropriate support if parents are to

			develop the confidence and competence to exercise these rights (Beveridge, 2005).
Appleton & Minchcom, 1991	<i>The Empowerment model</i>	<p>This model promotes parental power and control, and highlights the need for professionals to tailor their involvement in ways that are responsive to both the strengths and the needs of individual parents and families.</p> <p>The professional will need to consider what type of help the parent may need in order to take up a position as 'partner', and how they would need help to become empowered.</p> <p>The professional is required to actively promote the parent's sense of control over decision making.</p>	<p>The model does not articulate the methods that professionals need to employ to become more responsive to parents' needs.</p> <p>Professionals are still placed in a position of power, as the onus is on them to ensure that parents are treated as partners. Professionals might have varied understanding of what it means to be a partner, and therefore, some parents may be at greater risk of entering into inequitable partnerships.</p> <p>The model focuses on just one type of empowerment, but other forms of forms may be needed to truly address the power imbalance (Dale, 1996).</p>
Dale (1996)	<i>The Negotiating model</i>	<p>This model builds on the consumer and empowerment models, but sees negotiation as a key transaction for partnership work. This model defines partnership as 'a working relationship where the partners use negotiation and joint decision-making and resolve differences of opinion and disagreement in order to reach some kind of shared perspective of jointly-agreed decision on issues of mutual concern' (Dale, 1996: 14).</p> <p>The model recognizes that parents and professionals both have contributions to offer, but that this can mean that they have differing perspectives. The model offers a framework to bridge the gap between the varying perspectives.</p>	<p>As with the previous models, the emphasis is on the professional to carry out the negotiation and resolve any differences.</p> <p>More articulate, confident parents are likely to benefit more from this model than other parents.</p> <p>The model assumes that conflict resolution and the differences between 'role positions' and perspectives can easily be resolved by the professional. Some of these differences are likely to be complex and deep-seated, and this model appears to over-simplify this.</p>

Both the 'Expert model' and the 'Transplant model' (Mittler and Mittler, 1983; Cunningham & Davis, 1985) position the professional in a role of power, and the parent in the role of 'passive observer' and 'helper' respectively. Although these models were identified in the 1980's, many professionals still approach their interactions with parents in this manner (Dale, 1996). The move from expert model to transplant model was characterised by an increased recognition of the positive role that parents can play in supporting their child's special educational needs (Mittler and McConachie, 1983). Parents were seen as an untapped resource that could be utilised, and as a result, professionals began to see the benefits of imparting a small amount of knowledge to parents to enable them to play a role in their child's support. The parent therefore becomes an 'involved participant' (Dale, 1996: 8) who is believed to hold particular competencies, whereas the professional assumes the role of instructor or consultant.

Recognising the level of expertise that parents have in supporting their children, Cunningham and Davis (1985) proposed that a 'consumer' model should be used to guide parent-professional relationships (see Table 5). At its time of publication, this model was seen as revolutionary as it placed parents at the centre of the decision-making process for the first time. However, despite the significance of this shift in thinking, the model does not acknowledge the idea that some parents may find it difficult to make such choices regarding their child. As has been highlighted in this literature review, many parents are disadvantaged in their communications and interactions with professionals, and inequities can therefore arise as a result of this model of practice. Despite these concerns, the move to this model of working should

be seen as positive as it places emphasis on the need to listen to parental preferences and views.

Further developments in models of parent-professional working have highlighted the importance of parents receiving adequate support if they are to develop the confidence to exercise the rights accorded to them within the consumer model. This is captured through the 'Empowerment Model' (Appleton and Minchom, 1991) which emphasises the importance of parental power, but acknowledges the need for professionals to tailor their involvement in a way that takes into account the individual strengths and weaknesses, and the 'Negotiating Model', which places negotiation as a key transaction for partnership work.

Despite these developments, there are still a number of concerns about the utility of these collaborative frameworks. From critiquing the literature, the current paper would suggest that there are four main criticisms that can be directed towards parent-professional models that need to be addressed:

- models have been developed without direct consultation with parents;
- the professional determines the nature of the relationship;
- they give an oversimplified view of a complex relationship and;
- although they look at the roles of parents and professionals within they fail to look at the role of communication within this.

From this perspective, what is therefore needed is an approach to exploring parent-professional relationships from the perspective of the former, which takes into

consideration the individual lived experiences of parents and identifies what they value from their interactions with professionals.

## **6. ‘Voice of the Parent’: Implications for future research**

Throughout this paper, discussion has centred on the importance of parents’ views and experiences being situated at the heart of any initiatives and frameworks developed to improve parent-professional partnership working. A large proportion of research exploring parent-professional collaboration is borne from a theoretical perspective whereby parents are not actively engaged in the research process, which therefore raises questions about the reliability of findings. The review has suggested that where parent views are sought, our understanding of what it means to work in partnership varies significantly compared to how it would have been had the definition emerged purely from the extant literature. Where parents are engaged in the research process, we are reminded of the importance of ‘individuality’ and the dangers of trying to apply generic frameworks or theories in an attempt to understand how all parents are best supported.

There are fundamental differences between parents and professionals, which mean that even when professionals attempt to identify how their practice could be adapted to make partnerships more equitable, they may fail to capture the true essence of what it is that parents want. It is also important to note that all of the papers and chapters critiqued as part of this review were written by researchers and academics, many of whom are professionals in their own right. With the exception of those authors who are also parents of children with SEN (and make this position clear),



there is something uncomfortable and even disingenuous about these authors writing about parent-professional collaboration without highlighting their role as professionals and how this might create a bias in their approach.

One potential pitfall in advocating this role for parents is that parents might not always know what they want from their interactions with professionals, or be able to articulate this. It has already been established that some parents may find it difficult to engage with professionals, and it is therefore likely that such parents would find it difficult to be active participants in research. What is therefore needed is an approach to researching parent views that allows them to tell their story in their own words, whereby emergent themes can then be extracted that highlight issues relating to parent-professional working.

## **7. Conclusions**

Parent-professional partnership is a topic that is complex in its conceptualisation due in part to the heterogeneous nature of parent and professional populations. Although numerous authors have attempted to define 'partnership', we are yet to arrive at a shared understanding regarding what this means. Definitions will vary depending on whether they are developed by parents or professionals suggesting that each individual brings with them, their own understanding regarding what it means to work in partnership. Authors often attempt to define partnership based on existing theory and literature, rather than working in consultation with parents, or directly exploring their experiences of partnership working. This challenges the utility of the definition

as it is not representative of parents' actual experiences, but instead represents the authors' perceptions regarding what partnership working should entail.

A large proportion of policy documentation also fails to make explicit their understanding and use of the term 'partnership' thus leading to further misunderstanding. Government reports increasingly emphasise the need to consult with parents and treat them as equal partners in their interactions with professionals, but do not always convey how this can be achieved. The principles of partnership articulated in these documents are theoretically sound, but do not make clear recommendations regarding how these principles can be put into practice. From an equality perspective, it is also important to note that the onus is placed on the professional to ensure that they work in partnership with parents. This means that some parents will be at risk of entering into inequitable relationships and will remain 'voiceless' if 'partnership' is not seen as a priority for that individual professional.

Fundamental differences exist between parents and professionals that need to be taken into consideration when attempting to understand parent-professional working. Parents of children with SEN have a more emotional, longer term investment in the relationship which means that tensions can often exist between them and the professionals with whom they work. Within the literature, distinctions are also made between different groups of parents, whereby some parents are identified as being less likely to play an active role in their child's education, or engage with professionals. From this perspective, parental involvement is seen to be influenced by family social class, single parent status, and to a lesser extent, ethnicity. Although many studies have attempted to identify why this is the case, few have explored this

group of parents' experiences in their own right to see how this could inform our understanding of parent-partnership working.

This critical literature review highlights a need to employ research methodologies that enable parents to be engaged as valued participants in the research process to further our understanding of parent-professional partnerships. Although models of partnership working contained within the literature are useful in providing a framework through which parent-professional interactions can be viewed, they are not informed directly by research with parents, and research therefore needs to develop to address this.

## **References**

- Alexander, L.B. & Dore, M.M. (1999). Making the parents as partners principle a reality: The role of the alliance. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 8 (3), 255 – 270.
- Anning, A. (2000). *New deals and old dilemmas: Lone parents of young children balancing work and parenthood*. Paper presented at the British Educational Research Association Annual Conference, Cardiff.
- Appleton, P.L. & Minchom, P.E. (1991). 'Models of parent partnership and child development centres'. *Child: Care, Health and Development*, 17, 27 – 38.
- Ball, S.J. (2003). *Class Strategies and the Education Market: the Middle Classes and Social Advantage*. London: Routledge Falmer.
- Bastiani, J. (1993). Parents as partners: genuine progress or empty rhetoric? In P. Munn (Ed.) *Parents and Schools: Customers, Managers or Partners?* London: Routledge
- Beveridge, S. (2005). *Children, Families and Schools: Developing Partnerships for Inclusive Education*. London: Routledge Falmer.
- Birkett, D. (2000). 'There was nothing on my list about this...' In P. Murray and J. Penman (Eds) *Telling Our Own Stories – Reflections on Family Life in a Disabling World*. Sheffield: Parents With Attitude.
- Calder, M.C. (1995). Child protection: Balancing paternalism and partnership. *British Journal of Social Work*, 25, 749 – 766.
- Carpenter, B. (1997). *Families in Context: Emerging Trends in Family Support and Early Intervention*. London: David Fulton Publishers.

- Carpenter, S., & Carpenter, B. (1997). Working with families. In B. Carpenter (Ed.) *Families in Context: emerging trends in family support and early intervention*. London: David Fulton.
- Carpenter, B. (2003). Shifting the focus: from parent to family partnerships. *Special Education Perspectives*, 12 (1), 3 – 16.
- Case, S. (2000). Learning to partner, disabling conflict: early indications of an improving relationship between parents and professionals with regard to service provision for children with learning disabilities, *Disability and Society*, 16 (6), 837 – 854.
- Central Advisory Council for Education (1967) *Children and their Primary Schools* (The Plowden Report). London: HMSO.
- Cross, T. (1996). Culture and family centred practice. *The Prevention Report*, 2 – 5.
- Crozier, G. (1999). Parental involvement: who wants it? *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 9 (3), 219 – 238
- Cunningham, C. & Davis, H. (1985). *Working with Parents: Frameworks for Collaboration*. Buckingham: Open University Press
- Dale, N. (1996). *Working with Families of Children with Special Needs*. London; Routledge.
- Desforges, C & Abouchar, A. (2003). *The Impact of Parental Involvement, Parental Support and Family Education on Pupil Achievement and Adjustment: a literature review*. (Research Report 433). London: DfES.
- Department for Children, Schools and Families (2010). *Lamb Inquiry: Special Educational Needs and Parental Confidence*. London: DCSF.

Department for Education and Skills (2001). *Special Educational Needs Code of Practice*. London: DfES.

Department for Education and Skills (2002). *Special Educational Needs and Disability Act*. London: DfES.

Department for Education and Skills (2003). *Together from the Start – Practical Guidance for Professionals Working with Disabled Children (birth to third birthday) and their Families*. London: DfES.

Department for Education and Skills (2004). *Removing Barriers to Achievement: The Government's Strategy for SEN*. London: DfES.

Evans, J. & Vincent, C. (1997). Parental choice and special education. In R. Glatter, P. Woods and C. Bagley (Eds). *Choice and Diversity in Schooling*. London: Routledge.

Fine, M.A. (1993) Current approaches to understanding family diversity. *Family Relations*, 42, 235 – 237.

France, L., Topping, K. & Revell, F. (1993). Parent-tutored cued spelling. *Support for Learning*, 8 (1), 11 – 15.

Frederickson, N., Dunsmuir, S., Lang, J., & Monsen, J. (2004). Mainstream-special school inclusion partnerships: Pupil, parent and teacher perspectives. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 8, 37 – 57.

Fylling, I. & Sandvin, J.T. (1999). The role of parents in special education: the notion of partnership revised. *European Journal of Special Educational Needs*, 14 (2), 144 – 157.

Gascoigne, E. (1995). *Working with Parents as Partners in SEN: Home and School a Working Alliance*. London: David Fulton Publishers

- Hallgarten, J. (2000). *Home-school link workers: a case for expansion?* Paper presented to a DfES discussion group. (London: DfES).
- Hatcher, R. & Leblond, D. (2001). Educational action zones. In S. Riddell and L. Tett (Eds) *Education, Social Justice and Inter-Agency Working: joined up or fractured policy?* London: Routledge.
- Henderson, A.T. & Mapp, K.L. (2002). *A new wave of evidence: The impact of school, family and community connections on student's achievement.* Austin, TX: National Center of Family and Community Connections with Schools.
- HMSO (1993) The Education Act 1993 [Online] [http://www.opsi.gov.uk/acts1993/ukpga\\_19930035\\_en\\_1](http://www.opsi.gov.uk/acts1993/ukpga_19930035_en_1) [Accessed online 19th December 2009]
- Hornby, G. (1995). *Working with Parents of Children with Special Needs.* London: Cassell.
- Hornby, G. & Ashworth, T. (1994). Grandparent support for families who have children with disabilities: A survey of parents. *Journal of Family Studies*, 3, 403 – 412.
- Jordan, B., Redley, M. & James, S. (1994). *Putting the Family First: Identities, Decisions, Citizenship.* London: UCL Press.
- Jupp, S. (1992). *Making the Right Start.* Hyde: Opened Eye.
- Keen, D. (2007). Parents, families and partnerships: issues and considerations. *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education*, 54 (3), 339 – 349
- Kohl, G.O., Lengua, L.J., & MacMahon, R.J. (2000). Parent involvement in school: Conceptualising multiple dimensions and their relations with family and demographic risk factors. *Journal of School Psychology*, 38 (6), 501 – 523.

- Lacey, P. (2001). *Support Partnerships: Collaboration in Action*. London: David Fulton Publishers.
- Lake, J.F. & Billingsley, B.S. (2000). An analysis of factors that contribute to parent-school conflict in special education. *Remedial and Special Education*, 21 (4), 240 – 251.
- MacPherson, A. (1993). Parent-professional partnership: a review and discussion of issues. *Early Childhood Development and Care*, 86, 61 – 67.
- Martin, J., Tett, L., & Kay, H. (1999). Developing collaborative partnerships: limits and possibilities for schools, parents and community education. *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 9 (1), 59 – 74.
- Mason, M. (1995). Breaking of relationships. *Present Time*, 13, 3 – 7.
- Merton, R.K., Fiske, M., & Kendall, P.L. (1990). *The Focused Interview: A Manual of Problems and Procedures*. New York: Free Press.
- Metso, P. (2004). *Home, School and Education: Encounters and Boundaries*. Helsinki: Finnish Educational Research Association.
- Meyer, D., & Vadasy, P. (1997). Meeting the unique concerns of brothers and sisters of children with special needs. In B. Carpenter (Ed.) *Families in Context: Emerging Trends in Family Support and Early Intervention*. London: David Fulton Publishers.
- Miles, M. & Huberman, M. (1994). *Qualitative Data Analysis* (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition). Beverly Hills CA: Sage.
- Miller, P. (2001). A study into the experiences of children who have a brother or sister with an autism spectrum disorder. *Good Autism Practice*, 2 (2), 13 – 29.



- Mirfin-Veitch, B., & Bray, A. (1997). Grandparents: Part of the family. In B. Carpenter (Ed.) *Families in Context: Emerging Trends in Family Support and Early Intervention*. London: David Fulton Publishers.
- Mirza, H.S. (1997). Black women in education; a collective movement for social change. In H.S. Mirza (Ed.) *Black British Feminism*. London: Routledge.
- Mittler, P., & McConachie (1983). *Parents, Professionals and Mentally Handicapped People: Approaches to Partnership*. Beckenham: Croom Helm.
- Mittler, P. & Mittler, H. (1983). Partnership with parents: an overview. In P. Mittler and H. McConachie (Eds) *Parents, Professionals and Mentally Handicapped People: Approaches to Partnership*. Beckenham: Croom Helm.
- Murray, P. (2000). Disabled children, parents and professionals: partnership on whose terms? *Disability and Society*, 15 (4), 683 - 698.
- Nechyba, T., McEwan, P., & Older-Aguilar, D. (1999). *The impact of family and community resource on student outcomes: An assessment of the international literature with implications for New Zealand*. Available from: [http://www.minedu.govt.nz/web/document/document\\_page.cfm?id=5593&p=58](http://www.minedu.govt.nz/web/document/document_page.cfm?id=5593&p=58) (Accessed 7<sup>th</sup> June 2009)
- O'Connor, U. (2008). Meeting in the middle? A study of parent-professional partnerships. *European Journal of Special Educational Needs*, 23 (3), 253 – 268.
- Oliver, M. & Barnes, C. (1998). *Disabled People and Social Policy: from exclusion to inclusion*. Harlow: Longman.
- Peck, D. (2002). What's the problem? A guide to running a problem-solving workshop for parents/carers. *Support for Learning*, 17 (1), 39 – 43.
- Pring, R. (2000). *Philosophy of Educational Research*. London: Continuum.

- Randall, P., & Parker, J. (1999). *Supporting the Families of Children with Autism*. Chichester: John Wiley.
- Reay, D. (1998). *Class Work: Mothers' Involvement in their Children's Primary Schooling*. London: University College Press.
- Reay, D. (2005). Mothers' involvement in their children's schooling: social reproduction in action? In G. Crozier and D. Reay (Eds.) *Activating Participation: Parents and Teachers working in Partnership*. Stoke on Trent: Trentham Books.
- Roll-Petterrsson, L. (2001). Parents talk about how it feels to have a child with a cognitive disability. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 16 (1), 1 – 14.
- Russell, F. (2003). The expectations of parents of disabled children. *British Journal of Special Education*, 30 (3), 144 – 149.
- Rutman, D. (1996) Caregiving as woman's work: woman's experiences of powerfulness and powerlessness as caregivers. *Qualitative Health Research*, 6 (1), 90 – 111.
- Sadow, S. (1994). *Whose Special Need? Some Perceptions of Special Educational Needs*. London: Paul Chapman.
- Simmons, K. (1997). Supporting parents at the special educational needs tribunal. In S. Wolfendale (Ed.). *Working with Parents of SEN Children After the Code of Practice*. London: David Fulton Publishers.
- Singh, N.N. (1998). Cultural diversity: A challenge for evaluating systems of care. In M.H. Epstein, K. Kutash and A. Duchnowski (Eds). *Community-based Programming and Evaluation*. Austin, TX: Pro-Ed.
- Stake, R. (1998). Case studies. In N. Denzin and Y. Lincoln (Eds) *Strategies of Qualitative Inquiry*. London: Sage.

- Standing, K. (1999). Lone mothers and parental involvement: A contradiction in policy? *The Journal of Social Policy*, 28 (3), 479 – 495.
- Todd, E. & Higgins, S. (1998). Powerlessness in professional and parent partnerships. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 19, 227 – 236.
- Vincent, C. (1996). *Parents and Teachers: Power and Participation*. London: Falmer.
- Vincent, C. (2000). *Including Parents: Education, Citizenship and Parental Agency*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Warnock, M. (1978). *Special Educational Needs – Report of the Committee of Enquiry into the Education of Handicapped Children and Young People*. London: HMSO.
- Wills, R. (1994). It is time to stop. In K. Ballard (Ed.). *Disability, Family, Whanau and Society*. Palmerston North, NZ: Dunmore Press.
- Wolfendale, S. (1983). *Parental Participation in Children's Development and Education*. London: Gordon & Breach.
- Wolfendale, S. (1992). *Empowering Parents and Teachers: working for children*. New York: Cassell
- Wolfendale, S. (1995). *Creating and Valuing a Partnership with Parents in Assessment during the Early Years*. London: David Fulton Publishers.
- Wolfendale, S. (1999). Parents as partners in research and evaluation: methodological and ethical issues and solutions. *British Journal of Special Education*, 26 (3) (Research Section).
- Yin, R.K. (2009). *Case Study Research: Design and Methods* (Fourth Edition). London: Sage.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **MODELS OF PARENT-PROFESSIONAL COLLABORATION: WHAT DO THE PARENTS OF CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS VALUE FROM THEIR INTERACTIONS WITH PROFESSIONALS?**

**MODELS OF PARENT-PROFESSIONAL COLLABORATION: WHAT DO THE  
PARENTS OF CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS VALUE FROM  
THEIR INTERACTIONS WITH PROFESSIONALS?**

**Abstract**

Progress towards parent-professional cooperation is increasing, but there remains a core group of parents whose voices remain unheard on matters relating to their child's special educational needs. Existing research suggests that a power imbalance often exists when parents work with professionals, with the latter assuming the role of the expert with parents often left feeling powerless. Research has focused on how partnership with parents can be achieved at a conceptual level and although the principles of effective parent/professional partnership are articulated in numerous government-led documents, the extent to which partnership is achieved remains largely unknown.

This research uses a multiple case study design to explore the lived experiences of three parents of children with special educational needs in terms of their interactions with professionals. Data were obtained through the use of semi-structured interviews, and triangulated through the examination of documentary evidence and interviews with the Educational Psychologist working with the child. The interviews were analysed using Thematic Analysis which allowed a range of themes to be identified and cross-case conclusions to be drawn which highlighted the parents' experiences as articulated in their own words.

Three overarching themes emerged from the data set: 'communication', 'power' and 'rapport' which each contained a series of subordinate themes. Themes are described and discussed in relation to the research literature and their relevance to the study's research questions and consideration is given to how this data could contribute towards our knowledge of effective partnership working.

Implications for practice are considered, and highlight the importance of parents' being given a voice on matters relating to their child's special educational needs, and suggest that models of parent-professional working are more usefully borne out of lived experiences as opposed to theory.

## **MODELS OF PARENT-PROFESSIONAL COLLABORATION: WHAT DO THE PARENTS OF CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS VALUE FROM THEIR INTERACTIONS WITH PROFESSIONALS?**

### **1. Introduction**

In the context of working towards a more equitable society where emphasis is increasingly being placed on promoting equal opportunities for all those accessing the education system, it has been recognised that parents have a right to be heard on matters relating to their child's special educational needs (SEN) (DfES, 2001; 2002; 2003; 2004, DCSF, 2010). Parents play a vital role in contributing to their child's overall well being, and although professionals may strive to work in partnership with parents, this is far from achieved in many cases with some parents remaining 'voiceless' or seemingly 'unreachable' (Wolfendale, 1992). When parents are told that their child has SEN, they can find their expectations of becoming a parent challenged, and they face a number of difficult and potentially life-changing decisions to make (Carpenter, 2003). The likelihood of them interacting with professionals is increased, and in some cases they become reliant on professional support to gain access to provision and to fully understand the nature of their child's SEN (Gascoigne, 1995). This arguably places parents in a position of vulnerability, and can make it difficult for them to challenge professional advice, as they may feel that in doing so, they are placing themselves at a disadvantage (Lake and Billingsley, 2000; Oliver & Barnes, 1998).

The recognition of parents' relative competence and the subsequent invitation for them to play an active role in their child's development has therefore become enshrined in recent Government guidance (Fylling and Sandvin, 1999), and there now exists an expectation that parents will be consulted on all matters relating to their child's education. From this perspective, parents are no longer seen as powerless or subordinate, but are accorded an equivalent status within their relationships with professionals. Difficulties emerge in translating this theory into practice as parents are far from a homogenous group, so it is difficult to implement a generic approach that will ensure that all parents are part of an equitable partnership. Where some parents are well equipped to challenge professional dominance and to speak out regarding how their child's needs can best be met, others do not possess the skills or the confidence to express their viewpoint, and so equity is more difficult to achieve (Hallgarten, 2000).

### **1.1 National Policy Context**

The Warnock Report (DES, 1978) is considered by many to have paved the way for parents to play an active role in their child's SEN. Warnock (1978) attempted to address this ostensibly peripheral position of parents by suggesting that parents need to be fully involved in any decisions relating to their child, and to work in partnership with professionals:

'The successful education of children with special educational needs is dependent upon the full involvement of their parents: indeed, unless the parents are seen as equal partners in the educational process, then the purpose of our report will be frustrated' (DES, 1978, para 9.1)



Despite the Warnock Report's clear stipulations regarding the role of parents, the enormous contribution that parents have to make regarding their child's education is said to have remained a somewhat relegated feature of public policy since this time (Frederickson et al, 2004). Frederickson et al (2004) argue that the consistent failure (of Government policy) to acknowledge this role for parents has meant that multiple perspectives relating to a child's needs are rarely obtained, thus resulting in an over-reliance on the views of the professional.

It could be argued that Frederickson et al's (2004) position is no longer accurate, as numerous Government documents have sought to address the unequal position of parents of children with SEN (SEN Code of Practice, 2001; Together from the Start, DfES, 2003; The Lamb Inquiry, 2010), and have brought parent rights to the forefront of discussion. A summary of these guidance documents is provided in Table 1. These documents are by no means exhaustive, and were chosen to be included in the current critique, as were considered to hold relevance for the current discussion through their explicit mention of partnership working. Speaking before its publication, Wolfendale (1995) suggested that the SEN Code of Practice (2001) would test the parent-professional relationship in ways that had not previously been tested, and would make apparent the extent to which the principles of partnership working were translated into practice. This should be considered a significant move as it exposed the nature of parent-professional collaborations for the first time, meaning that professionals could now be held accountable for their work with parents of children with SEN (Beveridge, 2005).

*Table 1: What do Government reports and enquires tell us about working with parents of children with SEN*

Report	Summary
The SEN code of practice (DfES, 2001)	<p>Acknowledges that parents have a critical role to play in their child's education. They have unique strengths, knowledge and experience to contribute to a shared view of their child's needs. All professionals must actively seek to work with parents and value their contribution. All parents should be treated as partners and should be empowered to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• recognise and fulfill their responsibilities as parents and play an active role in decisions relating to their child's SEN;</li> <li>• have knowledge of their child's entitlement within the SEN framework;</li> <li>• make their views known about how their child is educated and;</li> <li>• have access to information, advice and support during assessment and any related decision-making processes about SEN provision.</li> </ul>
Together from the start (DfES, 2003)	<p>This document offers practical guidance for professionals working with disabled children (birth – 3years) and their families. It outlines the following key principles for working in partnership with parents:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rights and responsibilities: Professionals have a duty to acknowledge and understand the unique role and relationship each parent has with their child.</li> <li>• Respect: Parents have unique knowledge about their child and have the right to be respected as the primary caregiver</li> <li>• Informed choice: Parents have the right to be provided with unbiased, accurate and up-to-date information in order to make informed choices</li> <li>• Individuality: professionals should acknowledge that each family is unique. Families can be diverse in terms of their experience, resources and expectations as well as their cultural, religious and linguistic influences,</li> <li>• Equality: parents should be valued as equal partners.</li> </ul>
The Lamb Inquiry (DCSF, 2010)	<p>The Lamb Inquiry (DCSF, 2010) recognises that parental confidence is 'a key issue in making provision for children with SEN' (DCSF, 2008:1) and therefore provided opportunities for Local Authorities to explore how parental confidence can be increased through commissioning 'innovative projects' and sharing good practice. The inquiry also took full account of previous research endeavors that have focused on parents' experience of SEN provision, to ensure that 'parent voice' is situated at the heart of any future recommendations and policy development. Both of these approaches to 'information gathering' should be considered positive, as increase the likelihood that any changes to procedures and provision will take place as a result of what has been learned from effective practice rather than being developed directly from academic discourses or Government rhetoric.</p>

Despite an increasing emphasis placed on working in partnership with parents, understanding of the term 'partnership' remains unclear, and its use does not always mean that the author is referring to an equal relationship. Within the reports and enquiries critiqued, there is no universal definition of partnership, and authors rarely define the term, therefore assuming that the reader will bring their own understanding of what it means to work in partnership. The extent to which a shared understanding of 'partnership' is achievable and more importantly, useful, will now be explored through a critique of conceptualisations found in the literature.

## **1.2 Conceptualising Partnership**

Partnerships can vary structurally, and the form and degree of cooperation can also differ, meaning that a shared understanding of the term 'partnership' is difficult to achieve (Dale, 1996). It must also be acknowledged that both parents and professionals represent heterogeneous groups, and therefore bring with them different understandings and expectations of what it means to work in partnership which cannot be ignored. Despite this, the case is persuasive for a more specific definition that allows partnership to be measured against a set of predefined criteria (Dale, 1996; Keen, 2007). Without some shared understanding of the behaviours that constitute partnership, it is difficult to evaluate the steps that Local Authorities and professionals are taking to make sure that true partnership with parents is achieved. Gascoigne (1995) suggests:

'its specific and particular use in the context of special educational needs and parental partnership must be defined before the debate can proceed about its implementation, otherwise it risks becoming just another piece of jargon that serves only to obfuscate rather than clarify' (Gascoigne, 1995: 39)

Partnership has therefore been explored both as a concept, and as an element of practice, whereby studies have examined the circumstances under which effective partnership is likely to occur (Fylling and Sandvin, 1999). An awareness of who has constructed the definition, and their relationship with the 'object' of study is important as within the extant literature there is a noticeable difference in definitions that are borne from parental experience, and those that have been developed solely from a theoretical perspective (see Table 2).

An awareness of the methods through which the term was defined is also important, as this provides insight into the validity of the conceptualisation and its application to other parent-professional relationships. Neither Bastiani (1993) or Gascoigne (1995) make explicit the means through which their definitions were developed, and they therefore appear to represent the authors' own personal understanding of the term. This is not to suggest that their constructions are not of value, but instead suggests that if the authors had identified the process through which they had arrived at their definition, or the context in which it was developed then their use could be asserted with greater confidence. Wolfendale's (1983) definition of partnership can be seen to offer a more transparent approach, in that it was developed as a direct result with her work with parents.

Table 2: Definitions of 'Partnership'

Author	Definition	Derivation
Wolfendale (1983)	<p>Defined partnership as being characterised by parents who are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• active and central in decision-making and its implementation;</li> <li>• perceived as having equal strengths and equivalent expertise;</li> <li>• able to contribute to as well as receive services (reciprocity);</li> <li>• able to share responsibility so that they and professionals are mutually accountable</li> </ul>	<p>Based on first hand participation in a project with parents. Her definition was developed through working with parents and focusing on their participation in their child's development and education</p>
Bastiani (1993)	<p>Suggests that partnership should be limited to relationships in which there is:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• sharing of power, responsibility and ownership – though not necessarily equality;</li> <li>• a degree of mutuality, which begins with the process of listening to each other and incorporates responsive dialogue and 'give and take' on both sides;</li> <li>• shared aims and goals, based on common ground, but which also acknowledge important differences;</li> <li>• a commitment to joint action, which parents, pupils and professionals work together to get things done</li> </ul>	<p>Neither Bastiani nor Gascoigne make explicit the means through which their definition was developed. It therefore appears to represent their own understanding of what partnership means based on existing theory and research.</p>
Gascoigne (1995)	<p>Provides a working definition of partnership:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• each partner recognizes the different skills, experiences and knowledge of each of the other partners;</li> <li>• each partner values the skills, experiences and knowledge of each of the other partners;</li> <li>• all partners recognize the need for the input of each of the partners;</li> <li>• each partner feels valued.</li> </ul>	
Murray (2000)	<p>'In using the term here, I am referring to the relationships within which my son was positively valued in addition to being central and of foremost importance; where in light of his medical condition, his learning and communication difficulties, my parental knowledge was seen as crucial to forming and maintaining a relationship with him; where different roles with regard to my son were recognised and the boundaries between those roles respected by all parties; and finally, and most importantly, they were relationships with which my son was happy' (p. 683)</p>	<p>This extremely personal definition of partnership, represents her understanding from the perspective of having a disabled son. It varies from the other definitions not only from this perspective, but also through its mention of the child, and their happiness.</p>

The definitions presented in Table 2 vary in the extent to which they see equality as an integral part of parent-professional partnerships. The term partnership arguably carries connotations relating to equality and shared responsibility, but when used to describe the working relationship between professionals and the parents of children with SEN, then this is not always seen to be the case (Vincent, 2000). Bastiani (1993) suggests that parents might not always desire an equal partnership, or professionals might not be proactive in giving parents an equal say in the decision-making processes, which is why equality cannot always be viewed as a prerequisite to partnership working. Todd and Higgins (1998) argue that a discourse of equality as applied to partnership working actually serves to obscure such relationships 'by talking as if they do not exist' (p.228). They believe that partnership between parents and professionals can never be equal, and practitioners should therefore seek to avoid defining it as such.

From the definitions critiqued, there appears to be a lack of consensus regarding the components and behaviours that constitute true 'partnership' working (see Box 1). Although many of these differences are subtle, they all contribute to our varied understanding of what it means for parents and professionals to work in partnership with one another.

*Box 1: Variations in definition*

The constructions of partnership contained within the existing literature can be said to vary in:

- the emphasis they place on the importance of partnerships being equal;
- the rationale and methods through which the definitions are developed (anecdotal evidence, firsthand participation, previous research/literature, personal experience);
- the extent to which they acknowledge that differences between parents and professionals exist, and that these 'differences' will influence the partnership relationship;
- the extent to which they view partnership as a one-to-one link (between parent and professional), or whether they acknowledge the existence of multiple partnerships and;
- the extent to which they view the professional as being responsible for ensuring (equal) partnership working

The development of a 'universal' definition of partnership in the context of the working relationship between professionals and parents of children with SEN will be difficult to achieve due to the individual nature of each relationship. However, in the absence of such a definition, some professionals work towards their own models of partnership which is not always in the parent's best interest and also raises questions regarding accountability (Case, 2000). It is therefore proposed that a context-specific definition be developed, which is workable and meaningful for those practitioners and parents working together in that particular setting (for example, within Children's Services). This definition should be developed in consultation with parents, or where parents have been engaged as active participants in the research and should start with an exploration of their experiences. This will ensure that it holds relevance to all involved, and will also allow for progress towards partnership working to be monitored and evaluated.

### **1.3 Barriers to parent-professional partnership**

Whether or not we see 'equality' as an essential feature of partnership working, there are some parents who are more likely to enter into inequitable relationships than others (Gascoigne, 1995). Before a professional even seeks to define their role, there are a number of differences that exist between professionals and the parents with whom they work that can act as a barrier to the development of effective partnership working. Parents and professionals occupy different positions in relation to the child, which means that factors relating to 'power and powerlessness' (Alexander and Dore, 1999; Fyling and Sandvin, 1999; MacPherson, 1993; Todd and Higgins, 1998; Vincent, 1996), the presence of parental 'emotions' (Carpenter, 1997; Dale, 1996; Hornby, 1995; Peck, 2002; Randall and Parker, 1999) and 'typologies of parent' (Gascoigne, 1995; Vincent, 1996; 2000) all play a part in the extent to which parents become involved in their child's education and engage with professionals (see Table 3).



*Table 3: Parent-Professional differences: Summary of literature relating to power, emotions and type of parent*

<b>Focus</b>	<b>Author</b>	<b>Research / theory</b>
Power	Alexander & Dore (1999)	This paper highlights the ways in which traditional practice of working with children with SEN creates a distinction between the professional, as the 'knower and provider' of services, and the family as the 'receiver' of services (p.257). This has the effect of creating a power imbalance between both parties before they potentially even enter into a relationship.
Power	Fylling & Sandvin (1999)	Highlight issues relating to power when exploring the notion of partnership, and conclude that there is a socially defined power relation between laypersons and professionals, which means that partnerships will always be inequitable. They carried out interviews with parents and teachers regarding the role of parents in special education, and relate their analyses to the notion of partnership described within the existing literature. They conclude that there are two roles open to parents: 'parents as implementers', whereby their role is to implement aims and strategies initiated by the school, and 'parents as clients' whereby parents are seen to be part of the problem and are therefore included in any support provided. Both roles position parents as powerless.
Power	Todd & Higgins (1998)	These authors challenge the 'parents as powerless' and 'professionals as powerful' discourse through the use of an illustrative example: the evaluation of an 'educational achievement strategy' (EAS). As part of the EAS, teacher views regarding parental participation were sought, with an emphasis placed on what they considered the barriers and enablers to participation to be. Todd & Higgins (1998) suggest that teachers' comments about parental participation demonstrate a clear perspective on power as it applies to their relationships with parents. Teachers spoke of parental participation using language that implied the parents' powerlessness and considered partnership from their (teacher) perspective only, which further fuelled the parents as powerless and professionals as powerful dichotomy. Todd & Higgins (1998) argue that if one looks beyond the language that the teachers used, it becomes apparent that parents were not devoid of power, but that their power received no recognition. Parents were therefore powerless in the eyes of professionals, but not in reality.

Emotions	Birkett (2000); Gascoigne (1995); Murray (2000); Wills (1994)	All of these authors highlight the importance of professionals being aware of the emotions that parents experience when their child has SEN. They speak from a personal perspective, (all having children with SEN) and identify that parents are not likely to engage with professionals who do not show an awareness of the parents' position, and the grief and upset that they experience when they discover that their child has SEN. Much of this research has been criticised for being anecdotal.
Emotions	Carpenter (1997); Dale (1996); Hornby (1995); Peck (2002); Randall & Parker (1999)	These authors do not make explicit whether they are speaking from direct experience, or whether their message is theory-driven. However, all echo the message given by those authors who have children with SEN, that a failure to take into consideration the emotions that a parent experiences when their child has SEN can mean that 'partnership' will never be achieved. Again, these studies are not research based and therefore represent the authors' opinion, or their experiences of working with parents. Parents were not actively engaged in the research process.

For many of the studies outlined in Table 3, parents were not engaged as active participants in the research process. It is therefore difficult to see how conclusions have been drawn about their experiences without their 'voice' or 'viewpoint' being represented. One reason why parents are not always engaged in the research process arguably emerges in light of a frequent criticism directed towards 'parent research' on the grounds that it is anecdotal and therefore lacking in rigour (O'Connor, 2008). From this perspective, it is not always thought to be representative of parents' *actual* experiences or applicable to the wider population. The difficulty here is that, in criticising research for being anecdotal, the relevance of the parent's experience is potentially devalued and could imply that their views are not worthy of being listened to.

### **1.3.1 The impact of difference**

A further factor influencing parent-professional working relationships is the 'impact of difference' between parents from different backgrounds. Desforbes and Abouchaar (2003) carried out a review of the literature published on parental involvement in England, and concluded that level and type of parental involvement is strongly influenced by: family social class, maternal level of education, maternal psycho-social health, single parent status, and to a lesser extent, ethnicity. The impact of parental social class positioning has been widely researched within the literature resulting in a general consensus that 'middle class' parents are able to effect change in relation to their child's education to a greater extent than most working class parents (see, for example, Ball, 2003; Jordan et al, 1994; Reay, 2005). It is important to acknowledge that social class is difficult to define except in the broadest terms of economic, cultural or political similarities. Social class is to a large extent related to individual wealth but there are other less tangible factors (e.g. status) that can be difficult to quantify. (i.e. there are 'grey areas' because it is difficult to say exactly where the cut off is between classes). However, in a class ridden society, such as that in the UK where there is a vast difference between the incomes of the rich and the poor, it follows implicitly that there will be a high degree of social inequality.

Many of the studies exploring the impact of social class on parental involvement draw their conclusions based on the findings of previous research papers, and do not carry out direct research that enables their hypotheses to be tested. A study conducted by Reay (1998) is the exception to this, which explored parent-teacher relationships in a middle and working class school in London. Through direct contact with parents,

Reay's findings suggest that lower incomes, fewer educational qualifications and less knowledge about the intricacies of the education system led to less effective practices in terms of having their voice heard and influencing change for their child.

In critiquing the literature relating to social class and how this impacts upon a parent's involvement in their child's education, it would appear that there are three possible mechanisms through which social class might operate (Nechyba et al, 1999, see Box 2).

*Box 2: Three mechanisms through which social class might operate (adapted from Nechyba et al, 1999)*

- 1) '*A culture of poverty*' exists in which working class parents place less emphasis on the importance of education, and are therefore less likely to participate.
- 2) The second mechanism relates to '*social capital*' and suggests that working class parents do not know the types of people who can influence change, or possess the skills necessary to do this themselves.
- 3) The third barrier implicates '*institutional barriers*' whereby many schools can be seen to represent middle class institutions with their own set of 'class values'.

Although Nechyba et al's (1999) distinction is useful in helping to categorise the extant literature, it does not account for why some working class parents are able to play an active role in their child's education and challenge professional dominance, and some middle class parents are not (Metso, 2004). This suggests that other factors must also play a role, as social class alone cannot account for differences in levels of parental involvement. Kohl et al (2000) carried out research that suggests that single-parent status might be one of these factors. The results of their research indicated that single-parent status was negatively related to: parental involvement,

the teacher's perception of the parent, and the quality of the parent-teacher relationship. Kohl et al (2000) proposed that single-parents low levels of involvement were often the result of 'practical difficulties' relating to childcare arrangements or time management as a result of being the child's sole caregiver rather than being indicative of a lack of interest or willingness to become involved. It would therefore appear that both 'working class' and 'single-parent' status can act as a barrier to parental involvement, with numerous studies attempting to determine why this is the case, but with very few engaging parents within the research process.

#### **1.4 A gap in the literature**

Recognising that partnerships between professionals and parents are often unequal, and that some 'groups' of parents are at greater risk of professional dominance than others, Cunningham and Davis (1985) suggest that professional interactions with parents of children with SEN can be improved considerably if they are underpinned by models or frameworks that guide practice. These frameworks will help the practitioner to become aware of their approach to working with parents, and allow them to begin address the power differential that often exists within their work with parents (Dale, 1996). A summary and critique of the frameworks of parent-professional collaboration found in the extant literature is presented in Table 4. The frameworks appear to follow a natural progression whereby each model was developed and adapted to address a limitation or concern in the previous model. From this perspective they can be seen to represent 'an evolving relationship that graduates parents from positions of clients, to partners who collaborate with professionals on decisions relating to their child's education' (O'Connor, 2008: 255).

*Table 4: Models of parent-professional collaboration: frameworks to guide professional working practices*

<b>Author(s)</b>	<b>Model</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Critique</b>
Cunningham & Davies (1985)  Mittler & Mittler (1982)	<i>The Expert model</i>	Within the expert tradition, professionals rely almost exclusively on their own professional judgements about appropriate interventions for children with special educational needs.	Within this model, professionals may ask parents for information, and may inform them of what they have decided, but their decisions take little account of parental views.
Cunningham & Davies (1985)  Mittler & Mittler (1982)	<i>The Transplant model</i>	<p>Parents are enlisted as co-teachers and co-therapists and are instructed (by professionals) in the necessary techniques that they should use with their children. The techniques are 'transplanted' onto parents, so that they could become more involved.</p> <p>An example of this can be found in schemes that encourage parental involvement in reading whereby professionals share the model and skills that they would like the parent to use to support their child's</p>	<p>Although parents were able to play a more active role in their child's support; this is on the terms of the professional, and so therefore does not lead to equitable relationships.</p> <p>This model suggests that parents are in need of professional direction to be able to meet the needs of their children, and therefore does not acknowledge the skills that they have (Beveridge, 2005)</p> <p>Parents are viewed as lacking in skills, rather than recognising their unique contribution as parents (Hatcher &amp; Leblond, 2001).</p>
Cunningham & Davies (1985)	<i>The Consumer model</i>	Within this model, parents are encouraged to use their in-depth knowledge and experience of their own children in order to decide upon the services and interventions that were most appropriate for them (Beveridge, 2005)	<p>Since this model was proposed, there has been a great deal of caution about the type of consumerism that they espoused. This is related to the inequities that arise when so little choice is actually available for the majority of children and their families.</p> <p>This approach is premised on a recognition of parental rights with respect to information and involvement in decision-making processes. However, the model does not take into account the importance of appropriate support if parents are to develop the confidence and competence to exercise these rights (Beveridge, 2005).</p>

Appleton & Minchcom, 1991	<i>The Empowerment model</i>	<p>This model promotes parental power and control, and highlights the need for professionals to tailor their involvement in ways that are responsive to both the strengths and the needs of individual parents and families.</p> <p>The professional will need to consider what type of help the parent may need in order to take up a position as 'partner', and how they would need help to become empowered.</p> <p>The professional is required to actively promote the parent's sense of control over decision making</p>	<p>The model does not articulate the methods that professionals need to employ to become more responsive to parents' needs.</p> <p>Professionals are still placed in a position of power, as the onus is on them to ensure that parents are treated as partners. Professionals might have varied understanding of what it means to be a partner, and therefore, some parents may be at greater risk of entering into inequitable partnerships.</p> <p>The model focuses on just one type of empowerment, but other forms of forms may be needed to truly address the power imbalance (Dale, 1996).</p>
Dale (1996)	<i>The Negotiating model</i>	<p>This model builds on the consumer and empowerment models, but sees negotiation as a key transaction for partnership work. This model defines partnership as 'a working relationship where the partners use negotiation and joint decision-making and resolve differences of opinion and disagreement in order to reach some kind of shared perspective of jointly-agreed decision on issues of mutual concern' (Dale, 1996: 14).</p> <p>The model recognizes that parents and professionals both have contributions to offer, but that this can mean that they have differing perspectives. The model offers a framework to bridge the gap between the varying perspectives.</p>	<p>As with the previous models, the emphasis is on the professional to carry out the negotiation and resolve any differences.</p> <p>More articulate, confident parents are likely to benefit more from this model than other parents.</p> <p>The model assumes that conflict resolution and the differences between 'role positions' and perspectives can easily be resolved by the professional. Some of these differences are likely to be complex and deep-seated, and this model appears to over-simplify this.</p>

Although these models provide a conceptual framework through which professionals can view their work with parents, they are all developed from a professional perspective which raises questions about how accurately they describe the parents' role. None of the models identified was developed as a result of direct consultation with parents whereby their views about partnership working were sought and fed directly into the development of the model. The empirical study reported later in this volume is one step in filling this gap, because parents are seen as key participants and sources of data in this study.

### **1.5 The current study**

Within the research explored, the importance of parents' views and experiences being situated at the heart of any initiatives and frameworks developed to improve parent-professional partnership working has been emphasised. However, a large proportion of research exploring parent-professional collaboration is borne from a theoretical perspective whereby parents are not actively engaged in the research process, which therefore raises questions about the wider applicability of findings. There are fundamental differences between parents and professionals, which mean that even when professionals attempt to identify how their practice could be adapted to make partnerships more equitable, they may fail to capture the true essence of what it is that parents want. It has been highlighted that parents of children with SEN are among those who are most likely to be affected by professional dominance due to their reliance on professional input (Dale, 1996). It has also been identified that single parents and parents of low social class are less likely to play an active role in



their child's education, or have their voice heard. The experiences of this group of parents are therefore worthy of further exploration.

I would therefore suggest that what is needed is an approach to researching parent-professional partnership that places 'parent voice' at the centre of the research. Although many studies have attempted to achieve this (for example, Dale 1996; Gascoigne, 1995; O'Connor, 2008; Wolfendale 1995), evidence is often anecdotal and therefore cannot confidently be used to further our understanding of parent-professional partnerships. The research questions developed for the present study reflect the importance of parent voice and are investigated using a robust and systematic approach that takes the research above a merely anecdotal account. They place parents 'centre stage' by starting with an exploration of their thoughts and experiences of partnership, rather than taking a theoretical definition and assuming that it is applicable to the participants (See Box 3 for an outline of the research questions).

The case study methodology used in the present study lends itself to this type of exploratory research as it offers a systematic means of exploring a phenomenon in a real life context that seeks to illuminate and deepen our understanding of the given phenomenon (Stake, 1998; Yin, 2009). It also allows for multiple chains of evidence to be obtained, which provides a means of triangulating the data obtained from parents to determine its reliability, whilst at the same time acknowledging the importance of allowing parents to tell their story in their own words. The specific research questions are shown in Box 3.

*Box 3: Research Questions*

- How do the parents of children with SEN experience support from professionals?
- How do the parents of children with SEN feel about their interactions with professionals?
- How could professionals increase the value of their interactions with parents of children with SEN?

## **2. Methodology**

### **2.1 Rationale**

This study uses case study methodology to explore parent experiences of working with professionals on matters relating to their child's special educational needs. As the emphasis is placed on 'parent voice' and allowing parents to tell their story in their own words, it was thought that such methodology would facilitate this approach and enable other relevant issues, such as the exact nature of parent-professional contact, to be explored. Geertz (1973) advocates the use of case study methods when the researcher is striving to obtain a 'thick description' of participants' lived experiences and their thoughts and feelings about a particular situation.

Case studies can be described as a form of empirical inquiry that allow for the in-depth investigation of a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context (Yin, 2009). For the current study, the context in which the parents' interactions with professionals occurred is of particular relevance as it is likely to provide insight into

the factors that shaped their experiences and thus contribute to suggestions about improvements that could be made. Such an approach also subscribes to the view that individuals cannot abstract themselves from the world in which they live, and that human actions are therefore best understood within the context of social practices (Gadamer, 1975).

Case Study research can be described as an 'all-encompassing method' (Yin, 2009: 18) which encourages the researcher to consider the logic of the design, the data collection techniques and the approach to data analysis. It provides a framework through which all components of the research design can be considered, and sets out a logical path for the researcher to follow that guides them from the development of research questions through to the study's conclusions. As a result of this, the researcher becomes immersed in the research process, and so their identity as a researcher and the possible implications of this, therefore warrant further consideration. Case study methodology is embedded in a commitment to a particular worldview, which assumes that individuals are 'conscious, purposive actors who have ideas about their world and attach meaning to what is going on around them' (Robson, 2002: 24). This interpretative epistemological stance rejects the idea that 'knowledge' can only be derived through scientific means (Pring, 2000), and instead argues that knowledge and reality are represented through the perceptions of the people who experience it (Scott & Usher, 1996).

Utilising research methodology that places 'parent voice' at the centre of all data collection methods is therefore congruent with this interpretivist view, as it rejects the

notion that the world is 'knowable' in an objective sense. It assumes that every parent has their own conceptual system and understanding of the world in which they live, and that 'multiple interpretations' exist, all of which are truthful and authentic in their own right. From this perspective, the accounts that parents provide should not be challenged on the grounds of accuracy, but should instead be seen to represent the 'truth' as the parent perceives it. This has implications for the researcher and their role within the research, as instead of trying to uncover truths, what becomes important is that the researcher is able to view the world as viewed by the participants of their research (Robson, 2002).

From an epistemological standpoint, the present study will also take into consideration the ways in which the researcher's own interpretive framework is likely to influence their interpretation and analysis of results (Scott & Usher, 1996). Gadamer (1975) challenges those who assume the role of 'objective researcher', as he questions the extent to which the researcher can separate their own beliefs from the object of study. Instead, researchers who are engaged in the social practices of research, use their own interpretive frameworks to make sense of the research. This 'double hermeneutic' (Giddens, 1987) recognises that researchers interpret through their own conceptual and perceptual lens the interpretations made by those being studied (Scott and Usher 1996). Researchers are therefore encouraged to reflect upon the values, experiences, interests, preconceptions and assumptions they bring to the research process in recognition of the impossibility of remaining 'outside of' one's subject matter (Willig, 2008).

## 2.2 Design

Table 5 outlines the different components of the research design as they apply to the current study. Yin (2009: 26) suggests that ‘in the most elementary sense, the design is the logical sequence that connects the empirical data to a study’s initial research questions and, ultimately, to its conclusions’. The information contained within Table 5 was therefore used as a template throughout the research to ensure that the study’s research questions were addressed.

*Table 5: Components of a research design (Adapted from Yin, 2009)*

<b>Components</b>	<b>Current Study</b>
1) A study’s questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do parents of children with SEN experience support from professionals?</li> <li>• How do parents of children with SEN feel about their interactions with professionals?</li> <li>• How could professionals increase the value of their interactions with parents?</li> </ul>
2) Its propositions	As the current study is exploratory, it does not have any additional propositions to be tested. The overall purpose of the study is to explore parent experiences and determine what they value from their interactions with professionals on matters relating to their child’s SEN.
3) Its unit(s) of analysis	This relates to the fundamental problem of defining what the ‘case’ is. For the current study, the individual (the parent) is the primary unit of analysis.
4) The logic linking the data to the propositions	N/A
5) The criteria for interpreting the findings	The multiple case studies will be analysed using an analytic technique called ‘cross-case synthesis’.

The current study adopted a 'multiple-case' design, where each case has been selected so that it predicts similar results (literal replication). Multiple-case designs are said to have distinct advantages in comparison to single-case designs in that the evidence is often considered to be more compelling, making the overall study appear more robust (Herriott and Firestone, 1983). It was also felt that from an analytic perspective, the benefits of using more than one case study would be substantial, as analytic conclusions arising from multiple cases would be more powerful than if they had been drawn from one case alone (Yin, 2009).

Any use of multiple case designs needs to follow a replication logic, and each case must therefore be selected carefully on the basis that they will provide either similar or contrasting results. The current study opted for the selection of three cases that were believed to be literal replications on the basis of findings arising from the literature review. A significant body of research suggests that single-parents of low socio economic status are less likely to engage with professionals, or play an active role in matters relating to their child's education (Ball, 2003; Jordan et al, 1994; Reay, 2005). Their views regarding partnership working are also underrepresented in the literature and for this reason it was decided to focus upon the experiences of this group of parents. Rather than opting for a theoretical replication that would allow this theory to be tested (by selecting parents from different socio-economic groups or of differing marital status), it was considered important to give this identified group of parents a voice, to enable them to explore their experiences and consider the potential ways in which their levels of involvement and confidence could be increased. From a Local Authority perspective, such parents had also been identified as being difficult to

engage, and in the light of the recent Lamb Inquiry (DCSF, 2010), the Local Authority wanted to explore how this group of parents' confidence in the SEN process could be increased.

The case study research is therefore *exploratory* in nature, in that its primary aim is to explore parent experiences of working with professionals from the perspective of the former rather than trying to explain why something happened in the manner in which it did.

### **2.3 Participants**

Following this literal replication logic, participants were selected on the basis that they were likely to hold comparable views and experiences of working with professionals. In selecting participants on the basis of their typicality and possession of certain characteristics, the sample can be classified as 'purposive' (Cohen et al, 2007). A purposive sample is not recommended for those wishing to generalise their findings to the wider population, as the sample is not representative and is therefore considered to be 'unashamedly biased' (Robson, 2002). However, as the generalisation of findings was not the primary aim of the present study, the benefits of adopting this type of sample (in terms of its ability to allow the researcher to follow a literal replication) significantly outweighed any concerns relating to generalisability.

Participants were therefore selected by asking Educational Psychologist (EP) colleagues to identify parents that they had worked with in the past 12 months, who met the following criteria:

- their child has undergone the Statutory Assessment process in the past 12 months;
- they are of single-parent status and;
- they are considered to be of low socio-economic status (this was determined based on free school meal eligibility).

In considering the authors' identity as both an Educational Psychologist and researcher, it was decided that it would be inappropriate for families that she had worked with in the past 12 months to be included in the research. EP colleagues were therefore initially asked to identify parents who they felt met the first two criteria, as the latter point relating to their socio-economic status was not immediately identifiable, and would need to be accessed through Local Authority records or by asking the parent (potential participants were informed that this was one of the criteria being used, and their consent was obtained to access this information. See Appendix 1). It was decided to include the criterion relating to Statutory Assessment as this would ensure that all parents had children with SEN and would have experienced interactions with a number of professionals (Evans and Vincent, 1997). Furthermore, as the Local Authority has set procedures relating to this process, it is also likely that the parent participants will have some comparable experiences and interactions that could be explored. The emphasis is therefore less on the Statutory Assessment



process, and more on the level and type of professional contact that this process enables.

EPs were provided with a brief outline of the research during a team meeting (See Appendix 2), following which the selection criteria was shared with them. At this early stage of identifying potential participants, parents were not identified by name, and were only made aware to the researcher once their consent had been obtained by their link EP. A more comprehensive account of how participants were selected, and the ethical considerations relating to this, is provided in Table 6.

Table 6: Selection of Participants

Stage	Process	Ethical considerations
<i>Sharing research with colleagues</i>	Educational Psychologist colleagues were informed of the research project during a service meeting. The research proposal was shared, along with the rationale for conducting the research project. EPs were provided with a criteria for participant selection, and were asked to think of any parents that met the first two criteria (their child has undergone the statutory assessment in the past 12 months; they are of single parent status)	At this stage, EPs were asked not to identify these parents by name, but make the researcher aware if they could identify anyone who they felt met these criteria.
<i>Initial consent</i>	EPs were asked to contact the parents and inform them of the research (see Appendix 2). Their consent was then sought for their details to be passed onto the researcher.	Parents were told at this stage that in consenting to their details being passed onto the researcher, they were under no obligation to take part in the study should they choose not to. They were also told that they may not be suitable for the research, and so may not be selected.
<i>Potential participants contacted by researcher</i>	Parents were contacted by the researcher (by telephone) where the study was explained in greater detail. Parents were asked whether their child was eligible for free school meals, and their current employment status was also sought.  Parents were told that following these checks, they would be contacted again by the researcher.	Parents were told that participants were being matched on a number of measures, and that socio-economic status was one of these.
<i>Consent for participation</i>	Four parents met the criteria and all agreed to take part in the research. If more than four parents had met these criteria, a sample would have been randomly selected from this wider sample.	Parents were made aware that even if they met the criteria for participation, they might not be asked to participate in the research, as only a small number of participants were needed.
<i>Informed Consent</i>	Participants were provided with an in-depth account of the research (see Appendix 3)	Informed consent was obtained in line with the protocol outlined in the EC2 University Ethics form (see Appendix 4)

Four parents were selected to take part in the research. One parent formed the basis of an early pilot study, which allowed the effectiveness of the data collection tools to be explored and any issues relating to the suitability of the participants to be considered. Results from the pilot study suggested that the parents selected to take part in the research were well placed to share experiences that would enable the study's research questions to be addressed (a description of how the research methods were refined in light of the pilot study can be found in Appendix 5). The remaining three parents therefore became the participants for the current study.

Although participants were matched on the basis of the criteria stated above, it was not possible to match them in other areas to ensure an exact (literal) replication. All parents participating in the research were female, and of the same ethnic origin (White British), but differed in terms of their level of education, age and number of children (see Table 7). As no evidence was found within the literature relating to parents' age or their number of children and how this correlates with levels of parental involvement, this difference (in participant characteristics) was not considered significant for the current study. There is, however, some evidence to suggest that parents' level of education can influence their willingness to interact with teachers and other professionals, from the point of view that more educated parents are often more confident to play an active role in their child's education (Crozier, 1999). Although two out of three parents were educated to the same level, as participants were not specifically matched on the basis of their educational background, this will be taken into consideration when analysing the results.

*Table 7: Participant characteristics*

Participant	Gender	Age	Marital status	Number of children	Ethnic Origin	Education (age of leaving)
Pilot	Female	28	Single	3	White British	Secondary (16 years)
1	Female	32	Single	2	White British	Secondary (16 years)
2	Female	35	Single	2	White British	Secondary (16 years)
3	Female	29	Single	1	White British	College (18 years)

## 2.4 Procedure

As a result of the pilot study, data collection plans were refined with regards to both the content of the interview schedule and the procedures to be followed (see Appendix 5). Following this, individual semi-structured interviews were carried out with the three identified participants. Interviews were carried out one-by-one and transcribed by the researcher and analysed before proceeding to the next in the manner advocated by Yin (2009). The justification for this stems from the idea that as case study data are collected, the researcher must quickly review the evidence, so that themes and issues that emerge in one interview can then be pursued in subsequent interviews. An 'orthographic transcript' (Braun and Clarke, 2006), which provided a verbatim account of all verbal utterances was therefore produced for each individual interview and was considered to be 'a key phase of data analysis within interpretative qualitative methodology' (Bird, 2005: 227).

The case study adopted a 'focused interview' approach (Merton et al, 1990) where interviews were open-ended and conversational in manner, but guided by a set of

pre-determined questions derived from the case study protocol (a list of interview questions can be found in Appendix 6). Although such questions followed a specific line of inquiry, it remained important that the interview process was fluid to allow the parents to tell their story in their own words (Oppenheim, 1992; Rubin and Rubin, 1995). A list of interview questions and their relevance to the study's overall research aims is provided in Table 8.

*Table 8: Research questions and interview questions*

<b>Research Questions</b>	<b>Interview Questions</b>
How do parents of children with SEN experience support from professionals?	In relation to your child's SEN, what do you perceive the role of a professional to be?
	In your experience, to what extent do professionals explain their role, and purpose of involvement?
	How were you contacted by the professional?
	To what extent were you kept informed regarding professional involvement, and updates regarding your child?
	To what extent were you encouraged to give your opinion on your child's needs?
How do the parents of children with SEN feel about their interactions with professionals?	Can you tell me about your experiences of working with professionals on matters relating to your child's SEN?
	To what extent do you feel your interactions with professionals to have been a positive experience?
	To what extent did you feel that your views were listened to and acted upon?
	To what extent did you feel empowered to support your child following the involvement of professionals?
	How confident did you feel to challenge any views regarding your child presented by professionals?
How could professionals increase the value of their interactions with parents?	What does it mean to be a good professional?
	What did you gain from the involvement of professionals?
	What do you feel could have been done to have made your experience more positive?
	Do you feel that anything could be done to increase your confidence to contact professionals in the future? (Either to support you, or on the part of the professional)

From an interpretative epistemological standpoint language is seen as an essential part of determining how we perceive social reality, and is the primary means through which 'views' are constructed and created (Pring, 2000; Moore, 2005):

'Language is never neutral or representational of some separate reality, but rather it is productive and constitutive of meaning...playing a crucial part in the constitution of our social life' (Moore, 2005: 109).

The main strengths of the focused interview therefore relate to its ability to see the world from the eyes of the person being interviewed (Ely et al, 1991). Although the interviewer sets the agenda, there is less of a power imbalance present than in other methods of data collection, as the interviewee is given space for spontaneity and freedom of speech (Robson, 2002).

#### **2.4.1 Multiple Sources of Evidence: Triangulation**

Using isolated sources of evidence is not recommended for researchers utilising a case study approach (Yin, 2009) as significantly affects the reliability and validity of findings. Instead, researchers are encouraged to use multiple sources of evidence both from the perspective that they enable a broader range of issues to be addressed, and that they also allow for the development of 'converging lines of inquiry' (Yin, 2009: 115). This form of 'data triangulation' (Patton, 2002) encourages the researcher to collect information from multiple sources that is aimed to explore the same fact or phenomenon. This approach also helps to address the potential issues relating to construct validity as multiple sources of evidence have the potential to provide multiple measures of the same phenomenon (Yin, 2009). For the current

study, the accounts that parents provided as part of the focused interviews were explored through interviews with the EP responsible for writing their child's psychological advice (as part of the Statutory Assessment process), and a trawl of their child's file held within the EP service. For clarity, a timeline outlining the stages of data collection and data analysis is provided in Table 9.

*Table 9: Data collection and Data analysis timeline*

<b>Timeline</b>	<b>Activity</b>
September 2009	An outline of research and criteria for participant selection was shared with EP colleagues during a fortnightly team meeting. EPs were asked to consider potential participants.
September – October 2009	EPs contacted 'potential' participants to inform them of the research and to gauge their interest.
October 2009	Potential participants were contacted by the researcher
October 2009	IDEC database was checked to determine parents socio-economic status
November 2009	The three parents that met the criteria were contacted, and their consent obtained to participate in the study.
November 2009	Those parents who did not meet the criteria were contacted, and thanked for their time.
January 2010	Interview 1
January 2010	Interview 1 transcribed and themes identified
February 2010	Interview 2
February 2010	Interview 2 transcribed and themes identified
February 2010	Interview 3
February 2010	Interview 3 transcribed and themes identified
March 2010	EP interviews: exploration of information obtained from parent interviews
March 2010	File Trawl
March – May 2010	Overall data analysis (cross case synthesis)

#### **2.4.2 Educational Psychologist Interviews**

For reasons relating to time, it was not possible to gain the views of all professionals that had worked with the participants and/or their children, and so it was decided to explore the data by interviewing the EP who had worked with the family during the

Statutory Assessment process. This professional group was not only chosen due to issues relating to access, but also due to the statutory requirement that EPs have to contact parents and seek their views when writing their Psychological Advice. This significantly increased the likelihood that they were a professional group who were able to comment on the views that the parents had presented in their interviews. Therefore the themes that emerged from the parent interviews led to the creation of a number of propositions relating to professional involvement that were presented to the EPs, and their views were sought about these issues. A copy of the propositions and the interview schedule are provided in Appendix 7.

#### **2.4.3 Documentary Evidence – File Trawl**

The second way in which the evidence and facts of the case studies were explored was through a trawl of the child's SEN file. The Local Authority in which the research was being conducted holds central files on all children who are at School Action Plus on the SEN code of Practice (2001) or who have a statement of Special Educational Needs. Although such files do not contain information regarding all professional interactions, they do provide insight into the amount and intelligibility of 'official' communications, which can augment the data obtained from the parent interviews. Access to files also enabled specific lines of enquiry to be followed such as determining the extent to which parent views are reflected in Psychological Advice and in the final statement of special educational needs. It was considered important to use documentary evidence as one strand of data exploration as such sources of evidence provide a written account of events that is stable and can also enable



access to specific facts and figures relating to professional contact (e.g. the number of visits a parent received).

## **2.5 Ethical Considerations**

Although issues pertaining to ethics have been alluded to throughout this discussion, it is important to consider some of the ethical challenges that arose in working with this group of parents. A comprehensive overview of the study's general ethical considerations is provided in Appendix 4; which outlines information submitted to the University of Birmingham ethics committee as part of the ethical clearance process.

The main ethical considerations arose from talking to potentially vulnerable parents about their child's special educational needs and the support that they received. This has the potential to raise issues and concerns that may not have previously been considered, and to make the parents question the support that they have received in the past. This could evoke anger or upset for some parents, especially if talking about past interactions, which happened too long ago to rectify. A summary of the measures that were taken to control for this, and to ensure that the research was undertaken in accordance with the BERA Revised Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2004) 'code of conduct for researchers' is presented in Table 10.

Table 10: Ethical Considerations

Ethical Principle	Consideration
<i>Informed Consent</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A clear and explicit outline of the research was provided to potential participants to ensure that they were aware of the purpose of their involvement. Initial contact was made by the link EP who was provided with a script to be used to introduce the research to potential participants</li> <li>• Parents were provided with both a verbal and written account of the research. This informed them of the research objectives, what the research hoped to find, and the exact nature of their involvement (see Appendix 3).</li> <li>• Parents were asked to sign a consent form to indicate that they had understood the nature of the research, and agreed to take part (see Appendix 8).</li> </ul>
<i>Confidentiality</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All participants were spoken to regarding confidentiality and what it means in relation to their participation in the current study. This was explained using a pre-prepared script (see Appendix 9). This also outlines the procedure that will be followed if participants disclose information that makes the researcher think that they or others are at risk of harm.</li> <li>• No information contained within the research will enable the participants to be identified. All data was recorded and transcribed, but information was not stored against participants' names.</li> </ul>
<i>Right to withdraw</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participants were reminded of their right to withdraw from the research at any given time. They were also told of their right to request that their data be removed from the study. They were informed of this both when they were first contacted by their link EP, and once their initial consent was sought.</li> <li>• Participants were reminded that their consent is entirely voluntary.</li> <li>• Participants were asked to sign a consent form that indicated that they had understood these principles.</li> </ul>
<i>Controlling for detrimental effects</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Asking parents to talk about potentially sensitive issues could cause upset for some parents or make them feel that they did not have access to the best support available. As many parents were talking retrospectively about their past experiences, it would have been difficult to rectify any 'let down' or frustration that they might feel when reflecting on their experiences.</li> <li>• To help prevent this from becoming an issue, I ensured that I was mindful of this at all times, and I did not ask questions or pass comment that would intentionally alter participants' perceptions.</li> <li>• If questions did raise issues for participants, then I ensured that I was available to talk through any of these issues, and offer support and guidance.</li> <li>• I also ensured that I was able to signpost participants to agencies such as 'parent partnership' if they felt that this would help.</li> <li>• It is possible that the interview process raised questions for participants after the data collection phase was completed, and so all</li> </ul>

	<p>participants were given my contact details should they wish to contact me at any time.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Any detrimental effects that occurred during the research were immediately brought to the attention of my research supervisor, or relevant others</li> </ul>
<i>Data collection</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Parent views were sought using open-ended questions to ensure that parents were empowered to tell their story in their own words.</li> <li>Interviews were tape-recorded to ensure that the parents' views were recorded accurately. Their signed consent was sought for this</li> <li>Parental consent was obtained to gain access to their child's SEN file (see Appendix 9). Files were only accessed for the purposes outlined in the methodology, and were not accessed after the study's completion.</li> <li>Consent was also sought for their views (as obtained through their interviews) to be shared and explored through the EP interviews (see Appendix 3).</li> <li>Participants were made aware that they could have a named person/advocate present at all stages of the research.</li> </ul>
<i>Safe and appropriate storage of data</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>All interviews were recorded on audiotape with the participants consent and transcribed personally to ensure that only I had access to the data in its raw form.</li> <li>The interviews were stored in a secure location as MP3 files on my PC, and were only be accessed by me.</li> <li>All written transcripts were also stored electronically and were password protected.</li> <li>The names of the participants were not stored anywhere on the computer, or associated with the data in any way.</li> <li>Where interviews took place away from the site in which the data was secured, extra care was taken to ensure that the audiotapes were returned to the office and transferred to the computer as soon as possible.</li> <li>Any paperwork, including consent forms were stored in a lever arch file, and locked away in a secure filing cabinet to which I was the only key-holder.</li> <li>All recording was done electronically to avoid extraneous paperwork. Where data was stored, standards outlined in the Data Protection Act (1998) were adhered to, and the data was only be used for the purpose for which it was originally intended.</li> </ul>
<i>Dissemination of research findings</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Once the interviews had been transcribed and the data analysis had taken place, I arranged to go and visit all participants individually to share my findings. This took place before the public briefing document was written so that any objections or concerns could be taken into consideration and acted upon.</li> <li>After I shared the research findings with them, I also made myself available at a later date should they wish to discuss anything that I have shared once they have had a chance to process it. Participants were also given a copy of the written public domain briefing paper detailing the research and its outcomes.</li> </ul>

## **2.6 Reliability and Validity**

Issues relating to reliability and validity as they apply to the current study vary from those that are applicable to quantitative research, but still warrant careful consideration (Parker, 2004). Discussions should therefore be located within the research paradigm that is being used and should enable the quality of the research design to be explored. Yin (2009) alerts the reader to four tests that have been used to establish the quality of any qualitative empirical social research, and the ways in which the current study controlled for these is reported in Table 11.

Table 11: Case Studies: Validity and Reliability (Adapted from Yin, 2009)

Test	Case Study Tactic
<i>Construct Validity</i>	<p>This test of validity can be problematic for case study research; as such research is by its very nature 'subjective'. To establish construct validity the researcher should make attempts to ensure that their construction of a phenomenon, agrees with other constructions of the same phenomenon (Cohen et al. 2007: 138).</p> <p>Within the current study, this was controlled for in the following ways:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The use of 'multiple sources of evidence' (data was corroborated through EP interviews and a trawl of their child's SEN file);</li> <li>• establishing chains of evidence (this enabled the reader to follow the derivation of research from the initial research questions to the study's conclusions) and;</li> <li>• having key informants review the draft case study report.</li> </ul>
<i>Internal Validity</i>	<p>'Internal validity seeks to demonstrate that an explanation of a particular event...can actually be sustained by the data' (Cohen et al. 2007: 135). For the current study, the research should be able to accurately report a situation through the eyes of the parent participants.</p> <p>As the current study is 'exploratory', issues relating to internal validity present less of a threat than if the research was seeking to explain a particular phenomenon.</p> <p>Based on the interview and documentary evidence collected, it was important to check that any inferences made, were correct. This was achieved by exploring rival explanations and possibilities and feeding analysis back to participants for them to check that their experiences had been understood and reported accurately. The thematic analysis coding process also helped to ensure internal validity.</p>
<i>External Validity</i>	<p>External validity refers to the extent to which the results can be generalised to the wider population (Cohen et al, 2007). Case studies differ from survey and experimental methods in that they rely on analytic generalisation. In analytical generalisation, the researcher strives to generalise a particular set of results to some broader theory (Yin, 2009). This was accounted for through the use of multiple case studies, the selection of which derived from the prior hypothesising of different types of conditions. However, the generalisation of results is not a primary aim for the current research.</p>
<i>Reliability</i>	<p>Reliability is concerned with the extent to which a subsequent investigator could replicate the study and arrive at the same findings and conclusions, if they followed the procedures outlined in the research. The goal of reliability is therefore to minimise the errors and biases in the study.</p> <p>In the current study this was controlled for by ensuring that case study research procedures were well documented, through the provision of a case study protocol.</p>

## 2.7 Data Analysis

Yin (2009) suggests that 'as you collect case study evidence, you must quickly review the evidence and continually ask yourself why events or facts appear as they do' (p. 69). From this perspective data analysis took place at the earliest stages of data collection, as themes and issues were identified through the parent interviews, which could then be explored through the EP interviews and file trawl. Case study methodology is therefore reliant on the researcher's ability to interpret the information as it is being collected, as it allows changes to be made or alternative lines of inquiry to be pursued in light of the data provided. Although it remains important for the researcher to remember the original purpose of the investigation, analysing the data in this way avoids falling into the trap of collecting data as a means of substantiating a preconceived position (Yin, 2009).

Although analysis took place throughout the data collection phase, a more formal analysis of data was carried out at the end of the data collection process. As highlighted earlier, the use of case study methodology represents an all-encompassing research method that encourages the researcher to consider the potential methods of data analysis when designing their research. Taking this into consideration, the potential analytic techniques were considered and a process of 'cross case synthesis' (Yin, 2009) was decided upon. Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) was used as a tool to carry out this cross-case synthesis, as it allowed for the identification and analysis of key themes within the data corpus (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This process enabled themes to be identified across the case studies,

and cross-case conclusions to be drawn relating to the research questions (an illustration of the thematic analysis process is included in Appendix 10). Braun & Clarke (2006) highlight the importance of making clear the theoretical position of a thematic analysis, as all theoretical frameworks carry with them, a number of assumptions about the nature of the data being analysed.

For the current study, thematic analysis is therefore viewed as a method of analysis that seeks to reflect the reality of participants and for this reason is considered to be 'essentialist' or 'realist' (Braun and Clarke, 2006). An inductive or 'bottom up' approach was predominantly applied (Frith and Gleeson, 2004) whereby the identification of themes was driven by the data (Patton, 1990) and themes were identified due to the prevalence with which they occurred within and between the strands of the data. However, it is important to note that on occasion a deductive or 'top down' approach may inadvertently have been applied as 'researchers cannot free themselves of their theoretical and epistemological commitments, and data are not coded in an epistemological vacuum' (Braun and Clarke, 2006:82). From this perspective, it is possible that certain elements of the thematic analysis were driven by the researcher's theoretical interest in the area rather than emerging directly from the data itself. To control for this, all interviews were coded by the researcher and two professional colleagues; one of whom was aware of the research but not of the underlying theory, and one who did not know of the research. The outcome of this suggested a high level of inter-rater agreement (Miles and Huberman 1994), as the two professional colleagues independently coded the data in the same way as the researcher. They were also asked to group these initial codes into broader themes,

and although slightly different wording was used, there was a high level of agreement regarding how the initial codes could be further categorised. This helped to ensure that data were not coded solely on the basis of the researcher's theoretical and analytical interests. An outline of the phases of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006), and how they were applied in the current study is provided in Table 12.

*Table 12: Phases of Thematic Analysis (adapted from Braun & Clarke, 2006)*

<b>Phase</b>	<b>Description of the Process</b>
1. Familiarising yourself with the data	All interviews were transcribed one-by-one. They were read and re-read and initial ideas were noted.
2. Generating initial codes	Interesting features of the data were coded systematically across the three interviews. Data were collected that were relevant to each code.
3. Searching for themes	Codes were then collated into potential themes, and all data were gathered relevant to these themes.
4. Reviewing themes	A 'thematic map' was generated to check that the themes could be supported in terms of the coded extracts (see Appendix 13), and the data set as a whole.
5. Defining and naming themes	Clear definitions and names for each theme were generated.
6. Producing the report	Compelling extract examples were selected and links made explicit between how the analysis links with the study's research questions and literature.

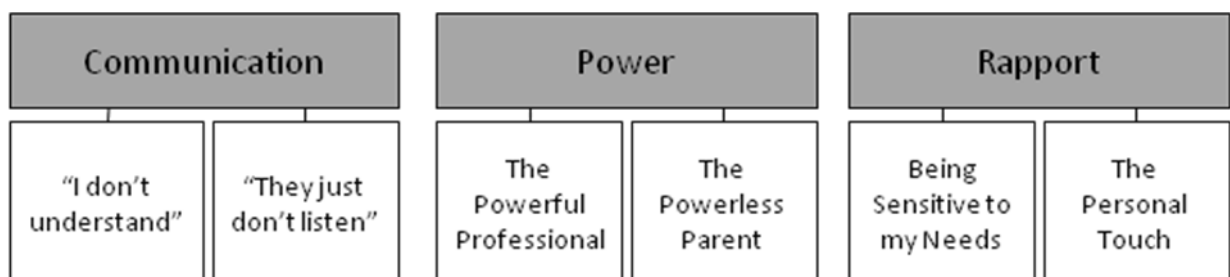


### **3. Results**

Themes were identified at a 'semantic' level (Braun and Clarke, 2006), whereby the analytic process involves a progression from 'description' to 'interpretation'. The themes selected were prevalent across all data sets and can be said to capture significant aspects of parent experiences as they relate to the study's overarching aim. From this perspective, although the emphasis of the current study is on allowing parents to share their experiences in their own words, it is important to remember that even a 'giving voice' approach involves some element of selecting and editing the data to border an argument (Fine, 2002).

Three overarching themes emerged from the data set, all of which serve to highlight a significant aspect of parents' experiences of interacting with professionals as told by the former. Within each theme, two sub-themes were identified which gave further structure to the analysis (See Figure 1). Annotated transcripts for each of the interviews can be found in Appendix 11. All names have been changed to preserve anonymity.

*Figure 1: Overarching and Subordinate Themes*



### 3.1 Power

This was arguably the most prevalent theme across the data set, with each participant making reference to the power imbalance that they believe to exist between themselves and the professionals they interact with. Power was seen to be held by professionals who were the 'experts' in their field, and by contrast, parents often felt 'powerless' as did not feel that they held the same level of knowledge regarding their child, or the power to affect change. Where some parents had a desire to become empowered, others were happy for the professional to hold the power and felt that this was their role. Within the overarching theme of 'power', the sub-themes: 'the powerful professional' and 'the powerless parent' are identified which help to bring further structure to the analysis.

#### 3.1.1 The 'Powerful' Professional

Parents often positioned professionals as being omnipotent and therefore felt that they were unchallengeable. They felt obliged to do what the professional told them and seemed to accept that 'professionals know best':

It's almost like in a parent's eyes a consultant is God. Especially if you have to wait an age to see them. If they say 'you realise that your child needs' then you do it without questioning as they're like the best that you can be, at what they do I mean. I guess it's the whole 'doctor said' therefore I must do it. I think that's the same for everyone though, not just parents of children with disabilities. There is almost like this unwritten rule that you shouldn't question people of a higher status. **(Interview 1, lines 434 - 443)**

I just see professionals as telling me what to do. You know

what's for the best for Harry and that. Some of them are rude and think that they're something special, but they know what they're doing at the end of the day, so you just have to go with what they say and that's that. **(Interview 2, lines 43 - 47)**

They're paid to help people like me, and people like Harrison. They're the experts. They know things that you can't know. I mean as a parent like. They're just clever and stuff. **(Interview 2, lines 53 - 56)**

Parents did however suggest that perhaps for some professionals their title accorded them this status unfairly and that professionals can at times abuse their position of power by not alerting parents to all of the options available to them. This was evident when parents acknowledged that professionals do not always know what is best for their child:

I think my experience in general is that they tell you to jump and you're expected to say how high. There were years when I would do that, you know, do exactly as they said, but then one day I woke up and realised that maybe they don't always know best. **(Interview 3, lines 43 - 48)**

Sometimes I give my opinion without anyone asking as you get so frustrated with what they are saying that you feel you have to. I always feel a bit self-conscious though as some professionals will just see this as confirmation that you are a pushy Mum or that you are deliberately trying to contradict what they say. **(Interview 1, lines)**

You still meet the odd professional who talks to you like you're stupid, or uses terms that you don't understand and then just expects you to nod and follow their advice. **(Interview 1, lines 203 - 206)**

When it comes to professionals, my experience is that they know right and you don't. They know what school my daughter should go to and whether she should get a statement or not. What her targets are, what she can do and what she can't, what I should be doing. Do you know what I mean? They think they know better than you about everything. **(Interview 3, lines 15 - 21)**

Parents also suggested that professionals did not appear to like their power to be challenged and saw more 'vocal' parents who are aware of their rights as threatening:

I think that some professionals can get a bit scared when parents know too much. Especially about their rights and what they're entitled to and what professionals are supposed to be doing. It makes them get defensive I find. It's almost like they feel you are challenging them, and that they are losing a bit of power. Maybe that's why they don't try and empower you as a parent, as if they did that, then they would be losing some of their power - to tell you what to do I mean. **(Interview 3, lines 188 - 197)**

Despite parent perceptions regarding professionals holding all of the power, and their concerns regarding this, there were times when parents wanted professionals to assume the role of 'the expert', and felt that a power imbalance should exist:

They ask you what you think and that, although I don't always know what I think. Sometimes you want them to come up with the answers and tell you what to do, and that's how it should be. **(Interview 2, lines 87 - 90)**

I think that they have a responsibility to know what is best for your child. It's hard to know what's best when you're just a Mum, so they should be able to tell you how to make your child better. Yeah, that's what their role is. **(Interview 2, lines 241 - 245)**

This viewpoint was also corroborated through the EP interviews, where it was suggested that despite attempts to make partnerships more equitable, there are some parents who seem to want to be told what to do, and how best to care for their child:

As much as we talk about equitable relationships and parental rights, there are a small handful of parents who don't seem to want this. They seem to want you to provide them with the answers. **(Educational Psychologist Interview 1)**

I think some parents need more support than others. There are some who can become reliant on professionals for help and don't ever challenge what we say. It makes me uncomfortable and I have raised it at supervision, but it's an ongoing problem. It's normally those parents who are in some way disadvantaged. That's why it doesn't sit comfortably with me. It makes me feel like I am abusing my position, when I know I'm not. **(Educational Psychologist Interview 3)**

### 3.1.2 The 'Powerless' Parent

Following on from the previous sub-theme, parents often felt that they were powerless to effect change on matters relating to their child's SEN, and that they did not have a say when it came to making important decisions. The professional-lay person divide was emphasized, with parents often feeling that their contribution was insignificant:

Well, when I met the Educational Psychologist I felt completely powerless and confused. I was convinced that Lenna would need to go to a special school, and when the psychologist challenged this and asked whether I had ever considered sending her to mainstream school I felt like my world had collapsed **(Interview 1, lines 242 - 247)**

It's really difficult as a single Mum. You're constantly given the message that you're not quite good enough, and I guess maybe you have that in the back of your mind when you have a disabled child. It makes it hard to speak out, as you never think that what you say is worth anything. **(Interview 2, lines 224 - 228)**

It is interesting to note that the parent in interview 2 mentioned her single-parent status when describing why she found it hard to 'speak out' and give her views and seemed to equate this status with her powerlessness. It is also significant that during the Educational Psychologist (EP) interviews, the EP who had worked with the parent in interview 1 provided an example of how she had attempted to empower this parent by providing her with all of the information possible about schools to help her to make an informed choice:

I think sometimes when children are diagnosed with autism, you know to the extent where they have limited verbal communication, then parents feel that they have no choice but to send them to a special school. I therefore see part of my role to make sure that parents are aware what their options are. You know, with Lenna's Mum for example. She was convinced that Lenna needed to be at a special school, so I played devil's advocate and asked her why. I know this is a subtle example, but I see this as helping to empower parents. **(Educational Psychologist Interview 1)**

From the EPs perspective, she was empowering the parent to make an informed decision regarding schools, but this had the effect of making the parent feel powerless and dominated by the professional.

Many parents felt that their experiences of working with professionals would be more positive if they worked together or if they felt empowered to provide the best possible care for their child. Parent empowerment was always seen to be positive:

I think it depends on the professional. With some of them I felt really empowered to be a better Mum and to change things, well the way I do things at home to support Lenna and help her reach her potential. **(Interview 1, lines 375 - 379)**

When people actually showed me how to do things I felt really empowered to support Lenna **(Interview 1, lines 385 - 387)**

I guess that's more about their personalities, and what they see their role as being. You know, whether it is to tell parents and children what to do, or whether they think it's about working in partnership. Two heads are better than one and all that kind of stuff. **(Interview 3, lines 101 - 106)**

I think that you should feel empowered as a parent. You should be able to make decisions and support your child, but that's not the reality of it. I think the times when I did feel confident was when I had done my own research. When I looked things up on the internet, and when I contacted parent partnership. **(Interview 3, lines 175 - 180)**

Although issues relating to power were prevalent across all interviews, parents' views and experiences often appeared contradictory as they talked of occasions where they felt it appropriate for professionals to hold the power, but then went on to criticize them for not sharing this power. It therefore appears that every situation and working partnership is different, and that the distribution of power will vary accordingly. There are some situations where parents are happy for professionals to dominate (as long as they do not abuse this power), but there are also times when they themselves want to feel empowered. These findings suggest that (at least for the parents included in the present study) there is a more nuanced expectation regarding the extent of influence that professionals should exert; the notion that parents may expect professionals to offer a 'magic wand' for providing solutions to challenges or difficulties appears overly simplistic.

### **3.2 Communication**

This theme was prevalent in all three interviews, and was also highlighted by the three EPs who were interviewed as part of the data triangulation process. Parents

spoke of communication in both positive and negative terms. The latter in relation to many of their experiences, and the former in relation to how their experiences could have been improved. Within this theme, communication was seen as a two-way process, and so attention was focused both on how information is presented to parents, and how this made them feel. It also highlights the extent to which parents felt their voice was heard and how professionals responded to their attempts to communicate their thoughts and feelings. Within the overarching theme of 'communication', the following subthemes were identified:

### **3.2.1 'I don't understand'**

This theme highlights the extent to which parents felt information and advice given by professionals was communicated clearly and at a level at which they could understand. It captures parents' experiences of receiving insufficient information and how this leaves them feeling angry and frustrated. For the current sample, parent experiences of communicating with professionals were predominantly negative and often left them feeling confused.

All participants described occasions where they had felt obliged to agree with what professionals were telling them, as they did not understand the language that was used, and did not always feel confident to admit that they had not understood:

When people actually showed me how to do things I felt really empowered to support Lenna, but sometimes when they explained what I should be doing, I didn't always understand, but would just nod as didn't feel confident enough to have told them that I didn't understand. I didn't want them to think that I was stupid. **(Interview 1, lines 385 – 392)**



Harry is my first child, and the fact that he was disabled, well it's a lot to get your head round, and they just expect you to be able to make decisions just like that, without giving you all the information that you need to be able to decide. Sometimes in the early stages I just agreed with what the doctors and physios and the psych people said, just cos I didn't understand, and they know best. You just kind of go along with it. Go with the flow. **(Interview 2, lines 16 - 24)**

I think that's especially true with doctors. They use so much medical language and stuff that you don't always know what they're talking about. Then you get them to explain it in a way you can understand and you still can't understand it, and even if you do, which is unlikely, it's difficult to tell them otherwise. **(Interview 3, lines, 216 - 221)**

This communication issue was also acknowledged through the EP interviews and provides an alternative perspective through which to consider the communication difficulties that seem to be present between parents and professionals:

Sometimes when a child has really complex needs, and you have formulated your hypotheses etc it is really hard to communicate this to parents and other professionals who aren't familiar with psychology. **(Educational Psychologist Interview 2)**

You try, with the best will in the world to explain things in a way that everyone can understand, but with something like psychology, that's not always easy. You feel patronizing asking a parent if they understand, but I always do it. More often than not they say they do, but I'm never sure. It's part of my job that doesn't always sit comfortably with me. **(Educational Psychologist Interview 3)**

Participants also reported not knowing why some professionals were involved with their child, and not having a clear understanding of what their role was. This suggests an assumed understanding on the part of the professional, and highlights

the importance of professionals clearly explaining their role, and how they are able to support the child and their family:

Again, in my experience this tends to vary from professional to professional. Some are really good at it, and others just assume that you know who they are and what they do, and then assume that just because you know they are a physio or whatever, you must know what they do. (**Interview 1, lines 495 - 500**)

There are ones that phone me quite a bit and tell me when they are going to see Harry and stuff. I guess they're the ones whose names I could tell you, and that I see as being more human-like. You can have a normal conversation with them. Then there are some who just rock up at meetings and you don't have a clue who they are, and if they do introduce themselves then you still don't really understand what they do. (**Interview 2, lines 250 - 258**)

They might tell you 'hi I'm James and I'm an Educational Psychologist' or 'hi I'm Dr Jones and I'm a Community pediatrician', but what does that actually mean? What do they do, and what does it mean for your child? (**Interview 3, lines 293 - 296**)

This was corroborated through the EP interviews, with each EP acknowledging that they have been in meetings or other situations where professionals have failed to introduce themselves or explain what their role is in relation to their child:

It's one of my bugbears and something that you see so often. Professionals pile round the table, and I can see the parent getting more and more anxious, but no one says anything. If I had a pound for every time I have had to say 'do you think we should all introduce ourselves?' **Educational Psychologist Interview 1**

I think professionals, and I have been guilty of this too, just think that it's enough to say your name and your title. In fact I have never been in a meeting where I have elaborated on my job description. There's never the time to do it, but it is something we need to address. **Educational Psychologist Interview 2**

Oh yeah, professionals are awful for that. They just assume that parents know who they are. Or they don't care or think that it's important maybe? **Educational Psychologist Interview 3**

Parents' lack of understanding and feelings of inadequacy were most apparent when they spoke of their experiences of meetings when there were a number of professionals present. Participant 2, shared that she no longer went to IEP reviews as she did not understand what they were talking about:

They don't listen to you. They just all have a chat, and then ask you if you have anything to say at the end, then you feel like you can't say anything. So there is no point really going. They talk about Harry and the things they are doing, and they show me what he is up to with this photo book thing which is really nice, but other than that they might as well be talking in a different language. (**Interview 2, lines 176 - 183**)

This lack of understanding also made participant 2 question her abilities as a mother and she also spoke of the physiological impact that attending IEP reviews had on her:

It used to make my stomach turn. I mean what was I going to tell them that they didn't already know? I used to dread the meetings and would come away feeling really stupid and like I couldn't give Harry the best support and that, so I just got to the point where I stopped going. They probably think I'm a bad mum for not going, but let them think that. (**Interview 2, lines 185 - 192**)

A lack of understanding therefore not only caused the parents frustration due to them not knowing what was going on with their child, but also had an effect on them personally, with all participants expressing feelings of inadequacy and inferiority.

This secondary effect is important to consider as it has the potential to impact upon their relationship with their child.

### 3.2.2 'They just don't listen'

This theme highlights the extent to which parents felt that their voice was heard on matters relating to their child's SEN. From this perspective, communication relates to whether or not parents felt that their attempts to communicate with professionals were both listened to and acted upon.

All parents felt that when interacting with professionals, their views were not always considered to be important or worthy of being listened to:

I think at the start I would be pushed to find anything positive about any professional that I met. The secrecy, the way that they spoke to me like I wasn't important, you know, didn't matter to them or my views weren't important. It was a really frustrating time. **(Interview 1, lines 184 - 189)**

I know that there are times when professionals don't have to listen to us and I respect that they know what they're talking about, but I think that sometimes it would make parents feel better about stuff if they were listened to. **(Interview 2, lines 163 - 167)**

At the beginning I didn't feel like I was listened to at all. I might as well not have been able to speak for all the good it did. I would say things and make suggestions and ask questions and they would be dismissed straight away. It made me not want to speak out. **(Interview 3, lines 111 - 116).**

When asked if they felt that professionals consistently sought parents' views and acted upon them, the EPs responses suggest that in many cases, parents have every right to be frustrated:

I think for some professionals, seeking parent views is just a formality. It ticks a box, but then the piece of paper is just filed away and the doctor, or whichever professional just carries on with what they were doing before. I don't think they change things as a result of talking to the parent. Not often anyway. **(Educational Psychologist Interview 2)**

I think the voice of the child and parent is central to our work, and if anything their views are the most important part of the whole assessment process. I don't think that's the case for all professionals though, especially medics. **(Educational Psychologist Interview 3)**

Parents felt frustrated by their lack of voice and difficulties in trying to get professionals to listen to their viewpoint. They felt that professionals were often dismissive of their views, which further added to their lack of confidence, and in some cases made them not want to speak out. On the occasions where parents did report that they had felt listened to, they described their experiences in more positive terms. They felt that they had been understood, and that professionals were taking notice of what they were saying:

I also remember the speech and language therapist asking me 'have you any idea what we're looking for'. I can't tell you how important this question was to me. The fact that it was so open allowed me to have a discussion with her, and I felt that I could share my fears for the first time. **(Interview 1, lines 173 - 178)**

It's really good when professionals check your views back. Not many do it, I don't know whether that's because of time, or that they just don't think that it's a valuable thing to

do, but when they do do it, you really feel that they have listened to you and if they haven't understood you properly, you have the opportunity to try and explain it again. **(Interview 1, lines 353 - 360)**

All parents spoke of the 'statementing process' in relation to whether or not they felt listened to regarding their child's special educational needs. Two of the parents felt that the statutory nature of the process meant that their views were more likely to be listened to:

I think with the whole statement thing, it makes professionals listen to you a bit more as they have to ask you what you think about schools and stuff, although at the time I didn't really know what the whole thing was about as no one really told me. **(Interview 2, lines 145 - 150)**

I think in the more formal things that take place like statementing, there is a place for parent views, but sometimes it is like they just ask you because they have to. **(Interview 1, lines 342 - 345)**

The remaining parent acknowledged that the Educational Psychologist ascertained her views during the statementing process, but questioned whether this was merely a formality as despite having her views listened to, they were not necessarily acted upon:

Even during the whole statementing thing when the Educational Psychologist comes round to your house and asks you what you think about a load of stuff...I'm still not sure that they listen to you. They listen to you as in they are sat on your sofa or at the end of the phone and acknowledge what you're saying, but whether they listen to you to the extent that they consider and act on what you say, I don't think they do. **(Interview 3, lines 123 - 132)**

This parent felt that her views were obtained because professionals were obliged to do so, but that this did not necessarily equate to her having her voice heard. She

also felt that parents' views were not accorded the status that they deserved, and that their opinion was often sought by way of confirming or agreeing with what professionals had said:

I think that a lot of professionals just ask because they feel that they should, rather than because they actually care what you think. It's just a question and they're not really bothered about the response that you give. I think so often your opinion is left to last. They ask you right at the end of a meeting when time is running out and everyone is packing up and shuffling their papers, then you have no choice but to say 'yeah that's fine'. **(Interview 3, lines 369 - 384)**

When asked specifically about the statutory assessment process, and whether or not they feel that parent views are fully taken into consideration, one EP offered the following explanation:

I think a lot of parents get frustrated by the statutory assessment process if I'm honest. We spend all of this time gaining their views and representing them in our psychological advice, and then when they receive their draft statement, they feel that they haven't been listened to. Sometimes a parent is adamant that they want their child to go to a special school, but assessments suggest that they could be happy and make progress in a mainstream environment so that is what's written into the statement. I think this makes them think that we just seek their views because we have to. **(Educational Psychologist Interview 3)**

### 3.3 Rapport

This theme highlights the importance of professionals being approachable, and being able to enter into a genuine helping relationship with the parent. It encapsulates the personal qualities that parents highlighted as being desirable in professionals and

emphasizes the need for professionals to be attuned to parents' levels of emotional needs. Within this theme, the following subthemes were identified:

### **3.3.1 Being Sensitive to my Needs (as a parent)**

This sub-theme relates to the importance of professionals understanding how being a parent of a child with SEN makes you feel, and the range of emotions that they are likely to experience. One parent shared her frustration and upset that no one was able to tell her what was wrong with her daughter. Describing the behaviour of a Health Visitor who visited her at home she said the following:

For me, no one calmed my anxieties or answered my questions. I know that they can't just say 'your child is autistic' or anything like that, but they could tell you more than they do. At the end of the day, I was a person with feelings, feeling lower than I ever had done, and her behaviour almost fuelled it. **(Interview 1, lines 87 - 93)**

These feelings relating to 'professional empathy' were also prevalent in the remaining parent interviews:

You almost grieve for your child when they have special needs and I don't always think that professionals are sensitive to that when they ask your opinion on stuff. **(Interview 2, lines 375 - 378)**

When your child has special needs, it's like your world comes to an end and you have to rebuild it bit by bit. Getting the help you need was my way of building it back. My way of dealing with it, but professionals don't always realise that. They lack the personal touch and it makes them come across as cold. **(Interview 3, lines 407 - 413)**

If some of them had disabled kids themselves it might help



them to be better at what they do. Not better at knowing their stuff as I'm sure they do, but better at knowing what it feels like to be a mum of a disabled child. I think if they realised how hard it was, emotionally more than anything, then I think that would make stuff better.  
**(Interview 2, lines 443 - 449)**

In understanding the experiences of the parents, it is interesting to turn to the data obtained from the EP interviews. EPs were asked whether they thought that it was possible for professionals to show genuine empathy towards parents, and whether they thought that this was important:

I always empathize with parents' position, but how much this comes across I'm not sure. There's a fine line between showing empathy and being disingenuous. **(Educational Psychologist Interview 2)**

I think that you can try and understand a parent's situation, but whether you can ever truly appreciate and understand what it's like to have a child with special educational needs, I'm just not sure. I think you can definitely offer them support and guidance, but I think empathy is completely different  
**(Educational Psychologist Interview 1)**

When talking about their understanding of what a professional's role should be, parents emphasized the importance of professionals working with their children within the different contexts that they exist. This meant acknowledging that the child was part of a family, and that they as parents might also need support, not just the child:

I think with Lenna, for me, the professionals' role shouldn't just have been about helping Lenna, they needed to look at Lenna as part of a family, and as a daughter, and then also support me as a parent to understand what's going on.  
**(Interview 1, lines 463 - 467)**

I don't think that I have ever really been offered a good piece of advice, or anything that has made me feel better as

a Mum of a child with special needs, which is what you would hope from their involvement. **(Interview 3, lines 392 - 396)**

For professionals to achieve this, they need to have a number of personal qualities that arguably differ from their professional skills, which enable them to consider the parent's viewpoint (which will differ considerably between parents) and understand the emotions that are likely to be caught up within this.

### 3.3.2 The Personal Touch

This final sub-theme therefore relates to the personal qualities of professionals, and how parents seemed to value those professionals who they considered to be more personable:

I've thought about this in the past, you know, when I have got pissed off about not being listened to, and I think that a good professional is a person for whom time doesn't matter. Does that make sense? It's pretty simple, but for me it made a real difference. I guess at university and stuff and in your training, they teach you how to do your job, but I doubt they teach you the personal touch - well not in my experience, but that is the kind of stuff that parents value. **(Interview 1, lines 279 - 288)**

There are some professionals that have helped us I guess, and have been really supportive. Especially when things with Harry have been really hard. They tend to be the ones that are less snobby though. The ones that don't get paid as much and are probably quite normal in the night time, you know, not driving around in their posh cars. They're the ones that talk to you like you're a normal person. You can just have a conversation with them rather than them just talking at you in a language you don't understand. **(Interview 2, lines 78 - 86)**

I think that professionals are also good when they make you feel like an individual not just one of their massive

caseload. And when they make you feel that time is not an issue. You can talk to them without feeling rushed, or that you can't ask questions. **(Interview 3, lines 88 - 92)**

When your child has special needs it's like your world comes to an end and you have to re-build it bit-by bit. Getting the help you need was my way of building it back. My way of dealing with it, but professionals don't always realize that. they lack the personal touch and it makes them come across as cold. Like they don't really care. Like they've seen it all before. I'm not saying you want a hug from them, as you don't and that wouldn't come across as sincere, but you do want them to put themselves in your shoes and try and imagine what it feels like' **(Interview 3, lines 407 - 417)**

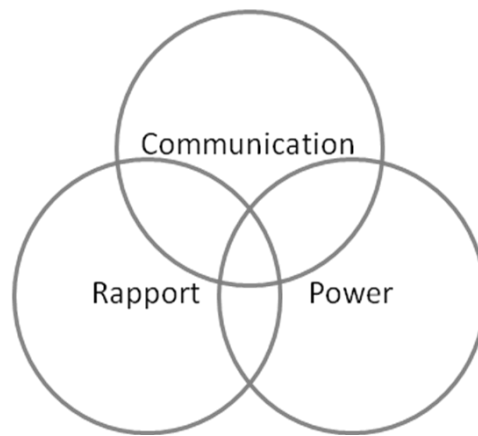
During the EP interviews, EPs were asked what they felt parents would value most about their interactions with professionals. One EP thought that parents would value her expertise and application of psychology, another felt that parents would value the access she was able to provide to additional resources and provision, and the final felt that parents often just want someone who they can talk to:

It's funny really. We spend all these years training and learning our craft so to speak, but in my experience, what parents seem to want is someone they can talk to. Someone they see as a real person not just a robot. **(Educational Psychologist interview 1)**

Although this EP showed good understanding of what parents value, the responses from the other EPs suggest that there can at times be a mis-match between what parents want, and what professionals *think* that they want. From this perspective it seems that professionals can become preoccupied by their professional role and the application of skills to the extent that they forget about the need to be 'human'.

Although parent experiences of working with professionals have been categorised into the three themes of 'communication', 'power' and 'rapport', it is important to highlight that these themes are not always discrete, and there is therefore likely to be some overlap between them (see Figure 2). The data gathered under each theme will be discussed in relation to the study's research questions in the following section of this paper.

*Figure 2: Pictorial representation of themes*



### **3.4 Documentary Evidence**

The information obtained from the file trawl has not been interspersed directly with the thematic analysis, as to do so would have affected the flow of results. As all parents mentioned the statutory assessment process, but differed in the extent to which they saw this as formal means of having their voice heard, the file trawl enabled Psychological Advice and Statements to be checked to examine the extent to which parents' views were accurately reported and acted upon. All parents expressed clear views regarding the type of SEN provision that they felt their child

was likely to need. These views were clearly represented in Section 6 of the Psychological Advice (parent views), but assessments and other cited information sources often gave advice that contradicted the parents' views, meaning that in the child's final statement, it appeared that the parents' views regarding school had not been considered. Although the file trawl enabled access to the evidence and assessments on which certain decisions regarding provision were made, there was no documentary evidence to suggest that this information was communicated to parents and so they are likely to have thought that their views were not taken into consideration.

The file trawl also provided insight into the amount of professional contact that each parent received or initiated, and allowed for any unusual patterns of contact to be explored. 'Parent 1' appeared to be much more proactive in her interactions, and there was documentary evidence to suggest that she contacted the Educational Psychologist at regular intervals over a two-year period. The file trawl also highlighted the times when 'parent 2' withdrew from all professional contact (as articulated in her interview), and provided insight into the professional's construction of this. This parent shared in her interview that she had stopped attending meetings and engaging with professionals as she felt anxious and frustrated, and did not understand what was being discussed. These feelings were not captured within the child's SEN file, and although professionals identified that the 'parent will not engage with services', they did not attempt to ascertain why this was the case or how it might be overcome.

## **4. Discussion**

Within this discussion the results of the research study will be critiqued in terms of their relevance to the study's research questions, and how they make an original contribution to knowledge. This will be explored with reference to the extant literature and consideration of the ways in which the current research study adds to existing knowledge and contributes to the understanding of parent-professional working as a result of utilising methodologies that involve parents as valued participants in the research process. Implications for practice will be explored in terms of how professionals can improve their interactions with parents based on the key findings emerging from the research study. Limitations of the study's methodology and the application of findings will be considered before making recommendations for future research in the area of partnership working.

### **4.1 Key Findings**

The key findings of this research study will be discussed in relation to the study's main research questions and will therefore be split into three sections:

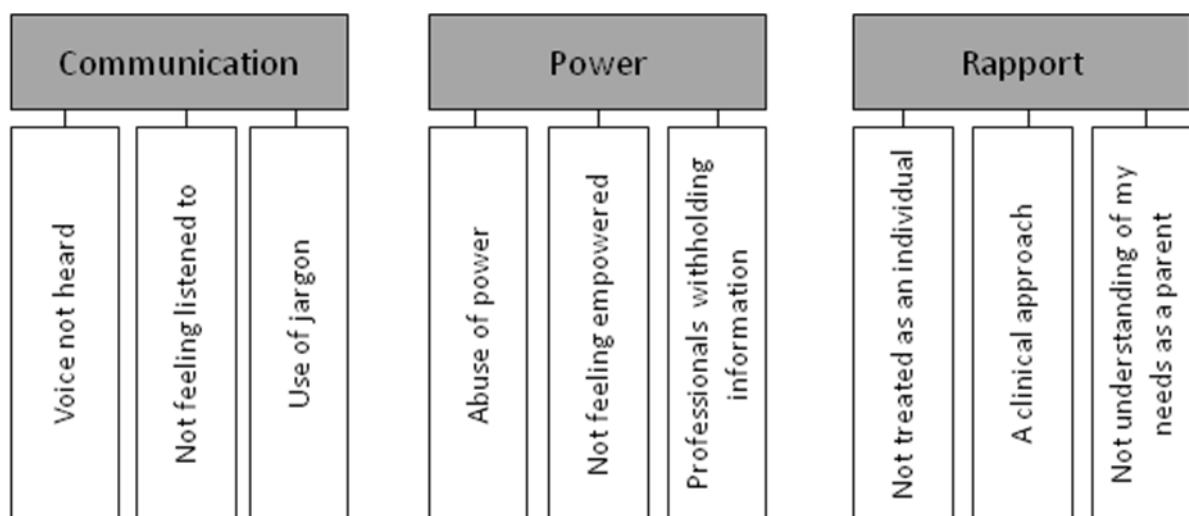
- How do parents of children with SEN experience support from professionals?
- How do parents of children with SEN feel about their interactions with professionals?
- How could professionals increase the value of their interactions with parents of children with SEN?

As well as enabling the emergent themes to be explored, this structure will also allow for conclusions to be drawn in relation to the study's overall aims, and comparisons to be made with previous research endeavours exploring parent-professional research.

#### 4.1.1 How do parents of children with SEN experience support from professionals?

This research question was designed to explore the *actual* experiences of parents of children with SEN. Within the extant literature, a large proportion of studies report on the relationship between parents and professionals, but fail to use parents as participants, an issue which the current research study has sought to address. For the current sample, each parent's experience was unique although there were common threads throughout the interviews, evident through the thematic analysis. In considering the commonalities between the interviews, parents' experiences of working with professionals on matters relating to their child's SEN were largely negative (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Parents' negative experiences of working with professionals



These negative experiences were often related to parents' perceptions that professionals hold the power within their working relationship, which resulted in them feeling powerless and unable to bring about change for their child. Within the interviews issues relating to power were highlighted at a number of different levels; (See Table 13) parents reported experiences that were congruent with an 'expert model' of partnership working (Cunningham & Davis, 1985) whereby professionals were seen to make the decisions, and parents were placed in the role of 'passive observer'. Within the literature, there are examples of where parents have felt appropriately consulted and empowered to bring about change for their child (for example MacPherson, 1993; Sykes, 2001), but this was not overly apparent within the current research.

Examples of professionals using the 'transplant' model (Cunningham & Davis, 1985) as a framework for collaboration were also alluded to, whereby professionals would impart small amounts of knowledge to parents to enable them to fulfil a particular role, or carry out a specific task. Parents seemed to value this approach as it gave them a sense of empowerment but without placing too much pressure on them to perform or fulfil certain expectations.



*Table 13: Manifestations of power emerging from the thematic analysis*

<b>The Powerful Professional</b>	<b>The Powerless Parent</b>
Withholding information	Not having access to necessary information about their child
Assuming the position of 'expert'	Dominated by professionals and their 'superior knowledge'
Failing to inform parents about the nature of their (professional) involvement	Not knowing why professionals are involved with their child, or what their role is
Failing to empower parents or share their skills	Not feeling empowered to meet their child's needs

The manifestations of power outlined in Table 13 are not uncommon, and are widely reported within the literature (Alexander and Dore, 1999; Dale, 1996; MacPherson, 1993; Vincent, 1996, 2000). This is important to note, as it suggests that the emergent themes from the current study confirm those uncovered within the critical literature review (Chapter 2). One way of interpreting this could be to suggest that there was a confirmatory bias in the analysis and interpretation of the present results. However, the strong thematic analysis undertaken (including input from naive second coders) as well as the different perspectives and sources of evidence included, suggest that the likelihood of such a bias was minimised.

Todd and Higgins (1998) suggest that the discourse underlying most constructions of parent-professional relations within the literature subscribe to this construction of the 'powerlessness of parents' and that this is manifested in two different ways:

- an overrepresentation of literature on parent-professional relationships from the perspective of the latter and;
- by imputing pathology, or some kind of deficit, on the part of the parent.

(Todd & Higgins, 1998; 229)

By engaging parents as valued participants in the research process, the first point relating to the dominance of the professional perspective begins to be addressed by the current research. One could predict that in inviting parents to talk about their experiences, and allowing them to tell their story in their own words, the second point relating to a parent-deficit model would be less apparent. However, throughout the interviews there were times when parents used language that implied some kind of deficit or inadequacy on their part and questioned whether they were good parents. For example:

‘I used to dread the meetings and would come away feeling really stupid and like I couldn’t give Harry the best support’. (Interview 2)

Parents also mentioned their single-parent status and questioned whether this contributed to their feelings of powerlessness or professional’s perceptions of their powerlessness. This was an example of where parents were attempting to make sense of their situation, or justify why professionals might treat them in a certain way.

The importance of exploring and understanding the distribution of power within parent-professional relationships is further emphasised through parents’ mention of ‘feeling empowered’ as an example of when their experiences of working with professionals have been more positive. Within the literature the idea of empowerment is far from new, and the ‘empowerment model’ was developed to try and reflect this approach to partnership working (Appleton and Minchom, 1991). Within the current study, parents described feeling empowered when professionals appeared to

genuinely listen to their views, or modelled specific techniques and skills that they could use with their child, which again resonates with previous research endeavours (DCSF, 2010). Throughout the interviews, there were also times when parents identified situations where they were happy for the professional to take the lead and assume the position of expert:

‘They ask you what you think and that, although I don’t always know what I think. Sometimes you want them to come up with the answers and tell you what to do, and that’s how it should be’. (Interview 3)

Although it could be argued that is indicative of parents not always wanting to feel empowered, it could also suggest that parents feel empowered to be able to choose when they give their opinion, and when they feel that professionals are best-placed to offer solutions. From this perspective, a parent placing the power in the hand of the professional could represent a conscious and positive choice, which is not necessarily due to a lack of empowerment.

Exploring the notion of partnership, Fyelling and Sandvin (1999) suggest that the power divide that exists between parents and professionals is socially defined, meaning that partnerships will always be inequitable until the role of parents is addressed at a societal level. Carrying out interviews with parents and teachers, they suggest that there are two roles open to parents: ‘parents as implementers’ whereby their role is to implement aims and strategies initiated by the school, and ‘parents as clients’ whereby parents are seen to be part of the problem and are therefore included in any support provided. Although both of these roles place parents in subordinate

and powerless positions, neither of them accurately describe the position of the parents in the current sample.

For the parents in the current study, their accounts of partnership working suggest that they often experience support from professionals as an 'outsider'. Their experiences suggest that ideas and interventions were often imposed upon them rather than them playing a central role in the decision-making process. Although this links into discussions relating to power and the definition of parent-professional roles, the idea of parents as 'outsiders' was also apparent within the theme of 'communication'. Parents did not feel that they had a voice on matters related to their child's SEN, and that where their opinion was sought; it was not always acted upon. Seeking parent views was therefore seen as a formality rather than evidence of professionals valuing what parents have to say. This viewpoint was corroborated through EP interviews, whereby it was acknowledged that not all professionals seem to attach importance to the voice of the parent, especially if it challenges their own professional viewpoint.

The idea of 'parents as outsiders' can be further developed through the sub-theme: 'I don't understand'. Within this theme, parents' experiences of trying to understand professional jargon and explanations were explored and suggest that parents are often unable to actively contribute to discussions with professionals, because they do not understand what is being discussed. Evidence from the EP interviews suggests that this reflects a genuine difficulty on the part of the professional in trying to communicate psychological knowledge and hypotheses in an accessible form, rather

than any deliberate strategy to exclude parents. Nevertheless, from the parent's perspective, it further adds to their negative experience of partnership.

The idea of communication as a barrier to partnership working is far from new, and is consistently cited within the literature (Cunningham & Davis, 1986, Gascoigne, 1995, Beveridge, 2005). There is also practical guidance regarding effective communication, which can be found in Government documents such as the SEN Code of Practice (2001) and the Lamb Inquiry (DCSF, 2010). The Lamb Inquiry acknowledges the importance of communication with parents being jargon-free and accessible, and the parents consulted as part of the Inquiry voiced similar concerns to the parents in the current sample. One must therefore ask why issues relating to communication continue to pose a barrier to effective partnership working.

The data obtained from the current study can offer a new perspective, which suggests that barriers to communication can begin to be broken down if professionals explain their involvement and theories in terms of *what it means for the child*. For example:

‘They might tell you ‘hi I’m James and I’m an Educational Psychologist’ or ‘hi I’m Dr Jones and I’m a community paediatrician’, but what does that actually mean? What do they do, and what does it mean for your child? (Interview 3)

Explanations need to hold relevance to the parent rather than being discussed in abstract terms that they do not understand. Across the interviews, parents reported that a lack of understanding caused them to become inhibited and not want to speak out through fear of embarrassment; this in turn made them more likely to collude with professionals rather than challenging their views even if they disagreed with them.

From this perspective, issues relating to communication need to be identified and addressed at the earliest point if parent-professional relationships are to develop to a stage where they can be described as a partnership.

#### **4.1.2 How do parents of children with SEN feel about their interactions with professionals?**

This research question aimed to capture parents' feelings regarding their experiences of working with professionals. It varies from the first research questions as it is primarily concerned with the *emotions* surrounding parent-professional working, and was included in light of literature that suggests that the emotions that parents experience when their child has SEN are likely to affect their interactions with professionals (Carpenter, 1997; Dale, 1996; Hornby, 1995; Peck, 2002; Randall & Parker, 1999). Therefore, it is considered important for professionals to be able to abstract themselves from their professional role in order to see 'the child through the eyes of the family' (Carpenter, 2003; 4). An exploration of parent feelings within the current study suggests that professionals do not always achieve this, which appeared to contribute to parents' overwhelmingly negative feelings regarding their work with professionals (see Figure 4). Professionals frequently defined their role in terms of the child's needs alone and therefore failed to see the child as belonging to a wider family structure, which could also benefit from support.

*Figure 4: A summary of parents' 'feelings' regarding their interactions with professionals*

Positive	Negative			
Valued	Frustrated	Inferior	Silenced	Confused
Empowered	Upset	Stupid	Undervalued	Ill-informed
Listened to	Inadequate	Ignored	Powerless	Insignificant

Although parents generally felt frustrated by their interactions with professionals, they did occasionally share examples of where they had felt valued, listened to, and empowered to support their child. Although these experiences were in the minority, they are important to highlight as they were often considered to be the result of the personal attributes and qualities of the professional, in particular their ability to show genuine empathy. Within the sub-theme 'being sensitive to my needs', parents spoke of the importance of professionals being attuned to their emotional needs, and acknowledging the difficulties that parents can experience in coming to terms with their child's SEN. Carpenter (2003) suggests that when a child's SEN are first identified, parents can find their expectations of becoming a parent challenged. Emotionally, many parents will need support to adjust to their newfound situation, and to ensure the continued care of their child (Jupp, 1992; Mason, 1995). The results from the current study provide evidence in support of this, and suggest that if professionals are unable to show genuine empathy and respect then it is unlikely that partnership will be achieved.

Evidence from the EP interviews suggests that from a professional perspective 'genuine empathy' is difficult to achieve, as although attempts can be made to try and understand a parent's situation, this is difficult to communicate to the parent without appearing patronizing. Results from the current study provide insight into how this might be addressed, as they suggest that before professionals apply their specialist knowledge and expertise, there is a need to establish a relationship with the parent that enables them to demonstrate a 'personal touch' (see figure 5). Having established this, later attempts to empathise with the parent's position are more likely to be accepted, as the foundations of the working relationship will have already been established. Adopting a model of practice that emphasizes the importance of professionals being personable would also help to address feelings expressed by some parents that they are 'just another parent of a child with SEN'. Within the sub-theme 'the personal touch' parents spoke negatively about those professionals who failed to see their situation as individual, a concern that is also outlined within the extant literature (Gascoigne, 1995). The implications of this for future practice will be discussed in the next section of this paper. However, it is again important to note that the findings from the current study confirm those reported within the wider literature on parent-professional partnership and suggest that there is a need for all professionals to treat parents as individuals if they are to enter into positive and mutually fulfilling relationships.



*Figure 5: A diagram demonstrating the progression of a working relationship from the establishment of personal skills through to the application of specialist skills*



## 4.2 Implications for Practice

Adopting a model of practice that is directly informed by parent experiences has implications for the way in which professionals approach their day-to-day work with parents. In the first instance these implications will be considered through an exploration of the final research question, which looks at how professionals increase the value of their interactions with parents.

### 4.2.1 How can professionals increase the value of their interactions with parents of children with SEN?

This final question was designed to explore the ways in which professionals can increase the value of their interactions with parents from the perspective of the latter. Within each of the three themes (power, communication and rapport), parents made recommendations about the way in which their experiences could have been made more positive and this will form the basis of this discussion. Some of these recommendations emerged as a direct result of questions asked by the interviewer,

whereas others emerged spontaneously as a result of parents reflecting on their experiences. These recommendations, and the themes from which they emerged are outlined in Table 14. It would appear that there is no quick or easy way in which the value of interactions can be increased as parents' understanding of effective partnership working is likely to change dependant on the situation in which they find themselves and the personal resources that they have at their disposal (Ball, 2003).

*Table 14: How can professionals increase the value of their interactions with parents of children with SEN?*

<b>Overarching Theme</b>	<b>Professional Practice</b>
<b>Power</b>	There is a need for professionals to be aware of the power imbalance that often exists between parents and professionals and take steps to address this. This can be achieved through an awareness of the different manifestations of power (see Table 13, page 164)
<b>Power</b>	There is a need to empower parents to feel confident to speak out and to ensure that they are not voiceless. Not all parents want to feel empowered at all times, and so by empowering parents to speak out, they can be supported to identify the areas and occasions where they would like help. For the parents in the current sample, this may involve identifying factors relating to their social class or single-parent status that might affect their confidence to 'speak out'.
<b>Power</b>	Parents should be encouraged to play an active and valued role in their work with professional from the earliest stages to avoid them feeling pressurised and inadequate when it comes to making key-decisions regarding choice of provision etc.
<b>Communication</b>	Parents should be kept informed of all issues relating to their child, and encouraged to play a central role in any decisions made.
<b>Communication</b>	Parents should be communicated to in a way that is accessible to them (avoiding jargon). This is most likely to be achieved by explaining how the information that you are communicating is likely to affect their child, thus providing them with a concrete example. This coincides with the findings of the Lamb Inquiry (DCSF, 2010).
<b>Communication</b> <b>Power</b>	There is a need for professionals to adopt a transparent approach when working with parents, where information is accessible, and parents are aware of what professionals' perceive their (the parents) role to be. From this perspective, professionals should be explicit about their framework for collaboration.
<b>Rapport</b>	Professionals need to be aware of the different systems in which a child exists, and how the child's SEN affects people within these systems. From this perspective, professionals will need to offer support for the parents and wider family, not just the child.
<b>Rapport</b>	There is a need to treat parents as individuals and be sensitive to their needs as a parent. Professionals also need to acknowledge that there may be some commonalities between different parents that add to our understanding of working with that particular 'group'.
<b>Rapport</b>	Where appropriate, professionals should adopt a more sensitive and personal approach that enables them to empathise with the parent's position and consider the emotional impact of having a child with SEN (See Figure 5).

An awareness of the factors identified in Table 14 is important, as each has the potential to improve partnership working by considering the ways in which parents' negative experiences can be overcome. It is important to highlight, that each proposed element of professional practice was identified directly by the parents in the current sample through an exploration of their experiences. From this perspective, it would appear that professionals could increase the value of their interactions with parents by listening to their experiences and adopting an approach to partnership that places parent voice at centre stage.

A further way in which listening to parents' experiences can increase the value of partnership working is that it allows any preconceptions to be challenged. Thus far, this discussion has focused on how professionals can adapt their practice to make parent experiences more positive, but data obtained from the parent interviews in the present study suggest that parents bring with them a number of preconceptions regarding what it means to be a professional. For example, one parent spoke of professionals driving their 'big posh cars' and wearing clothing that made her feel intimidated and inferior. Giving parents a voice to talk about their experiences, allows any issues to come to the surface, which can then be explored further and addressed to ensure that they do not pose a barrier to partnership working.

As previously highlighted, Cunningham and Davis (1985) suggest that professional interactions with parents can be improved considerably if they are underpinned by models or frameworks that guide practice. The findings from the current study would support this assumption, and highlight a need for the development of frameworks that

arise directly from parents' experiences rather than from existing theory (e.g. Appleton & Minchom, 1991; Cunningham and Davis, 1985; Dale, 1996). The 'Parent-Professional Communication Model' represents one such attempt to capture this, and was developed by the current author based on the findings from the current study (see Figure 6). This model differs from those developed from a theoretical perspective (for example, the expert model, the transplant model, the consumer model, the empowerment model, the negotiation model) in that it highlights how the interpersonal skills of professionals can be applied to ensure that parents are active partners in the relationship rather than passive observers. The two-stage (effective) model highlights the importance of the balance of communication between parents and professionals. Emphasis is placed on the parent to share 'child-specific' knowledge and their experiences of being a parent of a child with SEN in the first instance, which will then enable professionals to share their professional knowledge and expertise during the second stage once empathy has been established. The single stage (ineffective) model demonstrates what could happen if time is not taken to understand the parent's position or allow their voice to be heard.

This model does not claim to solve all of the problems relating to partnership working, but suggests that what is needed is a more simplistic approach that takes into consideration what it means to be a parent of a child with SEN, and the emotions that surround this.

Figure 6: The parent-professional communication model: A Framework for collaboration

### The Parent – Professional Communication Model

#### Two stage communication model (effective model)

##### Rapport & understanding



**Outcome:** Parent feels understood & empathy established.

##### Knowledge share



**Outcome:** Parent is empowered & equipped with the appropriate knowledge/skills to move forward.

#### Single stage communication model (ineffective model)

##### Knowledge share ONLY



**Outcome:** Communication breakdown. Non-specific knowledge offered to a discouraged and largely unreceptive parent.

Adopting the 'parent-professional communication model' as a framework for parent-professional collaboration has implications for the initial training of Educational Psychologists and other professionals working with parents. Although many Educational Psychologist training courses emphasize the importance of teaching effective communication skills (CWDC Handbook, 2009), it is important to consider how much time is spent on developing trainee's interpersonal skills, or whether these skills can even be taught. An awareness of this is important as evidence from the current study suggests that these skills are what parents' value the most and that partnership will be difficult to achieve if the professional is not able to relate to the parent at a personal level. The findings from the current research also have implications for the ongoing supervision of Educational Psychologists (and other professionals), since they suggest that there is a need to support EPs to regularly reflect on their professional interactions with parents and explore how they can be improved.

### **4.3 Limitations**

Despite the benefits associated with engaging parents as 'active research participants' alluded to throughout this discussion, it is important to consider the potential limitations associated with adopting a 'giving a voice' approach. It is acknowledged that the results presented are bound within the limits of participants' ability to articulate their experiences of working with professionals, as well as their willingness to share information with the researcher in an honest and open way (Miles

and Huberman, 1994). Interpretative approaches to research and the methods that they employ can also be subject to confirmatory bias through the ways in which they are interpreted and reported, which is seen to be a limitation of this type of methodology (Elliott et al, 2009). Although this was controlled for in a number of ways (see Box 4) it is important to acknowledge that a researcher cannot fully abstract themselves from their own interpretive framework and this is therefore likely to affect the interpretation and analysis of results.

*Box 4: Reducing the possible effects of interpreter bias*

- *'Researchers cannot free themselves of their theoretical and epistemological commitments, and data are not coded in an epistemological vacuum'* (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To control for this, all interviews were coded by the researcher and two professional colleagues; one of whom was aware of the research but not of the underlying theory, and one who did not know of the research. The outcome of this suggested a high level of inter-rater agreement (Miles & Huberman 1994) and helped to ensure that data were not coded solely on the basis of the researcher's theoretical and analytical interests.
- Once 'themes' had been identified, they were fed back to research participants to check that they held relevance.
- Before the research was written up, the 'interpretation of findings' was shared with participants to check that their experiences had been properly understood and not misinterpreted.

Further limitations of the study relate to the methods of data collection that were employed. Although the use of semi-structured interviews allowed parent experiences to be explored, it is likely that the questions that they were asked influenced them to categorise their experiences in a particular way. Although some would therefore question whether this approach allows parents to tell their story in their own words, the current research would argue that the questions contained within



the interview were necessary to ensure a richness of data. Results from the pilot study corroborate this, as parents found it difficult to provide in-depth answers to the more open-ended questions, and so additional questions were introduced to facilitate discussion (see Appendix 7). The methods used to triangulate the data obtained from the parent interviews could also be subject to criticism. Although the file trawl provided insight into the amount and intelligibility of professional communications contained within that particular department, as information was not held on all professionals working with the family, the data did not always augment the data obtained from the parent interviews.

Further limitations relating to the study's sample and the application of findings are contained within Table 15:

*Table 15: Limitations*

Limitation	Consideration
The current sample is not representative	<p>A specific sub-section of parents were targeted due to research that suggests that these parents are not always likely to play an active role in their child's education.</p> <p>The results of the study are therefore representative of this specific group of parents' experiences which affects the generalisability of results.</p> <p>All participants were female, and the experiences of single-parent Fathers were therefore not represented.</p>
The classification of parents as 'low social class'	<p>Parents were identified as being of low social class based on FSM index. It should be acknowledged that there are numerous ways in which parents' social class could be identified (for example, maternal level of education/income, annual income/benefits), and it is therefore possible that if different methods were used, the parents in the current sample may have fallen into different social class brackets. However, the same method was used to classify each participant thus</p>

	<p>ensuring consistency across the current sample.</p> <p>It is also important to note that informing parents that they had been classified on the basis of their social class could have led to issues relating to 'demand characteristics' and influenced the answers that they gave. However, for ethical reasons it was important that they were aware of how they had been 'classified' for the purpose of the research (Wolfendale 1999).</p>
Generalisability of findings	<p>The use of case study methodology presents limitations in terms of the generalisability of findings. Parents' experiences represented in the current study are representative of a small sub-section of parents (literal replication) and so emergent themes cannot confidently or straightforwardly be applied to the wider population.</p> <p>Although the aim of the study was not to draw general conclusions about parent experiences, the present study does provide a source of rich descriptions which illuminate the meaning of partnership working as it reveals itself through parents' lived experience of interactions with professionals.</p>

Despite these concerns, it should be emphasised that the use of case study methodology in its current application allowed participants to present their own perspective upon the phenomenon being studied which is a central aim of all qualitative research (Elliott et al, 2009). Admissions of subjectivity alluded to within this discussion may also serve to underplay the rigour that was applied to the process of analysis whereby the methodological interpretation of interviews was based upon 'a systematic, cyclical process of critical reflection and challenge of the interpreters own emerging interpretations' (Willig, 2008: 156) in an attempt to provide an accurate account of participants' lived experiences.

#### **4.4 Suggestions for future research**

In order to be able to make more general claims about parents' experiences of working with professionals, and the type of support that they value, the results of this exploratory study could be extended to other parent populations. Similar studies with different groups of parents might serve to enrich our understanding of parent-professional working, and add insight to our understanding regarding whether 'parent status' affects their interactions with professionals. It would be particularly interesting to explore the experiences of fathers, to see how their experiences of working with professionals may differ from the experiences of the mothers reported in the current study. It would also be interesting to explore whether social class or single-parent status directly affects parents' experiences of working with professionals. Although the current study engaged participants of a specific social class and marital status, the methodology employed (literal replication logic, Yin, 2009) did not allow for an exploration of whether or not these factors directly affected parent-professional working relationships. This could be explored through the use of case studies employing a 'theoretical replication logic' (Yin, 2009) which would enable the experiences of parents from different social classes and/or of differing marital status to be compared.

Future research might also usefully be directed towards testing the application of the 'parent-professional communication model' which was developed on the basis of the current research findings. This could be achieved through exploring the experiences of parents who had worked with professionals who had utilised this model to ascertain

whether it addressed any of the concerns relating to a lack of empathy and understanding that were identified by the parents in the current study. This framework for collaboration could also be compared to other more established models or parent-professional working (such as, for example, the negotiation model, Dale, 1996) to see if they lead to different parent experiences.

As parent-professional relationships represent a dynamic and evolving entity, it is likely that parent experiences of working with professionals on matters relating to their child's SEN will change over time. As reported in the current study, parents' experiences of working with professionals during the statutory assessment process varied from their other experiences, and it is also likely that parents' perceptions may change the longer they work with professionals, or as they attempt to come to terms with their child's SEN. Longitudinal research would therefore add to the emerging picture of how parent-professional partnership can be achieved over time.

## **5. Concluding Reflections**

A significant body of research has attempted to define the term partnership as it applies to professionals working with the parents of children with SEN, but to date, no definition has been accepted as definitive. Parents are far from a homogenous group, and differences between them mean that they are likely to experience support from professionals in different ways, and have varied ideas about how they would like to work with professionals. What 'partnership' means to those who are being studied is therefore an important question, but one that receives little attention within the literature. The current study has sought to address this by providing a rich and contextualised description of parent-professional partnership by exploring the experiences of three parent participants. This inductive approach to understanding parent-professional partnership differs from the dominant approach within the literature, which attempts to define and therefore understand partnership based on existing theory and research.

This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge regarding parent-professional working by providing an alternative perspective through which partnership working can be developed and understood. By placing parents 'centre stage' in the research process, the importance of professional interpersonal skills and their ability to empathise with the parents' position were highlighted as key components for effective partnership working. Within the extant literature, discussions have focused on how partnerships between professionals and parents of children with SEN can be made more equitable by addressing the division of power

within the relationship. Although discussions relating to power were prevalent within the current research, it offers an alternative perspective regarding how this imbalance can be addressed; as suggests that parents will begin to feel empowered if issues relating to communication and 'personal understanding' are addressed.

The results from the current study suggest that although the notion of partnership and arguments in favour of a closer, more equitable relationship between parents and professionals has been accepted in theory, there is still some way to go in terms of developing practice. In order for such partnerships to 'become more than just lofty ideals' (Hornby, 1994), the concept needs to be developed into formal models of parent-professional practice that can guide practice. The 'parent-professional communication model' offers one way of addressing this by providing a framework for professionals that can guide their interactions with parents, which acknowledges the importance of building trusting relationships.

In summary, the current research provides an alternative approach to researching parent-professional partnership, which emphasises the need to engage parents as active participants in the research process if we are to begin to understand how partnership working can be improved. It highlights the importance of employing research methodologies that support a 'giving voice' approach, that enable researchers to explore participants' lived experiences in a way that takes their account beyond the anecdotal.

## **References:**

- Alexander, L.B. & Dore, M.M. (1999). Making the parents as partners principle a reality: The role of the alliance. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 8 (3), 255 – 270.
- Appleton, P.L. & Minchom, P.E. (1991). 'Models of parent partnership and child development centres'. *Child: Care, Health and Development*, 17, 27 – 38.
- Ball, S.J. (2003). *Class Strategies and the Education Market: the Middle Classes and Social Advantage*. London: Routledge Falmer.
- Bastiani, J. (1993). Parents as partners: genuine progress or empty rhetoric? In P. Munn (Ed.) *Parents and Schools: Customers, Managers or Partners?* London: Routledge
- BERA (2004). *Revised ethical guidelines for educational research*. [www.bera.ac.uk/publications/guides.php](http://www.bera.ac.uk/publications/guides.php) Downloaded: 4th February 2008.
- Beveridge, S. (2005). *Children, Families and Schools: Developing Partnerships for Inclusive Education*. London: Routledge Falmer.
- Bird, C.M. (2005). How I stopped dreading and learned to love transcription. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 11, 226 – 48.
- Birkett, D. (2000). 'There was nothing on my list about this...' In P. Murray and J. Penman (Eds) *Telling Our Own Stories – Reflections on Family Life in a Disabling World*. Sheffield: Parents With Attitude.
- Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3, 77 – 101.

- Central Advisory Council for Education (1967) *Children and their Primary Schools* (The Plowden Report). London: HMSO.
- Carpenter, B. (1997). *Families in Context: Emerging Trends in Family Support and Early Intervention*. London: David Fulton Publishers.
- Carpenter, B. (2003). Shifting the focus: from parent to family partnerships. *Special Education Perspectives*, 12 (1), 3 – 16.
- Case, S. (2000). Learning to partner, disabling conflict: early indications of an improving relationship between parents and professionals with regard to service provision for children with learning disabilities, *Disability and Society*, 16 (6), 837 – 854.
- Cohen, L., Manion, L. & Morrison, K. (2007). *Research Methods in Education* (6<sup>th</sup> Edition). London: Routledge.
- Crozier, G. (1999). Parental involvement: who wants it? *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 9 (3), 219 – 238
- Children's Workforce Development Council. *Educational Psychology Handbook* (2009) Downloaded from: <http://www.cwdcouncil.org.uk/educational-psychology> November 2009.
- Cunningham, C. & Davis, H. (1985). *Working with Parents: Frameworks for Collaboration*. Buckingham: Open University Press
- Dale, N. (1996). *Working with Families of Children with Special Needs*. London; Routledge.



- Desforges, C & Abouchaar, A. (2003). *The Impact of Parental Involvement, Parental Support and Family Education on Pupil Achievement and Adjustment: a literature review*. (Research Report 433). London: DfES.
- Department for Children, Schools and Families (2010). *Lamb Inquiry: Special Educational Needs and Parental Confidence*. London: DCSF.
- Department for Education and Skills (2001). *Special Educational Needs Code of Practice*. London: DfES.
- Department for Education and Skills (2002). *Special Educational Needs and Disability Act*. London: DfES.
- Department for Education and Skills (2003). *Together from the Start – Practical Guidance for Professionals Working with Disabled Children (birth to third birthday) and their Families*. London: DfES.
- Department for Education and Skills (2004). *Removing Barriers to Achievement: The Government's Strategy for SEN*. London: DfES.
- Elliott, R., Fischer, C., & Rennie, D (2009). Evolving guidelines for publication of qualitative research studies in psychology and related fields. *British Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 38, 215 – 229.
- Ely, M., Anzul, M., Friedman, T., Garner,, D. and McCormack Steinmetz, A. (1991). *Doing Qualitative Research: Circles within Circles*, London: The Falmer Group.
- Evans, J. & Vincent, C. (1997). Parental choice and special education. In R. Glatter, P. Woods and C. Bagley (Eds). *Choice and Diversity in Schooling*. London: Routledge.

- Frederickson, N., Dunsmuir, S., Lang, J., and Monsen, J. (2004). Mainstream-special school inclusion partnerships: Pupil, parent and teacher perspectives. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 8, 37 – 57.
- Frith, H. & Gleeson, K. (2004). Clothing and embodiment: men managing body image and appearance. *Psychology of Men and Masculinity*, 5, 40 – 48.
- Fyelling, I. & Sandvin, J.T. (1999). The role of parents in special education: the notion of partnership revised. *European Journal of Special Educational Needs*, 14 (2), 144 – 157.
- Gadamer, H.G. (1975). *Truth and Method*. London: Sheed & Ward.
- Gascoigne, E. (1995). *Working with Parents as Partners in SEN: Home and School a Working Alliance*. London: David Fulton Publishers
- Geertz, C. (1973). *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books.
- Giddens, A. (1987). *Social Theory and Modern Sociology*. Cambridge; Polity Press
- Hallgarten, J. (2000). *Home-school link workers: a case for expansion?* Paper presented to a DfES discussion group. (London: DfES).
- Herriott, R.E. & Firestone, W.A. (1983). Multisite qualitative policy research: Optimizing description and generalisability. *Educational Researcher*, 12, 14 – 19.
- Hornby, G. (1995). *Working with Parents of Children with Special Needs*. London: Cassell.
- Jordan, B., Redley, M. & James, S. (1994). *Putting the Family First: Identities, Decisions, Citizenship*. London: UCL Press.

Jupp, S. (1992). *Making the Right Start*. Hyde: Opened Eye.

Keen, D. (2007). Parents, families and partnerships: issues and considerations. *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education*, 54 (3), 339 – 349

Kohl, G.O., Lengua, L.J., & MacMahon, R.J. (2000). Parent involvement in school: Conceptualising multiple dimensions and their relations with family and demographic risk factors. *Journal of School Psychology*, 38 (6), 501 – 523.

Lake, J.F. & Billingsley, B.S. (2000). An analysis of factors that contribute to parent-school conflict in special education. *Remedial and Special Education*, 21 (4), 240 – 251.

MacPherson, A. (1993). Parent-professional partnership: a review and discussion of issues. *Early Childhood Development and Care*, 86, 61 – 67.

Mason, M. (1995). Breaking of relationships. *Present Time*, 13, 3 – 7.

Merton, R.K., Fiske, M., & Kendall, P.L. (1990). *The Focused Interview: A Manual of Problems and Procedures*. New York: Free Press.

Metso, P. (2004). *Home, School and Education: Encounters and Boundaries*. Helsinki: Finnish Educational Research Association.

Miles, M. & Huberman, M. (1994). *Qualitative Data Analysis* (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition). Beverly Hills CA: Sage.

Mittler, P. & Mittler, H. (1982). Partnership with parents: an overview. In P. Mittler and H. McConachie (Eds) *Parents, Professionals and Mentally Handicapped People: Approaches to Partnership*. Beckenham: Croom Helm.

- Moore, J. (2005) 'Recognising and questioning the epistemological basis of educational psychology practice', *Educational Psychology in Practice*, 21(2), 103 – 116
- Murray, P. (2000). Disabled children, parents and professionals: partnership on whose terms? *Disability and Society*, 15 (4), 683 - 698.
- Nechyba, T., McEwan, P., & Older-Aguilar, D. (1999). *The impact of family and community resource on student outcomes: An assessment of the international literature with implications for New Zealand*. Available from: [http://www.minedu.govt.nz/web/document/document\\_page.cfm?id=5593&p=58](http://www.minedu.govt.nz/web/document/document_page.cfm?id=5593&p=58) (Accessed 7<sup>th</sup> June 2009)
- O'Connor, U. (2008). Meeting in the middle? A study of parent-professional partnerships. *European Journal of Special Educational Needs*, 23 (3), 253 – 268.
- Oliver, M. & Barnes, C. (1998). *Disabled People and Social Policy: from exclusion to inclusion*. Harlow: Longman.
- Oppenheim, A.N. (1992). *Questionnaire Design, Interviewing and Attitude Measurement*. London: Pinter.
- Parker (2004). Criteria for qualitative research in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 1, 95 – 106.
- Patton, M.Q. (2002). *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods* (3<sup>rd</sup> Edition) Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Peck, D. (2002). What's the problem? A guide to running a problem-solving workshop for parents/carers. *Support for Learning*, 17 (1), 39 – 43.
- Pring, R. (2000). *Philosophy of Educational Research*. London: Continuum.

- Randall, P., & Parker, J. (1999). *Supporting the Families of Children with Autism*. Chichester: John Wiley.
- Reay, D. (1998). *Class Work: Mothers' Involvement in their Children's Primary Schooling*. London: University College Press.
- Reay, D. (2005). Mothers' involvement in their children's schooling: social reproduction in action? In G. Crozier and D. Reay (Eds.) *Activating Participation: Parents and Teachers working in Partnership*. Stoke on Trent: Trentham Books.
- Robson, C. (2002). *Real World Research* (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition). Oxford: Blackwell Publishers
- Rubin, H.J., & Rubin, I.S. (1995). *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data*. Thousand Oaks CA: Sage.
- Scott, D. & Usher, R. (1996). *Understanding Education Research*. London: Routledge.
- Stake, R. (1998). Case studies. In N. Denzin and Y. Lincoln (Eds) *Strategies of Qualitative Inquiry*. London: Sage.
- Todd, E. & Higgins, S. (1998). Powerlessness in professional and parent partnerships. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 19, 227 – 236.
- Vincent, C. (1996). *Parents and Teachers: Power and Participation*. London: Falmer.
- Vincent, C. (2000). *Including Parents: Education, Citizenship and Parental Agency*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Warnock, M. (1978). *Special Educational Needs – Report of the Committee of Enquiry into the Education of Handicapped Children and Young People*. London: HMSO.

- Willig, C. (2008). *Introducing Qualitative Research in Psychology* (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition). Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Wills, R. (1994). It is time to stop. In K. Ballard (Ed.). *Disability, Family, Whanau and Society*. Palmerston North, NZ: Dunmore Press.
- Wolfendale, S. (1983). *Parental Participation in Children's Development and Education*. London: Gordon & Breach.
- Wolfendale, S. (1992). *Empowering Parents and Teachers: working for children*. New York: Cassell
- Wolfendale, S. (1995). *Creating and Valuing a Partnership with Parents in Assessment during the Early Years*. London: David Fulton Publishers.
- Yin, R.K. (2009). *Case Study Research: Design and Methods* (Fourth Edition). London: Sage.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS**

## **CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS**

This final chapter comprises my concluding reflections relating to the research study, which were unable to be accommodated within Chapter Three of this Volume of research. The Chapter begins with reflections regarding the choice of research methodology, and goes on to consider how the research has made an original contribution to knowledge and theory development.

### **1. Reflections on research methodology**

The small-scale research study presented in Chapter 3 used case study methodology as a means of exploring parents' experiences of working with professionals on matters to do with their child's special educational needs (SEN). This methodology was chosen due to its ability to obtain a 'thick description' of participants' lived experiences and their thoughts and feelings about a particular phenomenon (Geertz, 1973; Yin, 2009). In the absence of research studies within the extant literature that give eminence to first-hand parent experiences of partnership working, case study methodology allowed this 'gap' in the literature to be addressed.

Case study methodology aligns itself with the epistemological assumptions of an interpretive paradigm, whereby knowledge and reality are represented through the perceptions of the people who experience it (Scott & Usher, 1996). From this



perspective, the parents' experiences were seen to be representative of the truth as they perceive it. The main challenges that this presents for case study research, therefore relate to the potential difficulties in reporting participants' views in a way that is accurate and truly reflects their experiences. Although this was controlled for in a number of ways, it is likely that my own interpretive framework and views regarding the phenomenon being studied influenced the way in which results were analysed and reported at a subconscious level. Although 'thematic analysis' is said to allow the data to speak for itself (Braun & Clarke, 2006), the analytic process involves a progression from 'description' to 'interpretation' which means that the researcher may bring their own interpretation to the results. Where parents presented views that were somewhat ambiguous, my interpretation (as researcher) was shared back to ensure that I had accurately understood their experiences. This stage of analysis was crucial, as on one occasion helped to identify an area of their experience that I had misinterpreted. Parents had spoken about times where they wanted professionals to hold the power, and take responsibility for making important decisions relating to their child. This was initially taken as an example of parents not always wanting to feel empowered, but on reporting this analysis back to the parents they were able to tell me that this was an inaccurate interpretation.

Despite these concerns relating to the interpretation of data, the use of case study methodology in its current application was seen to represent a systematic means of exploring a phenomenon in a real life context that was able to illuminate and deepen our understanding of the given phenomenon (Stake, 1998; Yin, 2009). Through obtaining 'multiple sources of evidence' (Yin, 2009), information was also able to be

collected that corroborated aspects of the parents' experiences thus addressing issues relating to construct validity, as multiple measures of the same phenomenon were explored. Taking all of these points into consideration, for the current study, the use of case study methodology allowed me, as the researcher to adopt a robust and systematic approach to research that took parent experiences above a merely anecdotal account. It offered a non-evasive and transparent approach to exploring parents' experiences, and allowed for consideration regarding the ways in which their experiences could be improved.

## **2. Original Contribution to Knowledge and Theory Development**

This research study offers an original contribution to knowledge and theory development in the field of parent-professional collaboration. Within the extant literature, there is a near absence of studies exploring parent-professional collaboration that place parent voice at the centre of the research. The research study reported in Chapter 3 has sought to address this, by directly exploring parents' experiences of working with professionals to ascertain how this can contribute to our existing knowledge and to establish what parent's value from their interactions with professionals.

The approach to research adopted within this study highlights the importance of engaging parents as active participants in the research, as although the results of the current study were in some ways comparable to those found within the literature; they also offer a new perspective on working with parents. This is most apparent

through the emphasis that the current study places on the interpersonal skills of the professional. Although numerous studies within the literature emphasise the emotions that parents experience when they discover that their child has special educational needs, what this means for the professional working with the family is rarely articulated. The 'parent-professional communication' model offers a solution to this, by providing a framework for collaboration that places professional interpersonal skills and the ability to show genuine empathy at the first step in establishing partnership with parents. This varies from existing models of parent-professional collaboration which tend to focus on how much knowledge professionals impart, and how professionals can empower parents. Although empowerment is also a key theme within the parent-professional communication model, it is established by making parents feel understood and listened to, rather than through imparting professional knowledge. The model was also developed as a direct result of parent experiences, drawing a further distinction between existing models which were developed from a purely theoretical perspective. From this perspective, the model represents what parents want, rather than what professionals think that they want.

### **3. Reflections on the contribution of the study to my practice as an Educational Psychologist**

This research study provides an approach for Educational Psychologists to adopt when working with the parents of children with SEN that takes into consideration parental feelings and experiences and considers every parent as unique. From my perspective as a Trainee Educational Psychologist nearing the end of my training, it

has highlighted the importance of treating parents as individuals and listening to their experiences as a means of determining how best to support them. Much discussion within the psychology service that I work has centred on how parents can be treated as equal partners in their interactions with professionals. The findings from the current study suggest that although according parents an equal status within their professional relationships is important, a preoccupation with establishing equality can mean that we can sometimes fail to understand what it is that parent's value. There are times when parents may want professionals to assume the role of expert, but what is important is that they are empowered to make this decision and to be able to speak out regarding their child's needs.

By interviewing Educational Psychologists and asking them to comment on the views presented within the parent interviews, the importance of asking EPs to reflect on their work with parents was also brought to the forefront of discussion. Although all EPs working within our service pride themselves on being both parent and child centred, it would appear that there are elements of our practice that we find difficult. When commenting on one parent's view that she did not understand what professionals were telling her, the EP shared that she could appreciate this parent's viewpoint and that as a professional, she found it genuinely difficult to communicate psychological knowledge and problem formulation in a way that was accessible to parents, without appearing condescending. These concerns were able to be shared with the Principal Educational Psychologist within in our service, and as a result 'reflecting on our work with vulnerable parents' is now part of EPs monthly supervision. At a systemic level, the outcomes of this research have also

encouraged 'heads of service' within my employing local authority to consider the message that they give to professionals regarding their work with parents of children with SEN and the model of practice that they advocate. Guidance documentation is currently being produced.

#### **4. Impact of the research on the participants**

Finally, it is important to spend time reflecting on how the research impacted on the parents who participated. The ethical issues relating to engaging parents in discussion regarding potentially sensitive issues were identified in Appendix 4, and I remained mindful of these issues throughout the research process. All participants were made aware that they could contact me at any point during the research process, and the content of the interview raised questions for one parent and she therefore contacted me regarding this. This parent was concerned that she had in some way failed her child by not challenging what the professionals had told her. Her child had attended a particular school following the advice of a professional, and she had found it difficult to accept that this was the right educational environment for her. This parent valued being able to talk about this, and through listening to her concerns and asking questions she was able to process her experience in a way that enabled her to make better sense of it. I was also able to signpost this parent to support services within her area (for example parent partnership) as she shared with me that she often felt 'alone' when it came to supporting her child.

The remaining two parents did not contact me directly to talk about their experiences, but when I fed the results of the study back to them, they both said that they had found it really useful to talk about and reflect on their experiences. One parent in particular also felt pleased to have been able to contribute to the study, as she felt that it would benefit parents in a similar position to herself, by making professionals more understanding of parent's needs. This has implications for the way in which parental feedback is sought. Within my employing local authority, there are no clear procedures in place for parents to feedback regarding their experience of working with professionals and this is therefore something that needs to be addressed.

### **References:**

- Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3, 77 – 101.
- Geertz, C. (1973). *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books.
- Scott, D. & Usher, R. (1996). *Understanding Education Research*. London: Routledge.
- Stake, R. (1998). Case studies. In N. Denzin and Y. Lincoln (Eds) *Strategies of Qualitative Inquiry*. London: Sage.
- Yin, R.K. (2009). *Case Study Research: Design and Methods* (Fourth Edition). London: Sage.

**APPENDIX 1: Script used to inform potential participants of why single-parent status and socio-economic status were used as part of the selection criteria**

As you are aware, you have been selected to take part in this research on the basis of the following:

- you have a child with special educational needs
- your child has undergone the statutory assessment process in the last 12 months
- you are a single parent and;
- you are identified as falling within a low-socio economic status bracket as indicated by your child's eligibility for free school meals.

The research is directly concerned with your experiences as a parent of a child with Special Educational Needs. The other criteria for selection were included as there is a body of research that suggests that single-parents and parents of a certain social class show lower levels of parental involvement than other parents. Although this will not be explored directly within the current study, I felt that it would be beneficial to target my research towards these parents to explore their experiences and to see how their interactions with professionals might be improved.

## **APPENDIX 2: Outline of study provided to Educational Psychologists in relation to participant selection criteria**

I am looking to carry out a study exploring the experiences of parents in working with professionals on matters relating to their child's special educational needs. Although progress towards parent-professional cooperation can be said to be increasing, there remains a core group of parents whose voices remain unheard. Existing research suggests that a power imbalance often exists when parents work with professionals, with the latter assuming the role of expert. Research has focused on how partnership with parents can be achieved at a conceptual level, but what this looks like in practice still remains unknown.

I am therefore looking for parents to participate in the research that meet the following criteria:

- Their child has undergone statutory assessment in the past 12 months;
- They are of single parent-status and;
- They are of 'low' socio-economic status

I understand that the final criterion relating to socio-economic status is not easily identified, so I am looking for your cooperation in helping me to identify parents who might meet the first two criteria. Could you think of any parents who meet these criteria, and let me know numbers? For ethical reasons, I do not want to have their names at this stage.

Once I have established numbers, I will be asking EPs to contact parents to provide them with a brief outline of the research, and to seek their consent for me to contact them directly. I will then contact them directly to explain the research in greater detail, and to explain that one of the factors that I will be exploring is socio-economic status. I will seek their permission to look up their status using the IDACI database and ask whether they would be willing to take part in the study should their socio-economic status match the criteria. If there are more participants than needed, they will be selected at random. They will be informed of this at the initial stages.

If any parents are selected for whom you are the link EP (or wrote their psychological advice), I will also be requesting your involvement in the study. As I am using case study methodology, it is important that I triangulate the data obtained from the parent interviews. I would therefore be asking you to participate in a short semi-structured interview where you would be asked to comment on some of the themes that had emerged from the parent interviews. If for any reason you do not wish to take part in this should any of your parents be selected to participate, then please can you make me aware of this at the earliest stage possible.

Thanks in advance for your cooperation

**Ellie McNab (Trainee Educational Psychologist)**



### **APPENDIX 3: Script used to outline research to the selected participants and to gain informed consent**

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this research. I know that I have already spoken to you about the nature of the research, but wanted to provide you with a more in-depth overview just in case you have any questions etc.

I am looking to explore parent experiences of working with professionals. This can be any professional that you have worked with in relation to your child's special educational needs, so can include teachers, doctors, Educational Psychologists and many more. As you are aware, I am currently a Trainee EP, and this research is part of my training (at the University of Birmingham) to become a qualified EP. There are no right or wrong answers, and I have not attempted to guess what you might say, I am purely interested in your experiences. I have been reading up on parent-professional working, and there are some ways in which my reading has influenced the design of this research. As you are aware, I have selected people to take part in the research who are single-parents and of a particular socio-economic status (explain what status and why). This is because the research suggests that parents from these groups are sometimes less likely to play an active role in their child's education than others. This is not to say that this is true, and I will not be exploring this directly, but wanted to focus my research on a particular group of parents.

One of the reasons for carrying out this research stemmed from a concern within the team that I work, that a number of parents often felt that their views were not acted upon in relation to their child. This is not to say that this will be your experience, but this is where the initial idea stemmed from. I also want to consider the ways that partnership working between parents and professionals can be improved which is a further reason for carrying out this research.

I have constructed a list of 13 interview questions that I will use as a guide when I am talking to you. As I said, there are no right or wrong answers, and if you are unable to answer any of them, or do not feel comfortable to answer any of them then this is fine.

I will be interviewing three parents as part of the research, and will also be speaking to the Educational Psychologist that you worked with to ascertain their views. I will provide you with a copy of the questions that I will ask them once they have been generated. These questions will be following up on themes that emerged across the interviews, but no specific information relating to your individual interview will be

used. I will also be requesting access to your child's SEN file that we hold at the EDC. This contains details of all EP and Advisory teacher involvement, as well as any other professional involvement that we are made aware of this. As I am not the link EP for your child's school, I would like to seek your permission to access this? (This will be obtained on a consent form) It will be used to look at the nature of professional contact, and again, no information that enables you or your child to be identified will be used within the research. Although I have not refined my plans at this point, I think that I will just be looking at the amount and type of professional contact.

Once the interviews have been completed I will be writing up the research as part of my university requirements. I will feedback the results to you before this time to check that you are happy with what I have written and so you are aware of what the outcomes were. This can be feedback to you in any way you like. The research will also be shared with my EP team as it is hoped that it will inform us of how we might be able to improve our practice.

- At no point in the research will you be identified by name, or will any information be stored against your name
- I will be aware that you have participated in the research, as will your link Educational Psychologist, but other than this you will remain anonymous
- Everything that you talk about within the interview will remain confidential except for reasons outlined (see confidentiality script, Appendix 10)
- Your consent in this is entirely voluntary, so if at any point you wish to withdraw from the research then it is your right to do so. You are also reminded that you can ask for your data to be removed from the study at any point.
- Should the interviews raise any concerns etc regarding your interactions with professionals or the support that your child has received, then support will be made available to you to follow up any of these issues
- I will leave you with my contact details. Please feel free to contact me at any point during the research process should you have any questions, concerns or worries.
- All interviews will be tape recorded, but the recordings will be kept in a safe place and destroyed once they have been transcribed
- I will be carrying out all of the transcriptions to ensure that no one else has access to the data

Do you have any questions?

Ellie McNab

**Trainee Educational Psychologist**

## APPENDIX 4: EC2 Ethics form submitted to University of Birmingham

### **Form EC2 for POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH (PGR) STUDENTS**

#### **MPhilA, MPhilB, MPhil/PhD, EdD, PhD IS**

This form MUST be completed by ALL students studying for postgraduate research degrees and can be included as part of the thesis even in cases where no formal submission is made to the Ethics Committee. Supervisors are also responsible for checking and conforming to the ethical guidelines and frameworks of other societies, bodies or agencies that may be relevant to the student's work.

#### **Tracking the Form**

- I. Part A completed by the student
- II. Part B completed by the supervisor
- III. Supervisor refers proposal to Ethics Committee if necessary (via Julie Foster, the Ethics Committee Administrator)**
- IV. Supervisor keeps a copy of the form and send the original to the Student Research Office, School of Education
- V. Student Research Office – form signed by Management Team, original kept in student file.

#### **Part A: to be completed by the STUDENT**

NAME: **Eleanor McNab**

COURSE OF STUDY (MPhil; PhD; EdD etc):

**Applied Doctorate in Educational and Child Psychology**

POSTAL ADDRESS FOR REPLY:

[REDACTED]

CONTACT TELEPHONE NUMBER: [REDACTED]

EMAIL ADDRESS: [REDACTED]

DATE: **August 2009**

NAME OF SUPERVISOR: **Dr. Jane Yeomans**

PROPOSED PROJECT TITLE:

**Models of Parent-Professional working: What do the parents of children with special educational needs value from their interactions with professionals?**

BRIEF OUTLINE OF PROJECT: (100-250 words; this may be attached separately)

This research project will use case study methodology to explore parent experiences of working with professionals on matters relating to their child's special educational needs. Existing research suggests that a power imbalance can often exist when parents work with professionals, with the latter assuming the role of the expert with parents often left feeling powerless. Numerous government led initiatives have been introduced to try and give parents a voice, and make this relationship more equitable, but the extent to which these initiatives have been successful is questionable. This research will therefore explore parent experiences of working with professionals, and determine what they value from their interactions, and what they do not value. This will then be used to make recommendations regarding the way in which professional practice can be altered and refined to make parent experiences of working with professionals more positive.

**MAIN ETHICAL CONSIDERATION(S) OF THE PROJECT** (e.g. working with vulnerable adults; children with disabilities; photographs of participants; material that could give offence etc):

The main ethical considerations of this project will arise from talking to potentially vulnerable parents about their child's special educational needs, and the support that they have received (both past and present) from professionals. This has the potential to raise issues and concerns that may not have previously been considered, and to make the parents question the support that they have received in the past. This could evoke anger or upset for some parents, especially if talking about past interactions which happened too long ago to rectify.

It is possible that some of the parents participating in the research will not previously have been aware of their rights within the SEN process, or the potential support available to them, and that their understanding regarding this may become clearer after taking part in the research. Again, this will need to be considered carefully and followed up to ensure that they have access to the necessary support and guidance.

Talking to parents about their child's special educational needs (SEN) is undoubtedly a sensitive subject, and consideration will therefore also need to be given to how this is approached. For those parents that feel that they have had positive experiences in terms of the help that they have received for their child's SEN, it will also be important

to ensure that the content of the semi-structured interviews does not alter this perception. It will also be important to ensure that professionals are not referred to by name during all stages of the research.

RESEARCH FUNDING AGENCY (if any): Not Applicable

DURATION OF PROPOSED PROJECT (please provide dates as month/year):

**December 2009 – March 2010**

DATE YOU WISH TO START DATA COLLECTION:

**February 2010**

**Please provide details on the following aspects of the research [note that, if completing this electronically, the form will expand as text is typed; use as much space as you need]:**

**1. What are your intended methods of recruitment, data collection and analysis? [see note 1]**

Please outline (in 100-250 words) the intended methods for your project and give what detail you can. However, it is not expected that you will be able to answer fully these questions at the proposal stage.

**Recruitment:**

This research is commissioned by the Local Authority/Educational Psychology Service in which I currently work as a Trainee Educational Psychologist (TEP). The EPS were made aware from the outset that in taking on a TEP there would need to be a commitment to supporting them with their Doctoral research. The focus of the research was therefore decided upon in negotiation with the Principal Educational Psychologist. All Educational Psychologists within the service were made aware of the proposed research area during an early briefing shortly after I started working within the service (September 2008) and all agreed that they would be happy to take part/support the research. Within the EP service, Educational Psychologists are assigned 20% of their time for project work, which has a research and development focus. The service therefore has a policy relating to work of this nature, whereby the exchange of information between EPs as the preliminary means of identifying possible research participants is part of the service culture/expectations.

I therefore plan to ask Educational Psychologists (EPs) working within my service to identify families that they are working with to take part in the research. These should be families that they have worked with in the past 12 months, with which the EP has not had a high level of involvement (as this may bias the sample). EPs have been informed of my research during a service meeting (July 2009), and were asked to consider potential families over the summer. They were provided with a brief criteria to help them to identify possible participants, linked with the findings of my literature review which highlighted certain 'groups' of parents as being less likely to have positive relationships with professionals. Once identified, the EP will speak to them to give them a brief outline of my research to see if they are happy to talk to me. If they are, I will then contact them by phone in the first instance to offer a more detailed explanation of what would be required. If more parents offer to take part than is required by the research, then they will be selected at random. However, parents will be informed of this at the outset so it will not come as a surprise to them if they are not selected.

**Data Collection:** The research will use case study methodology, where semi-structured interviews will be the main method of data collection. The emphasis is on 'parent voice' and obtaining their experiences of working with professionals, and so the questions will be used more as a prompt if discussion becomes stilted. Questions

will all be open ended, and will allow parents to relay their experiences in their own words. All interviews will be conducted face to face and will either take place within their home or a location of their choice (e.g. children's centre, Educational Psychology Service, school). As recommended in the case study methodology, data will also be triangulated by completing a file trawl (of their child's EPS file) to determine the quantity and nature of professional contact, and a semi-structured interview schedule will also be used with the Educational Psychologist who most recently worked with the family. Access will only be gained to the files of the identified children/young people whose parents are participating in the research. All files are stored within the host EP service so access will be gained through these means once written permission has been obtained from the parents to ensure that they have consented to me viewing their child's file. This level of consent will be essential, as within the focus EP service, parental consent (in terms of access to files) is only obtained for the individual EP working with the child at that time.

**Analysis:** Thematic Analysis will be used to analyse the data.

**2. How will you make sure that all participants understand the process in which they are to be engaged and that they provide their voluntary and informed consent? If the study involves working with children or other vulnerable groups, how have you considered their rights and protection? [see note 2]**

A clear and explicit outline of the project will be given to potential participants at the outset which ensures that they are aware of the purpose of the research, who the results will be shared with, and their right to withdraw. This will be provided both in written form, and explained verbally to account for any literacy difficulties etc. The nature of the research and their role within it will be explained when the parents are first contacted by their link EP (using a script provided), and more thoroughly once their initial consent has been sought, to ascertain that they are still happy to take part in the study.

Before consent is obtained, it is essential that all potential participants are aware of the research objectives, so that they are aware of why the research is taking place, and what the outcomes of the research are likely to be. In this case, parents will be told that the research is exploratory, and is interested in obtaining parents' views of working with professionals on matters relating to their child's SEN. The results will be used to explore what models of parent professional-working appear to be used, and how close these models are to what parents would like. This will then be used to make recommendations regarding how this type of relationship could be made more equitable.

Parents will be told that should they choose to participate in the research they will remain anonymous at all stages, and no information will be contained within the research that enables them or anyone that they refer to, to be identified in any way (please refer to section 4). At this early stage of recruitment, a thorough explanation will also be given in relation to confidentiality to ensure that they fully understand how

the information they share will be used and who will have access to it (see sections 4 & 9). They will be reminded of their right to withdraw at any time during the research, and their right to request that their data be removed from the study should they no longer wish to take part. Importantly, they will also be reminded that their involvement is entirely voluntary. Parents will be told that they are able to bring a friend, or family member along to the interviews with them, who can also act as an advocate if needed. If parents do feel that this is something that they would like to do, the advocate will need to agree that what is said in the interview should remain confidential and should therefore not be shared with anyone else. Once all of this has been explained, participants will be asked to sign a consent form to confirm that they have understood the nature of the research, and that they are happy to take part. If they choose to have someone present within the interviews, it will also be necessary for the advocate to countersign the parents consent form to show that they have understood issues relating to confidentiality and that they agree that the information that they hear will not be shared with any other party.

### **3. How will you make sure that participants clearly understand their right to withdraw from the study?**

This will be explained to all participants both at the initial recruitment stage, and once they have agreed to take part in the research. This will be explained verbally in the first instance, and they will be then asked to sign a consent form that again reminds them of their right to withdraw from the study at any point they wish. For those participants that might have difficulties accessing written print, they will have the chance to take the form home to get a friend or family member to look over before signing. They will also be reminded that they are able to bring an advocate along to ask any questions etc.

### **4. Please describe how you will ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of participants. Where this is not guaranteed, please justify your approach. [see note 3]**

The data obtained from the interviews will not be stored against the participants' names at any stage of the research. Interviews will be recorded (consent will be obtained separately for this) and transcribed, but any information given that enables the participants to be identified in any way will be anonymised, and deleted where necessary.

The issue of confidentiality and what it means for the participants in the current study will be explained in full. Participants will be reminded that anything that they talk about during the research process will remain confidential, unless they share something that makes me feel that they (or those around them) are at risk of harm. If such information is revealed, I will inform participants that they have told me something that worries me, and that I will be sharing the information with my research supervisor to seek advice regarding what to do next. A script will be used to ensure that 'confidentiality' is explained to all participants in the same way.



*'Everything that we talk about for the duration of the research project will remain confidential. This means that although other people will hear and have access to what we have spoken about, they will not know that these views belong to you, or that you have taken part in the research.'*

*All interviews will be transcribed (typed up), and any features that enable you to be identified will be anonymised or removed. Your views will be respected throughout the course of the interview, but if at any point you share with me something that suggests that you or those around you might be at risk of harm, then it is my duty of care to share this information with my placement supervisor, and seek further advice. If this occurs, I will inform you of this immediately.*

*If at any point during the interview, or throughout the course of the research you decide that you no longer wish to take part, or that you do not want your interview transcript to be used as part of the study, then your data will be removed, and you will no longer be required to participate.'*

Parents will have access to this script and will also be given a copy to take away with them. Parents will also be made aware that they can have access to the transcript that is produced from their interview as soon as it has been produced.

#### **5. Describe any possible detrimental effects of the study and your strategies for dealing with them. [see note 4]**

Due to the nature of the research, parents will be asked to reflect on experiences that are potentially sensitive. This could cause upset for some parents or make them feel that they did not have access to the best support available. As many parents will be talking retrospectively about their past experiences, it will be difficult to rectify any 'let down' or frustration that they might feel when reflecting on their experiences. To help prevent this from becoming an issue, I will ensure that I am mindful of this at all times, and that I do not ask questions or pass comment that will intentionally alter participants' perceptions. If questions do raise issues for participants, then I will ensure that I am available to talk through any of these issues, and offer support and guidance. I will also ensure that I am able to signpost participants to agencies such as 'parent partnership' if they feel that this will help. It is possible that the interview process could raise questions for participants after the data collection phase is complete, and so all participants will be given my contact details should they wish to contact me at any time.

Any detrimental effects that do occur during the research will immediately be brought to the attention of my research supervisor, or relevant others such as my placement supervisor or Senior Educational Psychologist within the service that I work (para. 21, BERA Revised Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research, 2004). I have read and fully understood paragraphs 14 – 19 of the BERA Ethical Framework (ibid), and all conditions outlined in the framework will be adhered to.

## **6. How will you ensure the safe and appropriate storage and handling of data?**

All interviews will be recorded on audiotape with the participants consent and transcribed personally to ensure that only I have access to the data in its raw form. I will not ask the EPS employer's administration team (Walsall Children's Services) to do the transcriptions because there is a possibility that some of the voices may be recognisable, and this would compromise anonymity. The interviews will be stored in a secure location as MP3 files on my PC, and will only be accessed by me. All written transcripts will also be stored electronically and will be password protected. The names of the participants will not be stored anywhere on the computer, or associated with the data in any way. It is likely that as the parents are known to the Educational Psychology Service, their details will be on our database, but there will be no way of knowing that they participated in the research.

Where interviews take place away from the site in which the data will be secured, extra care will be taken to ensure that the audiotapes are returned to the office and transferred to the computer as soon as possible (the interviewer will ensure that they do not carry out school visits with the tape on their person, or leave it in places where it could potentially be stolen, e.g. in a car).

Any paperwork, including consent forms will be stored in a lever arch file, and will be locked away in a secure filing cabinet to which I am the only key-holder. Where possible, all recording will be done electronically to avoid extraneous paperwork. Where data is stored, standards outlined in the Data Protection Act (1998) will be adhered to, and the data will only be used for the purpose for which it was originally intended

## **7. If during the course of the research you are made aware of harmful or illegal behaviour, how do you intend to handle disclosure or nondisclosure of such information? [see note 5]**

When seeking informed consent, participants will have been made aware that should they disclose any information that suggests harmful or illegal behaviour then this will not remain confidential. Participants will have been told that should this arise, I will seek the advice of my supervisor in the first instance, who will then advise me of the steps that I will need to take. As a Trainee Educational Psychologist, I am also governed by the British Psychological Society Code of Practice (BPS), and this also offers guidance regarding how to approach such situations from a professional standpoint.

Decisions to override confidentiality will not be taken lightly and will be carefully considered. Prior to starting my data collection, I will discuss with my research supervisor the types of harmful/illegal behaviour that I feel will need to be disclosed, and this will be used to help me to make any decisions. If information is shared with me that I am concerned about but does not clearly constitute 'harmful or illegal behaviour', then I will seek supervision but will not mention the participants' name, or

any other identifying features to ensure that their anonymity is not compromised unnecessarily. As my research is linked to my host Educational Psychology Service, I have also talked to my placement supervisor to clarify how this information will need to be reported to the service. This will enable me to share any concerning information immediately with an identified person. It was agreed that should any of the above arise, then this information should be shared with either the Senior or Principal Educational Psychologist.

Where confidentiality is compromised, I will keep contemporaneous notes outlining the basis on which any decisions were made, and the steps that I followed. I will also inform the participant when they share with me something that I feel I need to follow up, and explain my reasons for this.

**8. If the research design demands some degree of subterfuge or undisclosed research activity, how have you justified this and how and when will this be discussed with participants?**

The research design does not contain any undisclosed research activity. Participants will be made aware of the research aims and objectives from the outset, and any questions they may have will be answered honestly and openly.

**9. How do you intend to disseminate your research findings to participants?**

Once the interviews have been transcribed and the data analysis has taken place, I will arrange to go and visit all participants individually to share my findings. This will take place before the public briefing document is written so that any objections or concerns can be taken into consideration and acted upon. After I have shared the research findings with them, I will also make myself available at a later date should they wish to discuss anything that I have shared once they have had a chance to process it.

Participants will also be given a copy of the written public domain briefing paper detailing the research and its outcomes.

## APPENDIX 5: Pilot Study: Details of how the data collection plans were refined

The pilot study enabled the data collection methods and procedures to be tested before starting the research. As a result, both the structure and the ordering of the interview questions were altered.

As a result of the pilot study, the following amendments were made:

- Additional questions were added to be used as prompts to some of the broader questions. This was due to the parent in the pilot study finding it difficult to talk at length about her experiences without this level of prompt;
- Interview questions were grouped under each research question, to give structure to the data analysis. this allowed for the exploration of their *actual* experiences, their *'ideal'* interactions and what could be done to improve partnership working;
- the more open-ended research questions were asked first as allowed the participants to tell the story in their own words. In the pilot study, if some of the more specific questions were asked first, the parent found it difficult to answer. This also allowed for later questions to be omitted if the participant had already answered them. The first questions will now be 'tell me about your experiences of working with professionals'. This is felt to be non-threatening and should encourage the parent to begin to tell their story;
- two questions were omitted from the study as they repeated issues already accounted for in other questions;
- the parent in the pilot study informed me that she found it distracting that the tape-recorder was on a table in front of her. It was therefore decided that in future interviews, the tape-recorder would be placed away from the participant's eye-line, although they would be clearly informed when the recording commenced and when it ceased.
- The seating position of the interview was also adapted in light of the pilot interview. I sat opposite the parent in the first interview but she said that she felt slightly intimidated by this, and it made the interview feel formal. I therefore sat next to the parents in the remaining interviews to make them feel at ease and to make the interview more interactive and conversational.

## **APPENDIX 6: Participant Interview Schedule**

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today. If at any point you have any questions, or would like to stop the interview then please let me know. Remember that there are no right or wrong answers, I am just interested to hear about your experiences.

- 1) Can you tell me about your experiences of working with professionals?
- 2) To what extent do you feel your interactions with professionals to have been a positive experience?
- 3) To what extent did you feel that your views were listened to and acted upon?
- 4) To what extent did you feel empowered to support your child following the involvement of professionals?
- 5) How confident did you feel to challenge any views regarding your child presented by professionals?
- 6) In relation to your child's SEN, what do you perceive the role of professionals to be?
- 7) To what extent do professionals explain their role, and purpose of their involvement?
- 8) How were you contacted by the professional (or professionals in general)?
- 9) To what extent were you encouraged to give your opinion on your child's needs?
- 10) What did you gain from the involvement of professionals (if anything)?
- 11) What does it mean to be a good professional?
- 12) What do you feel could have been done to make your experience(s) more positive?
- 13) Do you feel that anything could be done to increase your confidence to contact professionals in the future? (either to support you, or on the part of the professional)

## **APPENDIX 7: Educational Psychologist Interview Schedule/ Exploration of propositions**

The themes from the parent interviews led to the creation of a number of 'propositions' relating to professional involvement. These were presented to the Educational Psychologists, and their views sought:

- Parents feel that professionals use jargon when communicating which makes it difficult for them to understand what they are saying. To what extent do you agree with this?
- Parents feel that professionals do not always introduce themselves in meetings, or clearly identify who they are and what their role is in relation to their child. Do you think this is true?
- Do you feel that all professionals seek parent views, and act on what they have said?
- To what extent do you feel that the statutory assessment process takes into consideration parents views?
- Do you think that equitable partnerships with parents are easily achieved? What are the barriers to this?
- In your experience, do you feel that parents want to be 'equal' partners and empowered to support their child?
- What do you see your role as a professional as being?
- Parents feel that those professionals who show a more 'personal' side are the ones that they value the most. What are your thoughts on this?
- If parents are not immediately contactable, how do you follow this up?
- How do time pressures influence your work with parents

**APPENDIX 8: Informed Consent form (Used in conjunction with Appendix 3: Script used to outline research to the selected participants and to gain informed consent)**

1. I have read and understood the information that I have been provided with	
2. I have had time to think about the information	
3. I understand that the views that I give will be shared with others in the manner described, but that no information will be attributable to you	
4. I understand that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I can leave at any point. If you do decide to withdraw at any point, then you can ask for your data to also be withdrawn from the study	
5. I understand that the interview will be tape-recorded	
6. I consent to you accessing my child's SEN file	
7. I agree to take part in the study	

.....

(Full Name)

.....

(Please sign your name)

.....

(Date)

Thank you for reading and completing this form.

**Ellie McNab**

**Trainee Educational Psychologist (01 [REDACTED] [REDACTED])**

**APPENDIX 9: Confidentiality Script**

*This script was read out to parents, and they were also given a copy to take away with them. Parents were also made aware that they can have access to their transcript as soon as it has been produced.*

‘Everyone has the right to respect for his private and family life, his home and his correspondence’ (Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights).

Everything that we talk about for the duration of the research project will remain confidential. This means that although other people will hear and have access to what we have spoken about, they will not know that these views belong to you, or that you have taken part in the research.

All interviews will be transcribed (typed up), and any features that enable you to be identified will be anonymised or removed. Your views will be respected throughout the course of the interview, but if at any point you share with me something that suggests that you or those around you might be at risk of harm, then it is my duty of care to share this information with my placement supervisor and seek further advice. If this occurs, I will inform you of this immediately.

If at any point during the interview, or throughout the course of the research you decide that you no longer wish to take part, or that you do not want your interview transcript to be used as part of the study, then your data will be removed, and you will no longer be required to take participate.’



## APPENDIX 10: An illustration of the thematic analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

Generating the initial codes (Phase 2 of thematic analysis)			
1. Frustration	2. They're the expert	3. Need to gain trust	4. Professional secrecy
5. Expectations not met	6. Feeling challenged	7. Lack of personal touch	8. Feel like a bad parent
9. On the outside	10. Need for reassurance	11. Lack of information	12. Feeling inadequate
13. Challenged	14. Not listened to	15. Lack of clarity	16. Not valued
17. Powerless	18. Poor communication	19. With-holding info	20. Voiceless
21. Lack of confidence	22. Lack understanding	23. No confidence in prof	24. Prof = disinterested
25. Feeling judged	26. Prof = obstructive	27. Not kept informed	28. Empowered
29. Need to show empathy	30. Clarity of information	31. Sensitive to parent needs	32. Increased equity

Searching for themes (Phase 3 of thematic analysis)
<p><b>Potential Theme A (Feeling inferior)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>6. Feeling challenged</li> <li>8. Feel like a bad parent</li> <li>12. Feeling inadequate</li> <li>21. lack of confidence</li> <li>25. Feeling judged</li> </ul> <p><b>Potential Theme B (Poor communication)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>9. On the outside</li> <li>11. Lack of information</li> <li>14. Not listened to</li> <li>15. Lack of clarity</li> <li>18. Poor communication</li> <li>20. Voiceless</li> <li>22. lack of understanding</li> <li>27. Not kept informed</li> <li>30. Clarity of information</li> </ul> <p><b>Potential Theme C (Professionals in charge)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2. They're the expert</li> <li>4. Professional secrecy</li> <li>13. Challenged</li> <li>17. Powerless</li> <li>19. Withholding information</li> <li>24. Professional is disinterested</li> <li>26. Professional is obstructive</li> </ul>

28. Want to feel empowered  
32. Want increased equity

**Potential Theme D (Not understanding of my needs)**

1. Frustrated
3. Need to gain parent's trust
5. Expectations not met
7. Lack of personal touch
10. Need to feel reassured
16. Not valued
29. Need to show empathy
31. Sensitive to my needs as a parent

**Reviewing themes: The thematic map (Phase 4 of thematic analysis)**

Theme 1: Communication	Sub-theme 1: I don't understand	Lack of information	Not kept informed
		Lack of clarity	
		Poor communication	
		Lack of understanding	
Theme 2: Power	Sub-theme 2: They just don't listen	Voiceless	
		Not listened to	
Theme 2: Power	Sub-theme 1: The powerful professional	They're the expert	Obstructive
		Professional secrecy	Disinterested
		Withholding information	
Theme 3: Rapport	Sub-theme 2: The powerless parent	Want to feel empowered	Want increased equity
		Powerless	
		Feeling challenged	
Theme 3: Rapport	Sub-theme 1: understanding my needs	Expectations not met	Sensitive of my needs
		need to feel reassured	
		Need to show empathy	
Theme 3: Rapport	Sub-theme 2: The personal touch	Not valued	
		Need to gain my trust	
		Lack of personal touch	