Is there space for the child in partnership with families?

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Introduction

Partnership working, both with parents and with other professionals, is nowadays considered fundamental to good practice and is underpinned by policy and official frameworks. The notion of partnership as part of the 'culture of consultation' (Aitken and Millar, 2002) is accepted without question to the extent that Shucksmith *et al.* (2005) have suggested a 'participatory imperative'; but as with any orthodoxy, it is important to pause from time to time to reflect on whether we actually achieve what we set out to do. My intention here is not to undermine the concept of working in partnership, but to open up discussion about the philosophy behind such practice to ensure that it is ethically legitimate and that it includes space for the child's own perspective.

Background

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) model of development within the ecological niche illustrates interactions between the child as an individual and the social context. The child is positioned at the centre of the microsystem; occasionally this is a single micro-system, the family, but in contemporary society when the majority of children attend nursery, preschool or kindergarten it is likely there will be several microsystems. Bronfenbrenner (2005) stressed the importance of the underlying *processes* as being of key importance to human development. Partnership is clearly one of these processes; for instance, the way collaboration between school, nursery and home can aid a child's transition from one microsystem to another – but is it always a process that works for the benefit of the child? And is there space for the child within that process?

Partnership in the early years

There is a long history of partnership in the early years, in fact we could say it has been embedded since the beginning with Froebel's appreciation of the important influence of mothers on their children's learning. By the second half of the twentieth century the notion of partnership became mainstream with the Head Start programmes in the US in the1960s and endorsement of parental participation in the Plowden Report (CACE, 1967) in the UK. By the beginning of the 21st century it has become the orthodoxy underpinning policy frameworks and understood as fundamental to notions of what constitutes 'good practice' as evident in policy documents such as the 2004 Children Act , 2006 Childcare Act and the *Early Years Foundation Stage.* However, partnership as a concept is poorly defined and applied to a range of diverse practices (Aubrey 2010). It refers both to strategic frameworks through which services are delivered as well as to a style of working. Although partnership and collaboration are seen as crucial, practitioners are often unable to articulate the ethos behind their practice and instead simply rehearse the arguments. This is what Fullan (2003) refers to as 'false clarity' where people assume understanding of a concept without recognising the varied and contradictory versions it entails. Meanwhile the child for whom all this activity takes place usually has no say in the process.

There are many contradictions at the heart of concepts of partnership. Some stem from neoliberal policies that treat early childhood as part of the economic infrastructure and from contemporary interest in early childhood as a site to produce predetermined outcomes and provide solutions to economic and social problems (McDowall Clark, 2011). Others have existed for much longer. Lamb (cited in Penn, 2004) points out how the literature concerning child development is built on an assumption that the white middle classes have superior parenting skills. A discourse of the 'ideal' family (Scraton, 2004) underlies attempts to 'educate' parents and reinforce middle class styles of parenting (Mac Naughton, 2003) and this attitude has been with us since the nineteenth century when childhood began to become the

business of the state (Hendrick, 1997). At its worst, partnership can be a way of recruiting parents as partners in controlling the child to make them conform to expectations (James and James, 2004). Therefore working with families may be primarily concerned with reinforcing particular practices and directed predominately at ethnic minority families and children from poor working class backgrounds. Power, frequently invisible or unacknowledged, is a key variable in relationships with parents and an assumption that professionals are experts who know best can create a power imbalance between practitioners and families. In particular such differences in power affect children and there is an inherent danger that partnership becomes yet another mechanism for regulating childhood. Rhetoric has always placed the child at the centre of practice; the emphasis has now moved to the child in the centre of a nexus of relationships – in Bronfenbrenner's terms, this is a shift from micro to meso. Although intended for the child's benefit it can also serve to valorise relationships *between adults* above the child's own positioning so that children become the raison d'être for adult working relationships. The mesosystem has become the dominant discourse and governs children's lives (McDowall Clark, forthcoming). I would suggest that the contemporary emphasis on partnership working now locates the child firmly within the mesosystem and the implications of this for children's lives are worth exploring.

Children's voice and agency

Our notions of childhood, and the discourses that underpin them operate at every level not only within the micro- and mesosystems. To take just one example, amongst the overarching principles of the *Early Years Foundation Stage Curriculum* it is stated that: 'Children learn and develop well in enabling environments, in which…there is a strong partnership between practitioners and parents and/or carers'. This is one of the bedrock principles of early years practice (Bruce, 2005) with which all would surely agree. However, in the statutory guidance (DfE, 2012), we later read:

    Section 1

1.1 *This section defines what providers must do, working in partnership with parents and/or carers, to promote the learning and development of all children in their care and to ensure they are ready for school.*

This, in contrast, suggests a very passive view of the child as an object to be moulded by the actions of practitioners and parents together; thus there is an easy slippage from the child-centred practice envisaged within the underlying principles to a statutory directive for practitioners that emphasises the child as a national investment (Hendrick, 1994) and diminishes their agency. In this way partnership between practitioners and parents becomes part of increased surveillance and an aspect of the sustained 'gaze' (Foucault, 1977) brought to bear on young children in contemporary society.

The Childcare Act (2006) ensures that children under five have the statutory right to be consulted on decisions affecting their lives but, despite good intentions and the legislation to back them up, children as a social group lack power to have their voices heard. In addition, the implications of the familialisation of children (Qvortrup, 1994) whereby the individual child is frequently subsumed into the category of 'family' means professional training and practice is now often framed in terms of family rather than being child-centred (Tomlinson, 2008). Recent policy pronouncements such as *Supporting Families in the Foundation Years* (DfE, 2011) reinforce such a view. There may be tensions between the interests of the child and the interests of the family and whereas we cannot consider the well-being of young children outside the context of their families, it can be misleading to imagine the interests of one are the same as the other.

Parallel to the growing prominence of the family unit, is an emphasis on listening to the child. Listening to children has become a 'new orthodoxy' (McLeod 2008) but 'it rarely informs practice' (Gray and Winter, 2011) and there is still an absence of the child's perspective in research (Janzen, 2008). As a result we have no idea of children's own views on partnership working – for instance, the Economic Social

Research Council's 5-16 Project found that many children prefer to keep the different aspects of their lives (home and school) separate (Edwards and Alldred, 2000); is it our view that partnership working is for young children's benefit and, therefore, overrules any claims to privacy they might have? Or that children under 5 are considered too young to have a worthwhile perspective? Or is it that partnership working is now so much taken for granted that nobody ever thought to consider the views of the silent partners? In our eagerness to develop working partnerships these are questions few have stopped to ask.

Such gaps in knowledge and understanding come about through conflicting discourses of the child and the subsequent actions these engender. Partnership working occurs within the context of diverse discourses which can result in tensions between:

protection ↔ autonomy

care ↔ participation

advocacy ↔ guardianship

If we are to understand young children's own perspectives on partnership then it is necessary to recognise them first and foremost as citizens (Pascal and Bertram, 2009) and as experts in their own lives (James *et al.,* 2001). Accepting the agency of children means using a methodology which works with the voice of the child (Christensen and James, 2000; Clark and Moss, 2001) rather than positioning them as research subjects. This can help avoid over-interpretation by practitioners with a strong sense of guardianship and enable us to pay attention to the child in a respectful manner. Methodology, of course, is insufficient in itself (Waller and Bitou, 2011) and the attitude of adults, whether they are prepared to really listen to children's perspectives or whether these are subject to adult interpretation, are key conditions in determining whether or not children might be empowered by the process. Some aspects of children's lives are private and this must be respected by adults (Waller and Bitou, 2011) so our concern to develop meaningful and effective

partnerships with families must not be at the expense of the child as an individual citizen.

The challenges to adults

To open up discussion about the philosophy behind partnership which includes the authentic voice of the child there are a number of questions that face us:

- Should provision be child- or family-focused?
- Does partnership always work in the child's interests or is it part of the ever-increasing surveillance of childhood?
- How can we respect the authentic voice of the child within partnerships that are dominated by adults?
- At what age are children entitled to privacy in different aspects of their lives?
- 'Working with parents' in reality usually means with *mothers.* Given that the majority of Early Years practitioners are female, what are the implications of this gender dominance for boys?
- What might be the implications of locating the child at the nexus of relationships between adults?

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