

10 ‘Going the Extra Mile’

Working Class Teachers and Their Engagement with Parents

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10.1 Introduction

This chapter explores teachers’ relationships with parents in schools participating in the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) programme. DEIS (Department of Education and Skills [DES] 2017) is the Irish State’s action plan for educational inclusion and co-ordinates the services, supports and resources that are deployed to target educational inequality in Irish education. The study upon which the chapter draws examines the relationship between teachers’ capacity to identify and name the unequal power dynamics that have traditionally limited teacher–parent relations in working class communities, and their motivation to create more democratic and inclusive power dynamics. Significantly, the study comprises teachers drawn from a range of socio-economic backgrounds, which facilitates an exploration of teachers’ habitus and its influence on their relationships with parents. Habitus is a concept developed by Bourdieu (1977) to demonstrate the ways in which not only is the body in the social world, but also the ways in which the social world is in the body. Thus, habitus is an embodied concept (Bourdieu 1990) and expressed through “the beliefs, values, conduct, speech, dress and manners—that are inculcated by everyday experiences within the family, the peer group and the school” (Mills 2008, p. 80). In the context of this study’s focus on teachers’ practice, habitus enables an intelligible and necessary relationship to be established between practices and the context within which they are situated. While research into teacher diversity has focused almost exclusively on the benefits for students, through (sometimes) problematic ‘ethnic matching’ models, little has been written about teachers from under-represented groups and their engagement with parents.

Consideration of the current research in the field highlights the need to further explore teachers’ engagement with parents, and more specifically, working class parents. The majority of those teaching in DEIS schools are white, female and of majority-group social class and ethnic backgrounds (Keane and Heinz 2015) and have been teaching for fewer than five years (McCoy et al. 2014). Leavy (2005) points to the lack of pre-service engagement Irish student teachers have with working class and ethnically diverse populations. Leavy also found that pre-service teachers demonstrate limited understanding of the manner in which education systems are based primarily on the beliefs and values of the dominant middle class.

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Hanafin and Lynch's (2002) study of the views of working class parents on home-school links found that parental involvement in school is often limited to the giving and receiving of information. The parents in this study also felt excluded from participation in decision making about matters that affected their children's progress and their families' finances. Additionally, early career teachers' concerns about being ill prepared to engage with parents (Killeavy and Murphy 2006) also point to the need to explore teachers' understandings of their professional role in terms of supporting the involvement of parents in their children's education. This aspect of their professional role is significant, as numerous studies have found that parental involvement positively affects children's experience of education (Lareau 2000; Epstein 2001; Goodall 2013; Thomas et al. 2015).

10.2 Literature Review

Following Lynch and Lodge's (2002) view of class as a force for political mobilisation, we argue that the denial of class inequality in contemporary culture has left us without a vocabulary to name class-based inequalities. Drawing on concepts from critical educator, critical sociology and teacher identity literatures, we foreground dominant discourses of working class parental deficiency in the literature review. This provides a contextual backdrop for a critical analysis of the role educators can play in supporting the development of teacher-parent relationships that are defined by a sense of partnership, solidarity and hope.

Amidst heightened hegemonic demands around 'respectability' (Vincent et al. 2010), working class parents, and in particular working class mothers, have become vulnerable to public political discourse that judge them as failing (Gillies 2006). Golden and Erdreich (2014, p. 268) highlight that studies of working class mothers show that schools' expectations of mothers' involvement presuppose certain skills, resources, time and wherewithal and serve to categorise them as incompetent without recognition of the efforts these mothers make in their children's education. Lareau's (2003) influential ethnographic study found that working class parents often experience a sense of powerlessness in their engagement with schools, which contrasts with middle class parents' sense of agency in relation to intervening on behalf of their children. Research by O'Brien (2009) found that working class parents care deeply about their children's education, but in the face of persistent economic insecurity and cultural exclusion, some working class mothers are not in a position to participate more actively in their children's education due to a depletion in their emotional resources (see also Doyle and Keane 2019). Crucially, discourses of cultural deficit negatively influence the way teachers perceive working class parents (Bakker et al. 2007).

Freire's work offers a counternarrative to discourses of working class exclusion, non-recognition and deficit, and calls on educators to unveil opportunities for hope that challenge these oppressive discourses (Freire 1992). This chapter places a particular focus on examining teachers' awareness and critique of the hierarchical power structures that have traditionally placed parents in a position of subservience to teachers. Drawing on Freirean pedagogy, critical literacy and capacity appears to be a necessary stimulus for teachers to work towards the development of democratic

and inclusive relationships with parents. Freire (1996) considers this 'naming' of the world to be empty 'verbalism' in the absence of action. Drawing on this thinking, this chapter examines the level of connectedness between the 'naming' of these constraining influences on teacher–parent relations, and the motivation of teachers to democratise this relationship dynamic.

10.3 Methodology

This chapter explores teachers' attitudes towards, and engagement with, parents in schools participating in the DEIS programme, in a phenomenological study. Rather than adopting the new, North American understanding of phenomenology, as one that is primarily concerned with searching for participants' subjective experience of the phenomenon under consideration in order to express it uncritically (Crotty 1996), this study takes an explicitly critical phenomenological approach. Within this perspective, the extent to which participants' explicit and tacit understandings of the parent–teacher relationship were concerned with issues of social justice was deemed to be of critical importance. Moreover, as the aim of phenomenological research is to return to the concrete and the "internal experience of being conscious of something" (Holloway 1997, p. 117), the study was also concerned with recognising and examining the influence habitus has on teachers' understanding of their professional roles and responsibilities in terms of engaging with parents.

Semi-structured, life history interviews were conducted with 20 primary and 4 post-primary teachers from a range of socio-economic backgrounds. Fifteen of the participants came from a middle class background, while 9 participants were identified as having working class origins. The class background of participants was assessed through a process of self-disclosure and/or deductions made by the researchers based on participants' reference to their parents' occupations, the area in which they grew up, schools attended, and history of family engagement in education.

Using non-probability purposive sampling, the sample contains two cohorts, 18 primary teachers were interviewed in 2011, and a further 6 (2 primary and 4 post-primary) teachers were interviewed in 2020. The 2011 cohort were interviewed as part of a doctoral study (Burns 2014) that sought to investigate primary teachers' understandings of 'making a difference' in DEIS schools and identified some significant variations of 'difference' along class lines. In particular, there were habitus-specific influences on attitudes towards, and engagement with, working class parents. The small number of participants from working class backgrounds (3) in the 2011 cohort meant that further recruitment was required in order to further develop understandings around the role class habitus plays in how teachers engage with working class parents. Using an identical phenomenological approach and interview schedule employed with the 2011 cohort, a further 6 teachers from working class backgrounds were interviewed in 2020. Those interviewed in 2020 were teacher mentors on Maynooth University's *Turn to Teaching*, a Higher Education Authority (HEA) funded PATH1¹ initiative aiming to promote diversity in ITE.

Identical processes of data analysis were applied across both cohorts. Individual participants' stories of being a teacher was the primary unit of analysis. The data analysis process involved the text of these individual stories being broken down into more manageable units, which involved discriminating 'meaning units' with a focus on the phenomenon (the teacher–parent relationship) (Giorgi 1985). The second and key stage of the analysis involved looking across the sample as a whole. In so doing, it became possible to identify patterns of shared interpretations of the teacher–parent relationship amongst participants along social class lines. An 'ethical protocol' was approved by the research ethics committees of St Patrick's College, Drumcondra (Cohort 1) and Maynooth University (Cohort 2). In order to protect their identities, participants were given pseudonyms.

10.4 Findings

Participants' attitudes towards parents in DEIS schools are explored in part one, while the second part examines the level of connectivity between participants' 'naming' of the inhibitive forces on teacher–parent relations and their motivation to democratise this relationship dynamic.

10.4.1 Teachers' Attitudes towards Working Class Parents

The view that a proportion of parents in DEIS schools had a deficiency in their parenting skills set was expressed by the majority of participants. Significantly, the vast majority of these participants were from the middle class (mc) group. In contrast, the working class (wc) group's positive attitudes towards parents were embedded within a discourse of empathy and inclusiveness. General criticism of what they perceived to be some parents' indifference towards their children's education dominated the majority of participants' contributions, with Barbara (mc, primary) stating: "Our biggest hurdle is definitely the parents' attitude to education ... this drives me mad". A number of participants were concerned with instilling in their students a sense of discipline in order to compensate for what they perceived as the apparent marked absence of it in the home. Barbara stated: "They think I am very strict ... because I think in a disadvantaged school you do have to have that discipline because it is something that they don't have at home".

Some of the middle class teacher participants considered some working class parents to be unappreciative of the 'compensatory' measures instituted as part of schools' participation in DEIS initiatives. Frank (mc, primary) and Fiona (mc, primary) expressed their disappointment at the level of appreciation they received from parents for voluntarily providing extra-curricular activities for their students. Hannah (mc, primary) and Barbara (mc, primary) felt that a sense of entitlement pervaded some parents' attitudes, which resulted in what they perceived to be a lack of appreciation for teachers' efforts. Barbara and Hannah grew up in middle class communities in close proximity to the communities they worked in and had attended DEIS primary schools themselves, and there is some evidence to suggest that their complex socio-cultural habitus exacerbated their adhesion to class-based deficit thinking. The condemnatory tone of the language used by

Hannah in her references to parents seeking “handouts” and being “on the take” is also in evidence in Barbara’s claim that parents from working class backgrounds prefer to receive job seekers’ allowance rather than gain employment (“sure why would you bother working if you get [it] in your hand?”). In contrast, she references her parents as people “who have worked for everything in our life” and that she was “raised in a way that was like ‘we don’t go on the dole’”.

In contrast, there was a marked resistance amongst all working class participants to the assumption that working class communities are apathetic towards schooling and education more broadly. This is a view with which Len (wc, post-primary) and Ciara (wc, primary) disagreed:

When you actually get into the area and meet the people, there’s some absolutely fantastic people and some of the support that you get from the families from [named community] is second to none.

(Len)

The working class group commended the level of parental involvement in their respective schools and strongly contested the perception that working class parents are less supportive of their local schools. A number of the working class group, including Len, expressed their discomfort when some of their colleagues engaged in negative commentary about working class people, which was firmly embedded within a thesis of deficit:

Yeah, and then the parents ... might be wearing a tracksuit and other teachers straight away say ‘look at them’... they perceive them on how they dress, straight away they wouldn’t engage with them ... So yeah, it was tough to listen to those opinions in the staff room.

(Len)

10.4.2 Teacher Engagement with Parents

Our analysis showed that the majority of participants demonstrated awareness of the factors that contribute to some working class parents’ reluctance to engage with teachers and the formal school environment. The working class group were particularly conscious of the negative influence that hierarchical power structures have on the teacher–parent relationship.

Parents’ negative childhood experiences of school were identified by the working class group as the primary source of many parents’ reluctance to engage with teachers. Sandra (wc, primary) stated “that parents are afraid to come in because their experience in school might not have been great ... I think they feel maybe somewhat embarrassed talking to the teacher”. Sections of the parent population feeling “terrified to come into the office” (Len, wc, post-primary) and considering “teachers as the enemy nearly as they did when they were kids” (Claire, wc, primary) were identified by this group as significant barriers to authentic engagement with parents. Low literacy levels were also presented by Len (wc, post-primary), Sarah (wc, primary) and Lauren (wc, post-primary) as the source of many parents’ anxiety.

Awareness of the tendency of some parents to assume a position of subservience in relation to authority figures such as teachers was apparent in Grace (mc, primary) and Fiona's (mc, primary) recognition of parents adopting "timid" (Grace) and "apologetic" (Fiona) dispositions when talking with them. Grace and Fiona shared some commonalities in their social upbringing and identity formation with the working class group, including reporting having greater levels of (positive) pre-service engagement with working class communities than other middle class participants.

Motivated by a strong desire to 'give back' to the community and responsive to the discomfort many parents feel when engaging with teachers from middle class backgrounds, the working-class group advocated a proactive approach that encouraged parents to discuss their problems with them:

If you're [referring to parents] talking to management or a senior teacher from a wealthy background, they might feel embarrassed to say ... I had a student there, the mother was telling me that there was jail time involved and there was a court case going on, but she was too embarrassed to say that to anybody else, but I knew about it. We put things in place for that student, very discreetly.

(Len, wc, post-primary)

Imbued with a strong sense of vocationalism and communitarianism, the responsiveness of Darren (wc, primary) and Len (wc, post-primary) to the challenging social and economic context for many of the families they worked with brought them outside the formal remit of their professional role:

... there could be an issue around a child's mental health, or they might have their own problems in terms of drug addiction, or alcoholism ... They come to you, and they might be looking for help, like filling out things. To be honest, I don't really mind, because I kind of feel if you're working in a DEIS school or a disadvantaged area ... your remit goes beyond just teaching the children.

(Darren)

This expanded notion of their professional role was reflected in Len's (wc, post-primary) desire to "go above and beyond" and become involved in various extra-curricular initiatives in his school. These activities provided Len with the opportunity for him to connect with students and parents on a more equal footing, away from institutionally imposed contexts and meetings. Both Darren (wc, primary) and Len (wc, post-primary) felt that some colleagues who didn't 'go the extra mile' were more likely to have fractured relationships with parents:

In my own school, there's a large majority of us who share a kind of sense of vocationalism. But for some of my colleagues who don't appear to do the same, like I would be aware that recently there was conflict between the parents and those types of teachers. They wouldn't really be going the extra mile.

(Darren)

Lauren (wc, post-primary) and Sarah (wc, primary) attributed the strength of their relationships with parents to their embeddedness within the local community, and the importance of being “authentic” (Sarah), which cumulatively allowed them to build positive relationships with parents. Throughout, the working class group stressed the importance of supporting the development of a democratic and affirming parent–teacher partnership. This was embodied in Moira’s (wc, primary) assertion of the importance of talking ‘with’ rather than ‘down’ to parents, and Lauren stressing the importance of ensuring “that they feel equal and ... they need to feel like they have a voice ... and that their opinion is heard too”.

In contrast, boundary setting and professional protectionism governed the majority of the middle class participants’ relations with parents. The majority of the middle class group expressed a positive attitude towards limited parental involvement in the life of DEIS schools. Adopting a defensive stance in order to protect themselves from parents “coming up knocking on your door saying ‘why haven’t you done this or this?’” and “try[ing] to distance themselves” (Linda, mc, primary) was an approach strongly supported by this group of participants. This finding is consistent with Len’s (wc, post-primary) view that many teachers in DEIS schools, particularly those not from the local area, have a propensity to:

... kind of hide a little bit ... Definitely I know, some of the teachers aren’t from the area ... They would look at the address and they would see what part of the area it was from, I’m not ringing there.

(Len)

Many of the middle class group displayed a heightened level of responsiveness to middle class parents’ concerns in light of their perceived greater capacity to influence the running of the school. Frank (mc, primary) stated:

Well, generally, the problems you have with parents are not with the parents of the DEIS children, it’s the parents of the others. You would see very little of the parents of the DEIS children.

There was evidence that some of the middle class group were committed to cultivating the development of positive relations with parents. Building on their awareness of factors inhibiting parents from engaging more with the formal school system, Frances (mc, primary) emphasised the importance of making the school setting a power-neutral environment in which parents could engage freely and safely with teachers:

Yea, just getting them in even to see that it is not a scary place, and then different things like say we had the jumble sale on last week ... things that are maybe non-threatening, that are conducted in a fun, relaxed atmosphere, that definitely helps.

(Frances)

Frances (mc, primary) and Grace (mc, primary) identified the role of the Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) Coordinator as being central to changing

parents' perceptions of their local school through the promotion of projects that encourage parents to participate more actively in the life of the school. While the successful efforts made by these teachers and schools to encourage greater parent participation are to be commended, they were primarily based on engagement in politically 'neutral' topics or activities, driven by top-down perceptions of parental engagement.

10.5 Discussion and Conclusion

Consistent with previous research into teachers' perceptions of working class parents (O'Brien 2009; Golden and Erdreich 2014), class-based ideas dominated the majority of participants' attitudes towards working class parents. However, the working class teachers' strong resistance to dominant narratives of deficit and blame that sought to stigmatise working class parents as incompetent and disinterested was striking. There was no observed difference between the primary and post-primary sectors. However, the very small sample of post-primary teachers (four), all of whom were from working-class backgrounds, means that further research is required to develop understandings around the role class habitus plays in how teachers engage with parents across educational sectors. Reflective of the value they placed on the importance of the relational in education, the working class teachers' commitment to building open and inclusive relationships with parents also deserves specific attention in light of how tenacious and durable it was.

This very strong sense of what it means to be a teacher influenced the working class teachers' relationships with parents in a positive way. The cultural awareness and responsiveness to the sense of powerlessness and dependency that working class parents experience when engaging with schools (Lareau 2003) motivated them to do more. They expressed a desire to try to initiate open and inclusive relations with working class parents and felt strongly that teaching is an affective activity. Within this caring moral praxis, they saw care and the development of ethical, rather than economic or instrumental, relationships (Kelchtermans 2011) as an inalienable part of their daily practice.

These practices reflected the generative quality of the working class group's habitus in terms of perception and practices. In contrast, there was also some evidence of habitus and its more structuring and limiting quality evident in the intensity of middle class teachers' engagement with institutionally embedded discourses of parental deficiency. The propensity of habitus to determine people's likes and interests and inversely to engender a dislike towards other behaviours that are not part of one's "sense of one's place" (Bourdieu 1984) appears to lie at the root of some of the assumption-laden commentary on working class parents articulated by some participants. The boundary setting that governed the majority of middle class participants' relations with parents could be interpreted as part of a conservation strategy to protect the traditional position of teachers as the dominant power-brokers (Ball 1994).

In summary, an adhesion to deficit ideology influenced the majority of the middle class group's attitudes towards working class parents. This finding points to the importance of providing teachers with professional spaces along the continuum

of teacher education to explore their cultural backgrounds in order to overcome possible cultural prejudices and ethnocentrism (Boler and Zembylas 2003). The challenging of ethnocentrism and its influence on teaching beliefs, styles and interactions with students and parents (Bourdieu 1984) should encompass a "serious, correct political analysis" (Freire 1992, p. 9) of hegemony and its many veiled and enigmatic guises. It would be important that this process is forged *with*, not *for*, communities suffering the fallout from intense social and economic inequality.

Overall, the heightened willingness and efficacy of teachers from working class backgrounds to 'connect' with parents, strengthens the call to ensure that the current HEA-funded PATH1 projects aiming to diversify teaching in Ireland move from positions of precarity as pilot initiatives to a mainstay of teacher education state provision. Considering the strong national policy focus on fostering parental involvement in schools (DES 2019), and particularly in DEIS schools (DES 2017), these findings also highlight the need to problematise the prevailing power dynamics that are traditionally skewed towards teachers within the social field of the school and the stifling influence they can have on teacher–parent relationships (Baeck 2010).

Note

- 1 Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH): Strand 1 (Equity of Access to Initial Teacher Education).

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