

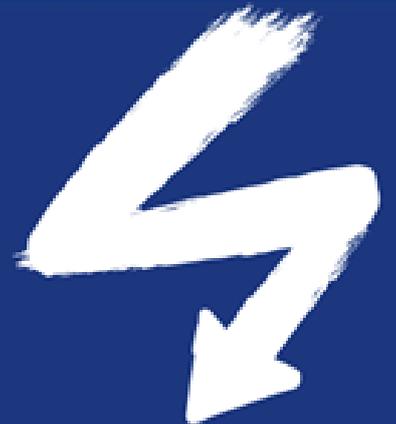


LIVERPOOL
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Early Work
By Student
Researchers

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About This Journal

Spark: Early Work by Student Researchers showcases excellent undergraduate writing in Education Studies and cognate disciplines. It aims to promote undergraduate research and inquiry in Education Studies, and to act as a means to allow publication of the best of this work. It aims to serve the needs of both the undergraduate research community, but also the field of Education Studies in general, by disseminating work on topics seen as important issues by those new to both the professional and academic field.

Contributions are welcomed in the form of articles, conversation pieces, literature reviews, book reviews, research methods, theoretical and analytical pieces in the field of Education Studies. Work based on original study is particularly encouraged. All contributions submitted according to the guidelines on page 58 are given thorough consideration and constructive feedback is offered to authors, who are supported throughout the submission process. Full articles also go through a peer review process, based on initial editor screening and anonymous review from at least one academic in the field.

Introduction to Issue 1 of Spark

Student researchers and their contribution to the debate on education.

Kate Litherland

Welcome to the first edition of *Spark*, a new journal for the dissemination of undergraduate research and writing in Education. Although all the work here has been produced by students or recent graduates in Education Studies at Liverpool John Moores University, the issues discussed are of interest in the field of Education Studies beyond the confines of this university or undergraduate study. Throughout, these contributions present a range of viewpoints on who and what education is for, and what it means 'to be educated'.

The nature of this journal itself highlights a number of current issues about Higher Education in the UK, and the role that undergraduate research plays here. In recent years, the expansion of the higher education sector in the UK has been accompanied by a controversial move to fees-based funding of teaching. This, it has been argued, has led to changes in how students perceive the 'value' of their experience, and has provoked debate about what experiences 'students-as-consumers' (Boden and Epstein 2006) can expect of higher education. Recently, one strand of this discussion has focussed on the value that undergraduate research can add to Higher Education. Arguments that 'all

undergraduate students in all higher education institutions should experience learning through and about research and inquiry' (Healey and Jenkins 2009, p6) are not necessarily focussed only on the experiences of the individual student researchers. The benefits of fostering a culture of undergraduate inquiry has been seen as having academic and cultural implications too: Neary and Winn argue that there is a strong case for 'undergraduate students working in collaboration with academics to create work of social importance that is full of academic content and value, while at the same time reinvigorating the university beyond the logic of market economics' (Neary and Winn 2009, p193). Contributing to this journal positions this group of undergraduate writers outside the realm of passive consumers, and instead positions them as 'producers': full participants in the educational process, who contribute to the body of knowledge in their subject through dialogue with both academics and practitioners in their field.

Dialogue and conversation are themes which therefore run throughout this journal, and which are reflected in various forms in the three types of contributions. Deleuze defines a conversation as 'the outline of a becoming' (Deleuze 2002, p2): a notion appropriate to the contributors whose research and writing functions as a bridge between student inquiry, and both professional and academic practice. Articles engage in these types of conversations between students, academics and educators: they are the product of extended student research projects. The Extracts participate in research conversations differently: offering suggestions, posing questions or suggesting responses to issues in their field of inquiry. There is scope for these contributions to be more diverse, and to include findings from,

and reflections on, a wide variety of work. The Conversations are collaborative pieces of writing, in which two students engage in a dialogue about specific aspects of their own educational experiences. These are, then, conversations in the manner than Oakeshott describes them: 'they are not concerned to inform, to persuade, or to refute one another, and therefore the cogency of their utterances does not depend upon their all speaking in the same idiom; they may differ without disagreeing': theirs is 'an unrehearsed intellectual adventure' (Oakeshott 1962, p198).

In this inaugural issue, the two Articles focus on early years education. Amber Davison's 'A case study of parents' and teachers' perceptions of the importance of parental involvement in primary education', argues that, whilst both teachers and parents consider parental involvement in primary education to be important, there are a number of significant barriers to this, not least that there is no shared understanding of exactly what 'parental involvement' means. Hélène Regnaut-Milazzo, meanwhile, takes on the difficult task of comparing two different education systems. Her study, 'A comparison of the early years curriculum in England and France' examines the underlying philosophies of French and English early years education, and how these different approaches manifest themselves in contemporary early years classrooms in the two countries.

The shorter pieces in this issue offer very different contributions. Scott Ellis's Extract draws on his Creative Writing project to debate the difficulties inherent in 'Constructing the postmodern short story', whilst the Conversations explore perspectives on two aspects of education in the UK. Adele Lunn and Elizabeth Sheppard discuss 'Church, state and education; the influence of

faith schools from a pupil perspective'. They reflect on how their own experiences of compulsory education, several years apart, were shaped by attending faith schools and the policies relating to faith education at those times. Near-contemporaries Michael Jones and Lewis Parry discuss 'Shifts in political power and their effects on education policy, reform and opportunity', highlighting how, in their view, initiatives to improve the quality of education brought advantages for the academically inclined, but limited opportunities for pupils whose interests lay elsewhere.

All of these papers raise questions about the nature and purpose of education, and discuss how the trajectories of those going through the education system are shaped by the ideologies, policies and practices particular to that time and place. The contributors set out their ideas here not only as an illustration of their own research conversations, but also as an invitation to the reader to participate in the conversation themselves.

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A case study of parents' and teachers' perceptions of the importance of parental involvement in primary education.

Amber Davidson
Early Childhood Studies Graduate

Introduction

In recent years there has been increased attention on engaging parents in school activities in order for them to participate in their children's learning (Harris and Goodall, 2008) and research has demonstrated the value of parental involvement as conceptualising parents to be important to improve the effectiveness and quality of education. Whalley (2001) documented that parents are children's first educators and play a critical role in helping their children. We may note that involving parents in education was not always encouraged by teachers as they believed that their participation was an intrusion into children's education. However, Edwards and Warin (1999) claim that teachers prefer parents to be involved and participate in children's learning as it benefits the child, parent and teacher. Additionally, parental involvement was one of the central recommendations of the Every Child Matters report emphasising the need for parents and families to work in partnership with schools (Argent, 2007). Although there has been recognition of the importance of parental involvement, such involvement can remain problematic. While there has been evidence of

the beneficial effects of parental involvement in primary schools (Muschamp et al., 2007), there is a paucity of in-depth research and investigation into both parents' and teachers' perceptions about the perceived importance of parental involvement. Research efforts have focused primarily on the benefits of parental involvement and the potential effects that this can have on children's academic achievement, behaviour and also their motivation towards learning.

Parental involvement, according to Hill and Tyson (2009), can be defined as having interactions with schools and with their children to promote academic success. Also, participation can be identified as having regular communication which involves children's academic learning and other school activities. Similarly, Fantuzzo et al. (1995 cited in Bakker, Denessen and Brus-Laeven, 2007) argues that parental involvement refers to a variety of parenting behaviours which can directly or indirectly influence children's educational achievement and cognitive development. Involvement has also been examined by Wong (2008 cited in Staples and Diliberto, 2010) claiming that parental involvement is the extent to which parents are interested in their children's learning and how willing they are to take an active role in the daily activities of the children. This would seem to support the views of Epstein (cited in Fan and Chen, 2001) who developed a model with different levels of parental involvement ranging from home involvement to school involvement. Home involvement includes carrying out educational activities which will help to improve children's cognitive development for example, reading, whereas school involvement

includes volunteering at schools and communicating with teachers.

The research reported in this paper sought to investigate the importance of parental involvement and I examined teachers' and parents' perceptions as to whether they regard parental involvement to be beneficial to children's learning and development. In addition, the research attempted to determine whether communication between parents and teachers is beneficial to children's learning. Furthermore, the research ascertains teachers' and parents' perceptions regarding whose responsibility it is in order to help children succeed. The study explores the different barriers that can impact upon and prevent parents' participation in their children's education. The research aims were to ascertain teachers' views on parental involvement in primary schools; to explore parents' perceptions on the nature and extent of their involvement, and to identify the barriers which can hinder parental involvement.

Literature Review

Ballantine (1999: 171) argues that 'parents are critical to children's successes during the schools years.' There are documented benefits associated with parental involvement. Lewis et al. (2007) have highlighted that children are more likely to maintain positive attitudes and better behaviour. In addition, parents' own attitudes and expectations towards education can have an effect on children and help them to appreciate learning. Parents being involved in children's education can have a significant effect on children's cognitive development including literacy and numeracy skills (Hill and Taylor, 2004).

Similarly, Flouri and Buchanan (2004) argue that children will benefit when both mothers and fathers are involved, which has been associated with higher intellectual and social development. However, Bastiani (2003) identifies that educational failure has increased due to the lack of parental interest in schooling, which could suggest that more needs to be done to address parental involvement.

Peters et al. (2007) found that the number of parents who feel involved in their child's school life has increased from 29% in 2001 to 38% in 2004. However, Tett (2001) indicates that two in three parents stated that they would like to be more involved in their children's education although schools differ in the amount of encouragement that they give to parents. According to Muschamp et al. (2007), communication between teachers and parents is a key factor to a successful partnership. Moreover, there is evidence to suggest (Hill and Taylor, 2004) that parents claim it is also their responsibility to enhance children's learning. This is supported by Williams (2002 cited in Wheeler et al., 2009), who stated that 58% of parents believe that they are partly accountable for their children's education and that the responsibility for children's learning is shared between both parents and the school. This has improved from previous years as parents used to see schools as wholly accountable for their children's learning (Peters et al., 2007). The majority of parents state that they want the best for their children, to receive high quality education and regular, reliable and accessible information about what the school does and how it affects their child (David, 1993).

It has been recognised that schools need to establish effective relationships and cooperative links. However, Epstein and Becker (1982) identified that there have been differing perceptions from teachers regarding parental involvement as some teachers are positive about parental involvement while others have been negative about working and communicating with parents. More recently, teachers have been encouraged to support parents to participate in their children's learning and to carry out activities outside of school such as reading and writing (Risko and Walker-Dalhouse, 2009). In contrast, the research of Muschamp et al. (2007) advised that if there was a too high expectation of what was achievable from parents this could be counterproductive. Ascher (1987 cited in Chrispeels, 1996) suggests that teachers would like parents to socialise their children to school in a number of ways including conveying the importance of education, supporting teachers by helping with homework and to ensure that children attend school. Ascher (1987 cited in Chrispeels, 1996) also claims that teachers would like parents to participate in school activities. However, Vincent (2000) argues that schools will encourage different sorts of involvement with some schools experimenting with more participative innovations.

For many years parents' have been encouraged to participate in children's education although there are numerous barriers that can hinder the level of parental involvement in primary schools. Willan (2006) stated that a proportion of parents may feel intimidated by their child's teacher. Consequently, Kersey and Masterson (2009) affirm that parents and teachers need to build

positive interactions to ensure that parents feel confident enough to approach the school. Furthermore, Mkwanaza (1994 cited in MacLeod et al., 2003) argued that attitudes and teachers' willingness to involve parents can contribute to low levels of involvement. However, these barriers can be overcome if teachers recognise the importance of parental involvement. Cullingford and Morrison (1999) argue that both schools and parents should come together with a sense of equality and clarity of role, but also mutual support. Additionally, Hornby and Lafaele (2011) found that family circumstances can influence parental involvement, such as single parent families and work commitments, in which families may find it complex to balance their family life and involvement within schools.

Overall, it has been noted that parents can have a significant effect on children's education and learning, such as improved academic attainment. The importance of cooperative links between both parents and teachers has been drawn upon in previous research. Furthermore, there has been recognition of the importance of parental involvement for some time although such involvement can remain problematic (Argent, 2007). This study ascertained both teachers' and parents' perceptions of the importance of parental involvement in primary school education and builds upon previous studies.

Methodology

The research focused on both parents' and teachers' perceptions of the importance of parental involvement. The research conducted was in the form an instrumental case study at a

primary school in Yorkshire. A mixed method approach was adopted since this was regarded as being especially appropriate as an approach that would enable the researcher to explore the research questions fully. Participants were selected through purposive sampling meaning participants were selected because the researcher believed that they were relevant to the research topic (Robson, 2002). Two teachers were selected from key stage one (KS1) who voluntarily took part within the research including a year one teacher and has worked in the school for five months (anonymised as 'Anna'); and, a year two teacher who has worked in the school for eleven years (anonymised as 'Bryony'). Additionally, the headteacher of the school was also interviewed to give an overall perception of parental involvement (anonymised as 'Claire'). Both mothers and fathers of children within KS1 were asked and welcomed to respond to the questionnaire. In order to determine which parent answered the questionnaire they were asked to state whether they were male or female.

Semi-structured interviews were used to discover teachers' thoughts and beliefs about parental involvement. This generated rich data allowing a detailed understanding of teachers' experiences and perceptions. A semi-structured interview allowed the researcher to gain a more in-depth understanding of the issue and also allowed the interviewee to expand and elaborate upon ideas that were raised (Bryman, 2008). The interviews were recorded to capture a clear and accurate account (Gray, 2009), in which they were then transcribed. Additionally, eighty-five anonymous self-administered questionnaires were given to parents in order to examine their differing

perspectives on parental involvement. As response rates can be low (Walliman and Buckler, 2008), envelopes were provided in order to maximise return rates. However, only twenty-five questionnaires were returned meaning and the return rate was thus 30%.

Statistical methods were used to present the data obtained from the questionnaires that were administered to parents. In order to do this, Microsoft Excel was used in order to calculate and formulate the data into charts. Once the interviews were transcribed, the responses were coded, which reduced a large amount of information into key themes that were raised to make sense of teachers' current perceptions of the importance of parental involvement. Questions were constructed around three broad areas of inquiry: relationships, responsibility and barriers. Questions aimed to discover whether teachers' believed that parental involvement can have a significant impact on children's education. Additionally, questions were focused upon teachers' relationships with parents and whether they maintain that positive relationships are important. The research also investigated both teachers' and parents' views regarding whose responsibility it is in order to enhance children's learning. Furthermore, conceptions of what involvement might include was drawn upon and the differing issues that can hinder parental involvement. Key words were recurrent throughout the three interviews such as 'positive relationships', 'partnerships', 'barriers such as work commitments' and 'joint responsibility'.

Discussion

Teachers' views on parental involvement in primary education

Throughout the three interviews the theme 'importance and benefits of parental involvement' was highlighted as an important factor in child development. The findings suggest that parental involvement can increase children's development, as the year two teacher, Bryony, stated;

"[Parental involvement] increases the child's development and I think there are improved standards in English and Maths. Also, more positive attitudes and behaviour of children, and their confidence and self-esteem will be raised".

These findings suggest that parental involvement can enhance children's academic levels. This is in agreement with Hill and Taylor (2004) who stated that parental involvement can significantly improve children's cognitive levels, particularly enhancing literacy and numeracy skills.

Furthermore, the headteacher of the school, Claire, suggested that parents have a greater understanding of their children's capabilities than others involved and can have a significant impact on their development. Claire claimed that children can further benefit from parental involvement as they feel more content and supported, which has also been found in research by Taliaferro et al. (2009). The teachers who were interviewed perceived parental involvement to be beneficial as they identified numerous reasons, including positive effects on children's cognitive development. Anna, the year one teacher,

expresses her beliefs in why parental involvement is important;

"I think most important is to have parents' support, so what you're doing in school is backed up at home...making sure what you're doing in school they [parents] reflect at home so we don't give them [children] bad habits. Plus, it gets the kids feeling a bit more interested in what they are doing because they get excited when their parents know what they are doing".

It appears that teachers within this study have positive attitudes towards parents becoming involved within the school and children's learning due the advantages that this can have on children's development. This is similar to previous studies, such as the Plowden Report, which acknowledged the benefits of parental involvement and appeared to improve home-school relations (Hornby, 2000). Furthermore, the importance of parental involvement has been emphasised in the Every Child Matters report to ensure that children have the best possible outcomes (Argent, 2007). Whilst parents are regarded as critical to children's successes, Harris and Goodall (2008) identify that a proportion of parents can be 'hard to reach', demonstrating that there are numerous barriers that can hinder parental involvement. However, it is evident that the teachers' within this study actively involve and encourage parents to participate in children's education.

A prominent theme that was identified within the data was relationships between both teachers and parents. This study found that all three participants stressed the importance of

relationships to enable effective communication.

This was highlighted in the interview with Anna;

“I think positive relationships are important and I think you need constant communication with them [parents] ... I wanted them to realise that I want them to know what is going on in school and I think it's important that they do... I think if you have positive relationships they feel free to come and tell you how their children are getting on... I like parents to realise that I value what they say because they are their children at the end of the day... So I do like to take into consideration into what they're saying, so I think that's the most important bit about the positive relationship”.

It was also found that having these positive relationships directly benefited children. This is consistent with Whalley (2001) who suggested that children are more content when both teachers and parents engage in strong communication and when both share the same views. Children's learning and development is therefore a joint responsibility, both parents and teachers, suggesting that the school views parents as partners, especially as Bryony explained;

“If you haven't got parents on side then they are likely to be funny with you sometimes, which is no benefit to the child. Also, you need to build up the trust between yourself and the parents and mutual support”.

Claire also claimed;

“Having positive relationships with parents is absolutely crucial not just important because if you have good relationships with parents, then

parents are much more comfortable to ask you if they have an issue with their children's learning or if they need support in any way... If there are positive relationships, parents are also much more willing to work with you and support you in their child's learning”.

This is similar to previous research as Driessen, Smit and Slegers (2005) found that partnerships are successful when there is a good level of cooperation between all individuals and when both recognise, value and respect each others' beliefs regarding children's learning and general concerns.

Throughout the interviews the theme 'responsibility' was highlighted as all the participants claimed that it is both the school's and parents' responsibility in order for children to learn and succeed. The findings suggest that parents believe that it is both teachers and their own responsibility for children's academic success. According to Ballantine (1999) parents who are involved within children's education can have a significant impact upon children's development throughout their time at school. Therefore, it can be argued that parents are vital towards children's progress. This was also found to be the case within this study as Claire described that parents are crucial because they are children's first educators although she expressed that children's success is a 'joint responsibility', suggesting that the school views their relationships with parents as a partnership. Partnerships were also discussed in an interview with Bryony:

“I think if we don't have a partnership; children will get mixed messages from both parents and the

school. And if they aren't consistent and work together then they [children] might try get away with things and you know, they might not achieve as well as they could".

The findings of this research suggest that parents are partly expected to be responsible for their children's education. Furthermore, Anna and Bryony believe that parents should support and 'back up' teachers in whatever they do as this will then increase children's behaviour and will not convey 'mixed messages'. Anna further expressed that parents have the responsibility to 'instill the characteristics' the school desires and the behaviour that is expected. These findings support research by Ascher (1987 cited in Chrispeel, 1996) who states that teachers would like parents to support schools ensuring that children's behaviour is acceptable and is on the school's level of expectations. It is therefore important that parents socialise their children to the school's expectations. Overall, it appears that teachers in this study perceive parental involvement to be an important factor in children's successes and that responsibility is a key issue.

This study found that the school actively encourages parents to become involved within the school and their children's learning. Claire stated:

"As far as I remember we have always encouraged parental involvement at [school]. We have in recent years placed more emphasis on involving parents more fully... So although we have always encouraged parental involvement I think it's become much wider in recent years than previously... We strongly focus on home-school relations, it is really, really important".

It appears that the school has always encouraged parental involvement which demonstrates that there have been continued exhortations to involve parents in their children's learning. The findings suggest that the school liaises with and involves parents in children's education and regards their involvement to be important. They all explained that parents are encouraged to carry out home learning activities with children including reading and spellings. The participants also stated that they encourage parents through 'newsletters', 'website' and 'discussions' in the hope that they will become involved. Overall, the essential understanding was that the ethos of the primary school was to include parents as it cannot work in isolation and appreciates parents' involvement. It can be suggested that the common goal is to have parents as fully integrated as partners as possible and the desire to involve parents is shared by all three participants. The findings of this research suggest that the school supports parents and aims to engage them within education.

Parents' perceptions on the nature and extent of their involvement

There was a substantial difference in the number of men and women who responded to the questionnaire as only 8% of fathers (two) returned the questionnaire. The majority of parents who replied were mothers, indicating that they are likely to be more actively involved than fathers. These findings support research by Peters et al. (2007) who also found that women felt that they were more involved in their children's learning than men. As a result, the findings suggest that women take a more active role within schools and

education. Although women appear to be more involved than men, the overall level of involvement within the school was relatively low as only 20% of mothers claimed that they contributed. The number of participants who volunteered within this research was low, therefore, it is difficult to determine an accurate representation of the gender differences regarding parental involvement. Even so, there was a large variety of responses stating how parents were involved within the school, such as PTA, fund raising events, reading with different year groups and after school clubs, which is consistent with previous research by Hill and Taylor (2004). As the number of contribution levels outside of the classroom was higher, with 52% of parents indicating that they were actively involved, this may suggest that activities outside of school hours are more suitable for parents. Parents also reported that they were involved with the school by attending parents' evenings, which may suggest that some parents believe this to be sufficient involvement and hence do not need to volunteer for other activities. However, this differs from teachers' conceptions as they claimed that parents can be involved through activities such as spelling practice.

It would appear from this research that parents believe that both they and teachers are responsible for their children's education, learning and progress as the majority (62%) of parents reported that they strongly agree on the questionnaire. The results support the findings of Williams (2002 cited in Wheeler et al., 2009) who conducted a study based on parental perceptions and also found that the majority of parents claimed that they were partly accountable for their

children's education, thus demonstrating that the responsibility is shared. A small percentage (13%) of parents in this study indicated that they disagree that they are equally responsible for their children's education. However, as this data was obtained through questionnaires it is difficult to determine the reasons for specifying disagree. Peters et al. (2007) claimed that parents used to perceive schools as wholly accountable for their children's education and learning, which may suggest that a number of the parents who claimed to disagree may believe that it is the school which is children's main source of education.

This research has examined parents' attitudes towards their involvement with children's education. It was found that 96% of parents agreed and strongly agreed that their involvement can influence children's education. Therefore, it can be suggested that parents believe that parental involvement can have a positive effect on children's work. This illustrates that parents believe parental involvement is essential. Additionally, parents also responded positively to the questionnaire as a large proportion (84%) indicated that the grades children achieve are important and carrying out educational activities at home is crucial (92%), indicating that their involvement has clear advantages. This appears to support the research of Risko and Walker-Dalhouse (2009) who claimed that parents who are involved in their children's education generally have high expectations for their children and encourage children to achieve to the best of their ability. The findings of this study can suggest that parental attitudes are positive regarding parental involvement that can have significant benefits for

children. This is consistent with previous research as Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2001) state that parental attitudes can have a positive influence on children as they themselves are also likely to be positive towards education and enhance their school work. Parents stated that their involvement can 'set a good example' to children which also supports previous research as Bandura (cited in Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001) argued that children model parents' behaviour and attitudes through observations. Therefore, parents who are supportive increase children's learning and improve their attitudes. Additionally, consistent with previous research (such as Anderson et al., 2003) the majority of parents reported that extracurricular activities outside of the classroom are also important, with 44% of parents indicating strongly agree and 28% stating agree. Only 12% of parents reported disagree regarding extracurricular activities. This suggests that parents believe that all aspects of children's development are important and not solely academic achievement. Overall, it is clear that parents are generally positive regarding parental involvement and that children can succeed and benefit from their involvement.

The theme 'relationships' were also identified on the questionnaires that were administered to parents. It was found that parents believe that communication with teachers about children's work and progress is vital, suggesting that parents are interested and concerned with regards to their child's education. Additionally, a large proportion of parents claimed that having a good relationship with their child's teacher is important. Fifty-two percent of parents indicated strongly agree on the questionnaire followed by

36% claiming agree. A small number (4%) disagreed that having strong relationships with teachers is important. One parent reported 'it is more important for the child to have a good relationship with the teacher.' According to Muschamp et al. (2007), communication between teachers and parents is a key factor to a successful parental partnership. A small percentage of parents stated that they disagreed or indicated satisfied regarding good relationships. This could suggest that parents believe children should have a good relationship with the teacher rather than themselves, as was stated on one response. The data from this study suggests that both parents' and teachers' perceptions regarding parental involvement are similar and are both generally positive. As parents' attitudes were obtained through a questionnaire their views could not be expanded upon.

Barriers to parental involvement

It is clear in this study that the school encourages parents to participate in their children's education although both parents and teachers believed there were a number of different barriers that can hinder parental involvement. The most common barrier that emerged from both the questionnaires and interviews was work commitments. Anna claimed:

"I think the biggest barrier is their [parents] work commitments so they don't have a lot of time. So by the they get home and if they've got to help their children with something and are tired, they've got to get the tea done, they've got to bath them [children] and get them to bed, so

there's not actually a lot of time for them to do it [participate], it probably becomes a bit of an interference... Also, they can't get in to school because they have younger children".

This suggests that parents do not have enough time to participate and become involved within the school environment and in their children's learning. These findings are similar to previous research as Hornby (2000) concluded that work commitments can hinder parental involvement and the lack of time parents have resulting in low levels of participation. Consequently, the results of this study demonstrate that time appears to be a contributing factor towards low levels of involvement. Also 'family life' was identified as a barrier by numerous parents indicating that it is not parental attitudes but the stresses of everyday life and lack of time, including having younger siblings and lack of child care. This is consistent with previous research by Hornby and Lafaeke (2011) who found that family circumstances can act as major barriers due to having young families. The findings suggest that although the school would like parents to be involved as there are documented beneficial effects, it appears that the school understands the barriers that hinder parental involvement and that families also have other commitments.

A number of parents indicated that they were unaware of how the school would like them to be involved or what the school expects. However, this contradicts teachers' perceptions within this research as they believe they actively encourage parental involvement. According to Cullingford and Morrison (1999) once parents understand what their role is, and how the school expects

them to participate, parents will become involved. Claire stated that parents who are illiterate may be one factor as to why parents do not contribute to their children's learning. This was also acknowledged in the research by Mkwanzazi (1994 cited in MacLeod et al., 2003). In addition, Anna reported that it can be difficult to find the time to always encourage parents to participate due to the realities of their work, showing awareness that there are also barriers for the teachers. This is in agreement with Browne and Haylock (2004) who believe that teachers have a large workload and can find it difficult to encourage parents to become actively involved. Conversely, Mkwanzazi (1994 cited in MacLeod et al., 2003) stated that these barriers which hinder parental involvement can be broken down if teachers realise the importance of their involvement and the effects that participation can have on children. This appears to be acknowledged in this school as the teachers stated that they aim to address these barriers, by supporting both parents and children with parents who are unable to support their children academically. However, addressing all barriers that arise is clearly not possible because parents have to work and have younger children to care for.

This research has drawn upon both parents' and teachers' conceptions of what involvement might include. Earlier in the discussion it was noted that teachers' claimed that parental involvement can include activities such as spelling practise at home. In contrast to this, parents' documented that they are involved in their children's education through parents' evening, clubs and PTA. It would seem that the two groups hold differing ideas of

what involvement might include. As a result, whilst there have been continued exhortations and encouragement between the school and parents, such involvement remains problematic and perceptions remain contested and complex.

A further theme that was identified was that parents may be intimidated by schools resulting in low levels of involvement. Anna stated;

“I think probably, a lot of people feel quite intimidated by schools, especially now as there are so many initiatives and things... I often think they can feel quite intimidated about coming into school, not particularly this school, just any school”.

Anna explained that parents can be intimidated because schools have changed dramatically since they themselves were at school. This theory supports research by Willan (2006) who found that parents were less likely to be involved with schools as they felt intimidated resulting in fewer discussions and less likely to volunteer within the school setting. However, no parents specified that they felt intimidated by the school although one parent claimed that one barrier was due to the fact that they were shy, which therefore prevents them from participating within school life. It was found that numerous barriers can hinder parental involvement although some of these barriers are due to parents' own personalities and confidence – not due to the fact that they are not encouraged by the school. Also, Bryony highlighted that parental attitudes may be a barrier to parental involvement stating that some parents simply do not want to become involved.

Conclusion

The findings from the study indicated that both teachers and parents believe parental involvement to be vital to children's development. It was found that teachers actively encourage parental involvement due to the documented benefits on children's development, such as increased numeracy and literacy levels. As considered in the discussion, this finding is consistent with previous research, such as Hill and Taylor (2004). It was found that parents' perceptions regarding their involvement is important towards children's school work and that parents also encourage children to partake within extracurricular activities. It is clear that both parents and teachers need to establish and maintain positive relationships and clear communication regarding children in order for parental involvement to be effective. Additionally, it appears that the teachers in this study believe that they have a successful partnership with parents. This study also found that the responsibility for children's education and learning is shared, suggesting that parents and teachers have a clear understanding of each others' role. This is supported with Cullingford and Morrison (1999) who argued that both teachers and parents should establish effective relationships and clarity of role. Both parents' and teachers' attitudes are positive towards parental involvement and view their contribution as very important. Teachers emphasised how they actively encourage parents to become involved within the school and their children's learning as it appears that teachers are committed to parental involvement and ensure that they engage with parents. While parents view their involvement as important, the level of involvement within the

classroom was generally low. However, the contribution levels of involvement outside of the classroom were significantly higher.

Although teachers support parental involvement, there are a number of barriers which may hinder the involvement of parents and the ability of the teachers to encourage such involvement. One barrier highlighted by the teachers was having sufficient time to encourage parents to be involved. Parents believed it was important to be involved in their child's education but were not always aware of the ways in which they could be involved. The most common barrier to parental involvement identified by both teachers and parents was work commitments and single parenthood as many participants believed they did not have the time to invest further in school activities. This supports research conducted by Hornby (2000) who found that work commitments appeared to be the main barrier preventing parental participation. Furthermore, although it was noted that the school encourages parents to participate, both teachers and parents had differing perceptions of what parental involvement actually is, which can, therefore, constitute as another barrier. Additionally, teachers highlighted on the fact that some parents do not want to become involved or may not be aware of how to participate in their children's education.

Further investigation for future research could be based on a larger sample size in order to obtain a better understanding of the issues discussed in this project since the small sample and comparatively low return rate of the questionnaires in this study precludes any generalisable conclusions. An additional

recommendation for future research would be to compare parental involvement in both primary and secondary education since it has been documented that there is a tendency for parents to be less involved when their children reach secondary school. Further investigation could explore and examine parental involvement, but specifically in relation to the role of fathers within children's education. This has been made as a recommendation as the number of fathers within this study was extremely low. This may broaden the understanding of parental involvement in children's learning.

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A comparison of the Early Years curriculum in England and France

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Introduction

The curriculum is at the heart of the education system: it is crucially important to the success of the whole education process (Bartlett and Burton, 2007), and designing a curriculum involves looking at the 'social, political and cultural context' (Dewey cited in Freedman (1998), p258). It therefore can be argued that the English educational system and therefore the curriculum is bound to be different from the French one as both countries have experienced different historical, political and social events that shaped their actual societies. Moreover, it appears that hegemony, 'the leadership or dominance of a state or a social group over others' (Oxford Dictionary, 2005), holds an important role in designing the curriculum. Roth claims that the curriculum is the means by which political leaders can 'force' their values and ideologies upon children, young people and their parents (Hollins, 1996). Earle and Kruse (2009, p109) add that cultural hegemony is easily transmitted through the curriculum, 'the knowledge in the curriculum is passed off as tradition'. The 3Rs are a good example of cultural hegemony being transmitted through the curriculum; in fact the emphasis put on the learning of the reading, writing and arithmetic started as early as 1825 and nowadays these are still considered as crucial as demonstrated by the implementation of the

National Numeracy Strategy and the National Literacy Strategy in 1999.

An interpretivist and a social constructivist approach will be taken when looking at both curricula. It is important to understand that the research will be based on assumptions and will therefore be subjective. In an attempt to clarify the research and find out what make both curricula different from one another, it is important 'to understand the complex and often multiple realities from the perspectives of the participants' (Lodico et al. (2010) p14-15). This work therefore looks into the social, cultural and political backgrounds that surround both curricula, in order to 'understand the meanings behind the actions' (Burton and Bartlett (2009), p21).

The Early Years Foundation Stage and the Programme de l'école maternelle differ in many ways with one resulting from educational research and another being more deeply rooted in the country's educational history. Even though both curricula appear to have the same outcome for children they differ very much in their structure and implementation with one applying a play-based approach and the other applying a more didactic one. And even though they were both influenced by the same educational pioneers such as Piaget and Bruner they appear to have different ways of applying those theories. However their differences, it is striking to notice that early years education in both countries holds an economic purpose, that aims to develop skilled workers that will thrive to develop and improve each country's economic outcomes.

Some key questions will be answered in this work, such as how deeply rooted the different

education ideologies are in each country's history? Did key educational reforms occur at a similar time in both countries? Who or what triggered those changes? Moreover which features of each curricula are emphasised and why?

The Early years Foundation Stage (England)

In the 1900s, early years education in the UK was not the main focus of the government and policy makers therefore it was not given much attention. Palaiologou (2010) notes that, what led the government to make changes and develop Early Years education was the issue of poverty. The major focus on education goes back to 1976 and James Callaghan's speech at Ruskin College, the latter called for 'the maintenance of proper national standards' and better relations between education and industries' needs (cited in Hamilton, 1988, p33). In 1997 the Labour Government followed in the footsteps of Callaghan and showed their intention to make education a priority with their famous motto 'Education, Education, Education'. Early years' education was no longer considered simply as a preparation for school but rather a place where all children, no matter what ethnic, religious or economic backgrounds they were from, were offered the best possible start in life.

The introduction of the Foundation Stage Curriculum (QCA, 2000, in Smidt, 2007) intended to make early years education more credible in the eyes of parents and more accessible; it set out early learning goals that the child had to reach prior to entering formal education and was based

mostly around the child and its development (Pugh, 2006). It later led to the introduction and implementation of the Early Years Foundation Stage in September 2008, which itself was highly influenced by the findings of the Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) Project carried out in 2004. The Early Years Foundation Stage sets up a set of learning requirements that comprises all the skills and knowledge that children should have acquired by the time they reach the age of five (DCSF, 2008, p11). Those Early Learning Goals cover six different areas that are: Personal, Social and Emotional Development; Communication, Language and Literacy; Problem Solving, Reasoning and Numeracy; Knowledge and Understanding of the World; Physical Development and Creative Development.

These Early Learning Goals are part of a bigger framework where partnership with parents and play prevail (Anning, Cullen and Flear, 2004). Personal, Social and Emotional Development is one of the most essential areas of learning for children's well-being and development. It appears to be linked directly with one Every Child Matters outcome, 'Make a positive contribution'; children learn to belong in the early years' environment and wider community as well as learning to behave according to the community's values and expectations. According to Moylett (2010, p137) within Personal, Social and Emotional Development adults teach children how to behave appropriately by 'modelling' behaviours that are 'socially acceptable'. From this point of view, it can be argued that children are conditioned from an early age to behave a certain way that is suitable for the community and wider society, and

therefore that they are in a way compelled to conform to the status quo (Walker, 2008). Walker appears to be suggesting that this can be seen as an example of cultural hegemony in that the government is using the curriculum to instil certain values in a very subtle way to get people to conform to them. Personal, Social and Emotional development is not only about young children learning to behave socially, but also about 'emotional intelligence' (Beckley, Elvidge, Hendry, 2009, p164), about interacting with other people and respecting them whatever their cultural, ethnic or religious backgrounds (DCSF, 2008). This area of learning is therefore very much embedded within the children's social environment. It can be argued (Moylett, 2010) that it is very much at the foundation of children's good development, and in order for them to be able to develop other skills such as literacy or numeracy they have to first and foremost feel at ease in the setting and be aware of their own and others' needs.

Considering play as the main trigger to learning and development emerges from Frederich Froebel's theory of children's development. However, there is a slight difference between what Froebel believed was considered as play and what the EYFS documents define as play. On one hand, the EYFS document states that play can be either 'child-initiated' or 'adult led' (DCSF, 2008, p11). Froebel however believed that only activities initiated by children could be considered as play; if the activities were initiated or led by the teacher with a particular educational objective resulting from it then Froebel saw it as 'work' (Bruce, 2009, p19). However, he strongly advocated the importance of adult in triggering children's learning by providing them with the

support and material needed for their development and learning (Waller, 2005), and this idea is very much in evidence in the EYFS. Two of the principles of the foundation stage listed by Smidt (2007, p54) state that 'well planned, purposeful activities and appropriate intervention by the practitioners will engage children in the learning process and help them make progress in their learning' and 'the learning environment should be well planned and well organised to allow children to have rich and stimulating experiences'. Those two statements support Froebel's vision of the adult being 'a careful gardener' (Lindqvist, 1995, in Follari, 2007, p25) who carefully prepares the environment to respond to and support children's needs.

Like Froebel, Maria Montessori was a strong advocate of providing children with a prepared environment that would nurture their development and learning; the environment, she believed, was an 'extra teacher' (Johnson, et al., 2005, p252). According to Montessori 'play is the child's work' (Johnson, et al., 2005, p252), but both she and Froebel believed in children learning through purposeful activities. In a Froebel or Montessori setting, children become their own teachers; learning comes naturally to them, therefore the different materials made available to them become the children's guide to certain skills' proficiency (MacNaughton, 2003). Within Froebel's and Montessori's approaches, the adult has a role of facilitator and observer who only intervenes when the child encounters difficulties or in order to challenge his learning when the latter seems cognitively ready for it (Follari, 2007). In the EYFS, the practitioner is in charge of 'monitoring children's progress' (Curtis and

O'Hagan, 2009, p155) during activities and prepares a suitable environment that answers children's developmental needs, but also challenges them. Within the EYFS the practitioner is expected to intervene more in children's learning than in a Montessori setting, and is in fact welcomed to join in children's play at any time to encourage them in their thinking process (Moylett, 2010).

Other aspects of the EYFS are considered as very important such as Communication, Language and Literacy Development and Problem Solving, Reasoning and numeracy. Both areas introduce children to skills that are very much at the centre of the National Curriculum introduced in primary school, but because the EYFS is a play based approach practitioners have to teach children in a playful way. However, Wood (2004) would argue that sometimes there is a lack of 'synchronicity between the policy initiatives' and what actually happens in practice where practitioners are very much focused on reaching a certain objective, so that activities turn out to be more didactic than play-based (Alexander, et al., 2009). For example, the National Literacy Strategy (introduced in 1998) was aimed at improving English children's literacy attainments as they appeared to be falling behind their international counterparts (Riley, 2006). Since then a great emphasis has been put on introducing young children to some basics of literacy during their pre-school experience. The EYFS Communication, Language and Literacy strand therefore promotes a print and communication rich environment (DCSF, 2008).

Similarly, the implementation of the National Numeracy Strategy in 1999 was a way for the government to indicate to schools the skills that were considered most important for pupils to acquire while in primary schools. Apple (1996, in Bell, 2003, p56) argues that the National Numeracy Strategy represents 'the dominant economic and political elite intent on 'modernising' the economy'. This argument is another illustration of cultural hegemony and a government response to the pressure of globalisation. Therefore the government, being so determined to produce better educated workers, took the initiative to implement early numeracy skills in the Early Years Foundation Stage. However this initiative contradicts Piaget's belief that children should not be introduced to mathematical concepts until they reach the age of six. In fact, according to Piaget prior to six, children are in the preoperational stage and are in an egocentric stage and cannot yet understand abstract concepts (Bee and Boyd, 2007). Therefore, the goals that children are expected to reach by the end of the foundation stage do not fit with their actual cognitive development.

This aside, Piaget's work has very much influenced the way the EYFS is being implemented. By adhering to Piaget's active learning theory, practitioners agree that children learn best when actively involved with objects rather than passively being fed information about the world (Anning and Edwards, 2004). In fact, the 4.2 Principle into Practice card entitled 'Active learning' (DCSF, 2008) shows that children in early years setting are involved in a constructivist approach to their learning and development. Therefore, the EYFS promotes an approach

where children are in control of their learning through exploration and interactions with the objects and people from their surrounding environment. The process of active learning involves children in communicating with the adult and their peers therefore as well as being constructivist, it also involves a sociocultural approach to learning, such as that advocated by Vygotsky and Bruner, who suggest that learning involves a high level of reflection through discussion and questions (Beckley, Elvidge and Hendry, 2009). The 4.3 Principle into Practice card entitled Creativity and Critical Thinking (DCSF, 2008) encourages to use the process of sustained shared thinking in order to help children develop their thinking and discuss ideas with each other. Through open-ended questions and discussion the adult scaffolds children's understanding to a higher level, a level that they might not have been able to reach on their own (Muijs and Reynolds, 2005).

It appears that the EYFS very much seeks to promote and offer a nurturing and safe environment where children can thrive, development and learn with the support of adults around them. The many influences from educational pioneers found in the EYFS guidance prove that the Government has sought to develop an early years curriculum that would suit young children and their development. However, behind its implementation there may have been specific political and economic objectives. In a world controlled by globalisation, knowledge, therefore education is considered crucial to the country's well-being in the world's economy (Spring, 2009, Brown and Lauder, 1997). For that reason, from an early age, children are already considered as

'citizens, future workers and consumers' (Yelland and Kilderry (2005:1).

Moss argues that the Labour Government had a specific interest in developing, improving and promoting early years education for all; (1999, in Sofou, 2010) and suggests that what pushed the Government to invest money in early years education was because, by providing more services for young children it allowed parents to go back to work. Therefore it can be argued that the Labour Government's emphasis on early years education was not only about improving early years services but was also aimed towards a political and economic purpose (Sofou, 2010). Dahlberg et al. (1999 in Sofou, 2010, p232) argued that early childhood education is therefore a process which intended to produce 'a stable and well-prepared workforce' and that all activities undertaken with the children in early years provision have, as their ultimate purpose the goal of getting them ready for their future life in a competitive society and economy rather than genuinely offering the children diverse opportunities to develop socially and emotionally. Moreover, Heckham (2006; in Van Der Kooy-Hofland, Kegel and Bus, 2011) argued that early intervention in literacy is more cost-effective than later intervention. The aims of early years' education seem therefore to have shifted from a preparation for formal schooling to a form of social engineering. The Government's stated intentions can be questioned, and it can be argued that the main driver is enhancing the country's economic growth in the competitive market rather than the social aim of helping all children and their families to thrive in modern society.

Le programme de l'école maternelle (France)

Early Years provision in France has shifted, since the end of the Second World War from providing care services for children to providing pedagogical services (Hall, 1976). From 1825, early years providers were known as 'salles d'asiles', from the latin 'asulon' meaning refuge (Oxford Dictionary, 2005), and catered mainly for children from poor backgrounds. There, children were introduced to literacy and numeracy but the curriculum was mainly about learning practical skills, such as knitting and sewing and religious education (Dajez, 1996). In 1881, Pauline Kergomard, inspector of the écoles maternelles, initiated many changes in early years provision. She introduced the 'école maternelle' which replaces the earlier 'salle d'asile' and with this name change came a total reconstruction of educational methods (Bascou-Bance, 2002). She was the pioneer of a play-based approach in early years' provision in France, and she believed that children should be free to enjoy the environment and be involved in activities that come naturally to them.

It was the 'Loi d'Orientation' of 1989 that set out what the écoles maternelles are now; it was the first law that introduced a pedagogical programme for the écoles maternelles and primary schools (Goigoux, 1996). This Law divided the French educational system into three cycles, two of which make up the école maternelles, Cycle 1 for children aged two to four years of age (first two years in the école maternelle) and Cycle 2 for children aged five to

seven years of age (last year in the école maternelle and first two years in primary school) (David, 1998).

From then on, the école maternelle was considered as a school with educational purposes rather than a place where children were taken care of (Doly, 1996). The curriculum 2002 set out its pedagogical purposes and learning goals that children have to reach by the end of the nursery years (Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale). This idea corroborates (over 100 years later) what was declared in the 1887 decree where nursery school was considered as the place where children get their first education and where they can develop physically, emotionally and cognitively. This idea – that it is a school in the formal sense, does not really fit with what Pauline Kergomard tried to instil when setting up the école maternelle. While she would not deny the fact that the école maternelle prepares children for their entry to primary school, she refuted however the idea that children should be taught through direct instruction (Norvez, 1996).

Therefore, it can be argued that the original purposes of the école maternelle introduced by Pauline Kergomard have been diluted over time. The introduction of the curriculum in 2002 and the prescribed domain of activities that had to be taught through mostly teacher-led activities is a long way from Kergomard's ideal but however corroborates with the early Napoleonic code of 1804 where education was centralised and highly structured (Magone, 2011).

Therefore the Government in 2002 held onto the idea of Pauline Kergomard in relation to the école maternelle but adapted it to the current demands

of society as they saw them. The actual Programme de l'école maternelle was implemented in 2002 and is divided into five fields of activities, S'approprier le Langage et Découvrir l'Écrit (Acquire language skills and some writing skills); Devenir Elève (Become a pupil); Agir s'Exprimer avec son Corps (Act and express himself with his body); Découvrir le Monde (Discover the world); Percevoir, Sentir, Imaginer, Créer (Perceive, Feel, Imagine and Create) (Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale, n.d.).

First and foremost, the école maternelle is a place of socialisation where children learn to interact with other people and learn to belong. It aims at nurturing children's physical, emotional, social and intellectual development through different stimulating activities (Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale, 1999). Children turn into social human beings and therefore will have to acquire the right behaviour and learn the rules and norms of living in this social world. This idea is very much represented through the area of learning entitled 'Devenir Elève'. There is a sense of conformity that seems to come out of this principle; the fact that it is entitled 'becoming pupils' shows that the école maternelle is run very much like a primary school, where children are expected to conform to set rules and listen to the adults in charge. It can therefore be argued that through this principle it appears that the government wishes to ensure that from an early age children understand and learn the rules of good citizenship and learn to conform to them. It can be added that this aspect comes under cultural hegemony exerted by the government on schools. Teachers are in charge of 'shaping' children, from the day they enter the

école maternelle and throughout their education, into educated and respectful citizens.

The didactic aspect of activities experienced in an école maternelle is embedded within the 'consigne', in other words, the instructions given to children prior to starting any activities. Brougière et al. (2008, p374) believe that the consigne 'transforms the child into a student'. It has been shown, that young children appear to be more responsive and sensitive to learning and therefore, that it is essential to provide them with a well structured and demanding learning process (Meirieu, 2004). Meirieu (2004, p11) adds that 'it is to match up children's ability that the école maternelle must be a place where real cognitive work occurs'.

One aspect of the implementation of the French early years curriculum which might surprise many early years practitioners is the fact that it does not really apply a play-based approach to learning. Even though the approach used in the école maternelle is meant to be a 'non-formal and play-like approach' (OECD, 2004, p43), it appears that 'play' is used for different ends. Because of the didactic approach to learning free-flow play rarely occurs within the classroom, play is more often used as a medium through which some activities are conducted. This could be due to the government's intention to prevent children from repeating years in later stages and activities that have an educational purpose rather than playful ones are prioritised (Goutard, 1993). Glutton (in Pillot, 2004) noted that toys are used for educational purposes rather than for enjoyment, leading children to link toys with work rather than pleasure. This idea of using toys and activities for

educational ends, ties in with Montessori's idea of play. In a Montessori settings children are free to go around the room and play with any toys made available to them; however, all the materials available have been made for an educational purpose. This concept is also used in the école maternelle; however, what differentiates it from the Montessori approach is that the adult in an école maternelle guides the children learning whereas in a Montessori setting the adult has a passive role in children's development and learning.

Similarly to England, France puts an emphasis on Literacy skills as shown in the principle entitled 'S'Appropriier le Langage et Découvrir l'Écrit'. Therefore one of the priorities of the curriculum is to ensure that all children who attend the école maternelle acquire good language skills, that enable them to understand the writing process but also the meaning of various texts presented to them (Bentolila, 2009). It is important to be aware that the école maternelle does not aim at teaching young children to read but rather to 'prepare its learning' (Observatoire National de la Lecture, 1997). Gilabert (1992), a former practitioner in écoles maternelles, was a strong advocate of the introduction to literacy, reading and writing, in early years settings. She strongly believed that children were already capable of learning those skills and that this early learning would prove to be very beneficial throughout their schooling.

Because language development and communication is at the very heart of the curriculum, teachers tend to rely on verbal communication in their teaching process. This idea fits with Vygotsky's social learning theory

where the teacher offers support to the children through sustained shared thinking in order to guide them towards the desired answer. Moreover Bruner's idea of scaffolding can also be identified in a French école maternelle where the teacher asks open ended questions to offer support or challenge children (Muijs and Reynolds, 2005).

Comparison

Throughout this work it has been shown that both countries' history has shaped the way education is implemented nowadays. On one hand, England has been very much influenced by James Callaghan's speech in the 1970s that highlighted the importance of linking education and industries in order to answer the country's economic needs and therefore putting an emphasis on literacy and numeracy in schools (Hall, 2004). On the other hand, France's educational influences go back to 1804 and the Napoleonic code where the whole system became highly structured and centralised, highly influencing the way education is implemented nowadays with a didactic approach prevailing in schools which might appear worrying to someone from England but which seems perfectly normal to people in France as it is deeply rooted in their history.

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Constructing the post-modern short story

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Introduction

“This postmodern stuff leaves me cold. Always a mish-mash of styles rolled into one,” whines one of Jonathan Santlofer’s characters in his novel *The Killing Art* (2006, p48). Postmodernism, in whichever medium, brings together a host of qualities and entwines them to express certain aspects that could not have been told in the style of a movement that preceded it. Perhaps if postmodernism leaves one feeling cold, that is what was intended.

Initially, the word can be examined in terms of its literal meaning, as in ‘after modernism’: an artistic, socially progressive movement prevalent in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century which was, broadly, concerned with expression and representation through realism. However, O’Donnel (2003, p6) proposes that ‘postmodernism is concerned with non-linear, expressive and supra-rational discourse,’ essentially seeing postmodernism as not ‘after now’ but instead as ‘anything but now’ in almost every possible way. Therefore, postmodernism could be applied to anything that followed modernism chronologically, or contrastingly, that which rejects its defined conventions.

In this article, I explore a number of key elements surrounding the theoretical process of creating a postmodern short story. I begin by examining

what precisely entitles a particular work of fiction to define itself as postmodern, and whether such a classification is even possible or accurate. I then proceed to discuss areas of ‘Voice’ in terms of narration, dialogue and speech. Following this, I investigate a multitude of different approaches to discuss whether writing itself has a distinct process, before finally debating the definition and distinguishing features of ‘the short story’.

Postmodernism in Literature

Speaking of postmodern fiction, Webster (1996, p122) claims that, “it is difficult to define a clear boundary in chronological, aesthetic or political terms... they transcend any strong... identification; they embrace a wide range of creative activity.” Snipp-Walmsley (2006, p405) states that, “any attempt to define postmodernism immediately undermines and betrays its values, principles, and practices. Postmodernism is loose, flexible, and contingent.” If this is true, how then is it possible to write from a postmodern perspective? Barry (2002) offers a brief outline as to what themes and styles postmodern fiction is likely to contain. These ‘postmodern indicators’, which are by no means ‘concrete’ nor are they exhaustive, include; a disappearance of the real, intertextual elements, denaturalised content, a rejection of any number of genre conventions, a rejection of stability (conventional time and space primarily) and differing points of view.

With these particular rules and constraints in place, many ‘good stories’ have a relatable character or at least a relatable character trait at their hearts, and are concerned with exploring the progression of character and the changes in their

personality. Bell (2001, p95) writes that, "It is impossible to write without a really clear sense of how your character views the world and her place in it." Bradbury (2001, p116) supports this view by stating that "...character is at the heart of all fictional writing...plot is itself often the product of a character... in their processes of development, growing self-knowledge or interaction with others." Perabo (2001, p101) summarises by explaining that it is not enough to have characters "do what we want them to do, say what we want them to say" instead "we must believe in our characters as living, breathing humans." Take *The Catcher in the Rye* (Salinger, 1951) for example, with the highly contradictive, alienated, and troubled Holden Caulfield, or *Life of Pi* (Martel, 2001) where young, inquisitive Pi is forced to sacrifice his innocence for survival. Both are concerned with character, and are voyages of self-discovery. As Bickham (1994, p15) states, "Self-discovery is on-going. We do not remain the same. Our feelings change, as do our thoughts and activities," which is what we, as readers, engage with in stories: how the characters change, and how they change us.

According to Moskowitz (1998, p35) "creative writing is almost always fuelled by personal experience and so... inherent in the process is the power to transform, and make positive use of, some of life's most perplexing and painful issues." Neale (2006, p45) points out; "How many times do you read about meals, or other daily routines like dressing, looking in the mirror, going out, coming in?" It is the way that these seemingly insignificant, daily routines are carried out by a character, that lets the reader know who they really are. For example, in *The Curious Incident of*

the Dog in the Night-Time (Haddon, 2003, p29) the lead character tells how; "I wanted a glass of orange squash before I brushed my teeth and got into bed so I went downstairs to the kitchen." Neale goes on to state that these details help build the character and world they inhabit; "the world is believable because it appears to have existed before the reader started reading about it and will continue on afterwards."

Voice

Concerning characters, one of the most important aspects is their voice; what they say, how they say it, when they say it. With voice in fiction it is important to distinguish between authorial voice (the way in which the author's attitudes are revealed using language outside of character's thoughts and dialogue (Lepionka, 2008)), and the narrative voice. First-person narrative is a technique employed by a writer to become a character, and tell the story through their eyes. This allows for a greater sense of discovery within the reader, as because they do not have the all-seeing, all-knowing eye of the onlooker, they experience the novel simultaneously as the narrator. Boehmer (2001) however, identifies a pitfall that many aspiring writers fall into when attempting to write in first person; that the constant writing of 'I' and of self stops the work from developing externally; outside of the character's mind. Third-person narrative then, deviates from first in that, the narrator plays more of an onlooker's role. Third-person narrators can be present within the story themselves to give a more realistic account; though Harvey (1966) argues this makes the narrator, "unreliable because he is a fool or a liar or profoundly self-

deceived.” They can also be fully removed from the story reporting on people’s thoughts in an omniscient, God-like state. Magrs (2001b, p140) sums this up explaining that the reader is put into a similar position as somebody watching television – they see everything, but are completely independent from that world.

It should be noted that there is also, of course, a second-person narrative whereby the writer makes the reader become the central character in the story. Porter-Abbott (2008, p71) raises an excellent point; that second-person narration is postmodernism’s most desirable narrative approach to storytelling because of its often mysterious and misrepresentative nature. For example, is second-person narrative really addressing ‘you?’ Or is it in fact ‘a masked first-person narrative (since a ‘you’ implies an ‘I’ addressing the ‘you.’) Further from this, perhaps the ‘you’ being spoken to is another character in the book, who themselves is being watched by another omniscient narrator, allowing the second-person narration to ‘lose its veneer of strangeness...so that we read it as a virtual third-person narration.’ Some theorists, including Bennet & Royle (1999, p78) in fact argue for “the idea that there may in fact be no such thing as a voice; a single, unified voice (whether that of an author, a narrator, a reader...) Rather there is difference and multiplicity in every voice”. This can be illustrated by fiction that refuses to remain in either first, or third person narrative, by regularly switching between styles. *The Book of Dave* (Self, 2006) shows this excellently by switching between both whilst simultaneously addressing two postmodern indicators by utilising different points of view, from the all-seeing

narrator, and the first-person perspective of Dave, as well as rejecting stability by alternating between past and present whilst ignoring logical chronology.

Another important aspect of voice representation is dialogue. Casterton (1986, p38) argues that, “...speech is one of the most revealing aspects of a person... a person’s accent... tells us where they come from... about their background or which social group they identify with.” An example of this is *Trainspotting* (Welsh, 1993), which utilises the Edinburgh dialect and accent in full effect to convey the effect of natural speech, rather than rule-bound writing. Bennet & Royle (1999b, p75) define this as ‘the reality effect’ whereby the written dialogue is designed to reflect human conversational language, to instil an air of realism and believability in the reader.

The Writing Process

Surprenant (2006, p200) believes that “literature is fundamentally intertwined with the psyche,” and that this “requires us to question the putative proximity of, or even identity between, unconscious physical and literary processes.” With this in mind, many established authors advise aspiring writers to keep a writer’s notebook or diary with them at all times to jot down thoughts, sights and sounds. Anderson (2006a, p34) maintains that, “The immediate capturing of your first impressions will ensure that you write them when they are hot... automatically putting impressions into words.” In support of this, Robbins (1996, p33) points out that keeping such a notebook can “free you to express important feelings about an idea... that occurred at a particular moment in the day.” Magrs (2001a, p7)

even claims that the most fascinating progress lies in constantly noting down “irresistible snatches of dialogue from bus stops and shops.” Some would argue against this social approach to writing however, with Smith (2001, p24) believing that, “the act of writing... is an occupation best done in solitude.”

Jouve (2001, p13) states that being a writer is “like being a dancer or musician. Unless you practice, you don’t develop the muscles... or the nimbleness of fingers.” She admits that there are of course rare occurrences of genius where people write fascinating novels seemingly out of thin air, but that the majority of writers practice, with activities such as ‘freewriting’ and ‘clustering.’ The first, formally introduced by Elbow (1973), describes the process by which we allow ourselves to write freely, the first thoughts that come into our head, unconcerned with structure, grammar or vocabulary; merely the flow of ideas. Brande (2006 [1934] p424) claims that these sorts of exercises allow “the unconscious to flow into the channel of writing.” The latter, originally developed by Rico (1983), are similar to ‘mind-maps’ and theoretically designed to assist in providing a visual map of thoughts by allowing the writer to record ideas “organically rather than sequentially” (Anderson, 2006b, p25).

Kleiser (2004, p1) argues that the writer must not think of a short story as a “novel in little”, instead, as Wolff (2007, p23) points out, short story is concerned with “a moment in time, or one part of a character’s life.” It is therefore vital that every piece of information conveyed to the reader is pivotal, and none more so than the opening. Newman (2000, p46) suggests that, “any first

paragraph that engages your reader is a success. Any other is a failure.” This is enhanced by Sage (2001) who implies that the engagement of the reader need not even be positive, just a reaction from them which implores them to continue, concretes a solid opening. Hall (1989, p81) however warns of the dangers of altering writing style to fit the short story form by saying, “an overly simplistic style gets in the reader’s way by making her overly aware... she is reading a work of imagination instead of experiencing it” but that “an overly elegant style may also block the reader’s voluntary suspension of disbelief.”

Conclusion

A postmodern short story then must contain any number of a fairly ambiguous, non-exhaustive set of ‘guidelines’ as opposed to rules. For example, it could include at least one, or all of Barry’s ‘Postmodern indicators,’ though these not necessarily be present in the content of the story, but perhaps in the style within which it is constructed. The majority of writers and theorists alike agree that a short story is such because it has no need to any longer. It is not a succinct, scaled down novel, or an abridged simple version, but its original length because that is exactly what it required. Voice figures hugely in postmodern fiction due to its ability to transcend narrative styles. The points made above, are perhaps contradictions to themselves, however. Perhaps a postmodern short story should not switch narrative, deny genre conventions or reject stability. After all, to define something as postmodern, and assign it values by which it must abide, devalues precisely what it means to be postmodern. Should we call it Post-postmodernism, New Puritanism, Neo-

Modernism, or Avant-Gardism? Then again, perhaps it should instead become nameless.

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Church, state and education: the influence of faith schools from a pupils' perspective

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Introduction

This article will examine the type of education received by two students, who although different in age, are now studying at the same level on an undergraduate degree course. It will explore the enduring trends and patterns throughout not only their own individual experiences, but throughout the history of education itself. Religion and religious education were very much an intrinsic part of both students' school days. This paper will reflect on the impact of religion, alongside Government policies which were put in place and how this affected their education, identifying any similarities and differences and why these may have occurred.

Adele's school days began in 1978 up until she left school aged sixteen, in 1990. For her, the dominating influence upon her education was the controlling Conservative government which spanned the period of time in which she went to school. Many important and influential changes took place during this era including the Education Reform Act of 1988 (Legislation.gov.uk, 1988), which saw the most radical changes to the

education system since 1944. Elizabeth's formal education began in 1986 at the age of four, following a period of time in Play School, an alternative to a nursery provision formed through the work of Friedrich Froebel (Wood and Attfield, 2005) who believed that for a child to develop holistically, they must experience everything possible and make their own decisions on which activities to partake in. She continued in education until taking her A Levels at 18 in 2001 and describes herself as having what she believed to be a very typical education, with no need for additional resources or help and thought this situation to be the norm.

Faith Schools and the Curriculum

Since the start of Elementary Education, the Church has played a large role in the provision of education, and one of the reasons was because it was felt everyone should be able to read and interpret the Bible, therefore educational provisions were created to allow for this even before education was made compulsory in England (Brisard and Menter, 2008). It can be seen throughout all the major turning points in educational history that much emphasis was put on maintaining the religious school sector. The continuation of faith schools right up until the present day is a legacy of the 1870 Foster Act which allowed both state schools and faith schools to co-exist. All of the schools both Adele and Elizabeth attended were Roman Catholic Voluntary Aided schools; whereby both the Local Education Authority and the Catholic Church contributed to the financing and control of the school. Voluntary Aided schools were originally

established by Church governing bodies and the state in the 1944 Education Act (McKenzie, 2001) which also outlined the requirement for daily worship within schools (Cooper, 1997). It followed then that the government funded The National Society to ensure Church schools were maintained (Gardner, 2005). Legislation in the 1944 Education Act looked towards a “partnership between the Church and the state” (Parker-Jenkins et al, 2005, p15) in relation to faith schools. This ‘partnership’ was still important when Adele and Elizabeth attended school in the 1980’s, where Conservative ideologies favoured the continuation of religious schools. Religion therefore was evident in all aspects of their school life. Adele’s primary school day focused around prayers, hymns and religious instruction. Elizabeth’s first primary school St Bartholomew’s which she attended from 1986 to 1992 had very close links with the Church, and both her Head Mistress and Deputy Head Mistress were Nuns. From 1994 onwards in her Secondary school, members of the religious community associated with the school were often present, although in a pastoral role.

Adele attended primary school between 1978 and 1985; long before the introduction of Key Stages which only became compulsory after the Education Reform Act of 1988 (Legislation.gov.uk, 1988). The way in which subjects were taught, and the time given to various subjects was during this period largely decided by the class teacher, the school and the Local Education Authority. Schools also followed guidelines set out by and the government such as The National Curriculum Framework of 1980

(Kirk, 1986); this was not statutory legislation, but guidance for schools regarding various subjects.

It was the Education Reform Act of 1988 (HMSO, 1988) which outlined by law that there should be a National Curriculum which must be followed. It also required assessment of children at the end of each Key Stage of education. This was at a time when the Conservatives were in power and Margaret Thatcher believed that the standard of education was poor (Thatcher, 1993) and that a system was required to enable schools to be compared to each other (Murphy et. al. 2009). At the time when Elizabeth was at her second primary school (1991-1994), there was little following of the National Curriculum. She was aware of how the structure, or lack thereof, was different to that of her previous school. The text books used were very old and the teachers decided what to teach depending on the weather, what was happening in the world or in some cases personal circumstances, such as family weddings or holidays. It may be as this was very early on in the development of the National Curriculum that they were still being taught in such a way and guidelines were not as strict. This shows similarity to Adele’s primary education.

Highlighted by both Adele and Elizabeth’s experiences, this period of education free from the restrictions of a National Curriculum, gave teachers what Hargreaves (2009, p15) describes as “professional freedom”, with the flexibility to tailor their lessons to suit their own strengths and interests as well as that of their pupils. Unfortunately this freedom was often blighted by a severe lack of resources. The “social impact” (Jones, 2003, p112) of the Conservative

government at this time was an overall cut in public expenditure which included education. For Adele living in a deprived area, this was even more apparent as there were fewer educational resources available to children from lower social backgrounds (Apple, 2004). The recent cuts in public expenditure instigated by the new Coalition government suggest that there will be a repeat of this again today.

Although schools at the time of Adele being in education did not have the restrictive curriculum such as we have today, nevertheless the 1980s saw increasing government intervention in both subjects taught at school and the education system as a whole. Beginning with The School Curriculum in 1981 which outlined the subjects to be taught in class, and continuing with the White Paper of 1985, which addressed the assessment of subjects, it was clear that the Conservative government's growing involvement in education inevitably led to the more defined level of governmental control seen through the enforcement of the National Curriculum in 1988 (Kirk, 1986). Despite the lack of cooperation with national standards for Elizabeth, she felt that she excelled in this learning environment. There were still weekly spelling tests but with very little pressure and she soon found herself in the top set of the class. From this personal account, Elizabeth would question if the National Curriculum is of great benefit to pupils, or, if as stated in its creation, it is purely for comparative reasons.

An essential element of the National Curriculum is its focus on core subjects. Science is now part of the core curriculum in all schools (although as we

discuss later, this has not always been the case). This is quite a startling difference to Adele's recollection of science lessons in primary school, which were only taught possibly once a week. At Adele's school there was much more emphasis on creative and artistic subjects such as art, music and drama. This emphasises again how teachers were allowed to an extent, to dictate the amount of time given to particular subjects and did not have to adhere to formalised assessment.

However, the need to raise existing standards, particularly in certain subjects was as Lawton (1989) discusses, one of the reasons suggested for the introduction of a National Curriculum. There were other motivating factors too. By the time Adele had reached upper junior school, she perceived a growing awareness of gender discrimination when it came to various subjects. Boys were allowed extra physical education time whilst girls undertook needlework. The boys in the class were also given greater encouragement by teaching staff to participate in science and technology subjects. Feinberg and Soltis (2009) suggest this could be based on the teacher's own gender bias and their own assumptions of the pupils' curriculum choices. This is clearly where the introduction of the National Curriculum could help to counterbalance this inequality. All pupils following a set curriculum, gives both boys and girls equal opportunities.

Since its creation post 1988, there have been numerous debates and reforms centered on the National Curriculum. Despite its benefits, it has been reported that the style of the National Curriculum can be detrimental to pupils learning due to the nature of the testing involved. Mansell

and Ward (2008) reported that Ofsted outlined in 2006, that too much time was being spent on test preparation, and that it may not be the ideal way for all children to receive a well-rounded education. However, the current coalition government discuss amendments which they feel need to be made, such as removing 'non-essential' subjects, and concentrating on the core subjects (DfE, 2010). This appears to show a very cyclical view and repeats how education first began, concentrating on the three R's, reading, writing and arithmetic brought about from the 1862 Revised Code (Aldrich, 2006).

Assessment in, and of, faith schools

There is the belief that religious or faith based schools exceed their counterparts educationally and socially (Kassem and Murphy, 2009) and this has forced some parents into making very big life changes for the sake of their child's education. It was reported in 2010 that one parent, who was an atheist, attended Church for two years to ensure his child got a place at the Church of England School he wanted him to attend (The Independent, 2010). It may not be however, that it is the school itself which is creating higher results. Faith schools are able to have a stricter admission policy and be more selective when taking on pupils (Barker and Anderson, 2005) allowing for socio-economic factors to be considered and this is seen as going against the notion of inclusion, allowing all pupils the right to an equal curriculum (Murphy et. al., 2009). Shepherd and Rogers (2012) have recently reported that there is a very low level of pupils attending Faith Schools, especially Catholic schools, who are applying for free school meals,

an indicator of lower income families, therefore questioning whether the schools are excluding children from those families in favour of those from more affluent backgrounds.

Testing and 'standards' via levels of attainment, although often promoted by Governments as unique to their particular party, are certainly nothing new and have been recognised as a key feature of education since the end of the First World War (Holt, 1980). Adele and Elizabeth have very different memories of testing at school. Throughout Adele's infant years she has no recollection of testing at all, but junior school saw end of year tests, which dictated their ranking within the class based on the subjects taught. Although this method boosted the confidence of more able pupils, it was particularly demoralizing to the consistently low achieving pupils who were often physically punished for academic failure rather than supported with their learning.

The first nationally assessed examinations Elizabeth took in primary school were the Key Stage 2 Standard Assessment Tasks (SATs) which through were introduced to give targets to be met in each subject for pupils in specific year groups (Brisard and Menter, 2008). As explained by Kassem et. al. (2009) SATs can also be used to advise parents of their child's progress to ensure the child is receiving a good education or to identify any problems. Elizabeth's memory of testing, specifically SATs, whether it was due to the setting she was being taught in or just because they were relatively new, is that she doesn't remember being put under a great deal of pressure. She knew they were exams they had to take, but there was no real sense of them being

the most important task they had to complete. A report by Garsed, (2002) highlights that it is currently felt that not only are children put under too much pressure, but that they are being tested too young when they are still developing socially and that the examinations therefore are counter-productive. Although unlike Adele's experience, with the threat of physical punishment for poor results, it is clear that pressure of testing can be a real problem, and the lack thereof for Elizabeth may be seen as quite exceptional throughout education.

SATs are not only used to evaluate the child, but also the school as these are used as a criteria for league tables (Kassem and Garratt, 2009), therefore it may be seen that the emphasis is taken away from the child, their happiness and well-being. It can also be argued that SATs results are not a real reflection of every child's ability, and the reliability of SATs results, especially at Key Stage 1 and 2, has also come into question. Merrell (2009) highlights some of the basic factors which may affect a child's performance such as having a bad day on the day of the test, being unwell or being distracted, therefore these test results cannot give a clear indication of even the brightest of children: some schools specifically train the pupils to pass the exams (Raffan and Ruthven, 2005).

Following on from primary testing, both Adele and Elizabeth took GCSE examinations. In 1988 Adele was allowed to take a maximum of eight GCSEs; these qualifications being relatively new at the time (McKenzie, 2001). As a higher set they were encouraged to opt for a wide variety of subjects very similar to the English baccalaureate,

which the new coalition government is encouraging both schools and pupils to follow today. It is a common stance for the Conservative party to hark back to so called 'traditional values', and reflect upon a perceived golden era of education (Jones, 2003). In 1997 Elizabeth's GCSE choices were more limited as she could only choose certain subjects from different categories. Although at the time this seemed very unfair, upon reflection, it ensured she received a varied education as you couldn't for example choose all art based subjects. Both Adele and Elizabeth were encouraged to choose from a variety of subjects and Beck (2005) refers to a varied curriculum as being important to ensure children can develop into independent people, capable of making life choices and decisions themselves, so will therefore be with you for life. It was also compulsory for Adele and Elizabeth to take Religious Education at GCSE, as it still is now in most faith schools and also some state schools.

Adele was obliged to take three compulsory options, Mathematics, English and Religious Education; Science at this time was not viewed as a compulsory subject, and she did not take any GCSE science subjects. There had been criticisms over the option of 'dropping' certain subjects according to Holt (1980), particularly Science which it had been suggested should be compulsory until the age of sixteen. Science was later made a core subject by the Education Reform Act of 1988. Science was therefore an option which Elizabeth did have to take, but the school she attended only offered the dual Science award, this ensured however that there was time in her study to take on another subject, and in

total she took 11 GCSEs. Subject choice and status have long been contentious topics, often based on the economic and political climate of the time, as Paechter (2000) points out; social change is often reflected in curriculum change.

Choice of school itself was promoted by the Conservative government particularly regarding the subject of faith schools. The 1988 Education Act gave more parental choice but also brought in collective acts of worship as a necessary requirement for all maintained schools. The content of this is decided by the school's governing body and the Local Education Authority. Even though consideration of the school community should be the basis for its content, the Act clearly states that there should be a Christian emphasis. This statute has been criticized by The British Humanist Society which argues that collective worship goes against inclusion, and that the term 'worship' itself is religiously suggestive. (Parker-Jenkins et al, 2005). Yet the current non-statutory guidance provided for the teaching of religious education in English schools, states that both community and faith schools should learn about a range of faiths and beliefs, and that religious education in all schools should be based on providing spiritual, moral and social development (DfE, 2010).

Religion has always played a very large role in all aspects of education: as discussed by Kassem and Murphy (2009) there is great influence from the Church in the teacher training organisations, feeding down to school level. Some faith based schools have been criticized for lacking a broad curriculum, and that the religious influence within the school can have a direct effect on the

teaching of various subjects. For example, sex education in faith schools is taught in adherence to the particular faith. The religious agenda of a school can infiltrate all aspects of school life; teacher's individual opinions can help incorporate a hidden curriculum, thereby promoting particular values or beliefs. This is particularly important within Catholic provision where the school's governing body, who usually consist of clergy members, decide staff employment. The nature of this promotion has to be assessed especially when many faith schools are partially state funded (Parker-Jenkins et al, 2005). In contrast to this faith school supporters believe as both taxpayers and parents they have the right to send their children to a school of their choosing, and argue that faith schools are reflective of their community, culture and identity. It has also been argued that community (non-faith) schools, provide merely a tokenism of religion; they fail to address spirituality, undermine religion and at worst promote anti-religious beliefs, whereas faith schools promote a religious ethos which is at the heart of the school community and curriculum. This infuses into all aspects of school life, something which faith school supporters believe community schools fail to do (Parker- Jenkins et al, 2005).

Within primary faith school education, it may be difficult to ensure that the faith based teaching does not overrule all else, which is why, in our view, SATs at these earlier Key Stages are also beneficial as they ensure that the child is receiving a full education, including mathematics and English, and that emphasis is not solely on religious teaching. Within Secondary education, it remains compulsory that all schools (including

non-faith schools) must teach religious education, but it is not compulsory that testing must take place. Religious schools today follow their own faith based ethos as part of the teaching of religious education which is assessed and inspected through their particular Church's governing body. This may in itself create its own league table system, but a problem which may arise from this is that the pupils may be being taught in a way to simply pass the exams and that the true value of the religious teachings that they should be learning is not being understood. The level of influence and control religion plays within the education system is still prevalent in not only faith schools but state schools also. Religious education is recognised as a compulsory subject within the state system, this Meighan and Harber (2007) argue could be regarded as a means of indoctrination. However as reported by Shepherd (2011) around a quarter of state schools are breaking the law by choosing not to teach religious studies up to the age of 16 as is required, deciding to instead focus the teaching on the core subjects.

Conclusions

Upon reflection, Elizabeth feels very lucky to have received the education she did, whilst Adele feels that new education acts and policies cannot truly come to fruition for the benefit of pupils unless there is the financial support behind it. Although for her at the time, tests, assessments, changes and policy all seemed very unpleasant and unnecessary she can see now what impact they had upon her life and why certain policies were in place, and the benefits she gained from them. Both Adele and Elizabeth were unaware of the reasons as to why their education was as it was,

but despite their different experiences have identified a number of trends which ran throughout both their time in education. From religious influence to the National Curriculum, to assessments and the choices available, none were unique to Adele or Elizabeth's time in education, and are continuing themes throughout.

When reviewing more recent policies, New Labour and the current Coalition government's views, the emphasis on religion can still be seen. Upon reviewing the idea of choice within the education market place, New Labour pushed for more diversity thus further supporting the need for Faith schools within our education system (Tomlinson, 2003). Today many Catholic schools are being recommended to become academies in order for them to be able to maintain their values (Butt, 2011). Whilst attending these schools it is easy to be unaware of the controversy surrounding faith or more in particular Catholicism, but on reflection both Adele and Elizabeth can see the influence it had on their individual educational experiences and how access to certain institutions can create inequality. Yet whether children are educated in faith or community schools the subjects of faith and choice will always be contentious, for as Parker et al (2005, p147) state, "No education is ever value or culture free".

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Shifts in political power and their effects on education policy, reform and opportunity

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Government policy, initiatives and political reforms play a major role in shaping and adapting the way in which the country's education system has provided for its people (Chitty, 2009). As highlighted by Ball (2008), educational reform provides a platform for sectors of society to develop and flourish academically, or as Lawson and Garrod (1996) acknowledge, further hinder and constrain educational provision and opportunity for children from working class families. Olssen et al. (2004) make a link from how a political party's bias to a variant of social class, directly influences the placement of financial and educational provision in society. A study undertaken in 2005 by Taylor (2006), (cited in Harber, 2008) investigating social class and its effects on educational attainment concludes that in more affluent areas, the vast majority of eleven year olds achieve level 5 in the national English test and 94% of fifteen year olds gain five or more passes at GCSE at grade C and above.

Conversely, of the children from a more deprived background, just 13% are likely to get the top level five in the national English test for eleven year olds and only 24% of fifteen year olds

achieve the five or more GCSEs at grade C and above.

The focus of this article is to help distinguish and uncover the dovetailing effects of how the transfer of power in government has, throughout Michael and Lewis's career in education, affected the educational opportunities and divides associated with social class, political agenda and reform. Michael's educational background which began in September of 1997 follows a conventional route from primary into secondary, through to sixth form and finally onto university. Michael's primary school was selected following numerous visits to various primary schools in Cheshire. His secondary school was chosen from the notion that the primary school had a history of being a feeder school for the secondary, furthermore it was proximity of the school that provided the foremost appeal. Michael's economic background is middle class, as both Michael's parents have a professional occupation, furthermore this has additionally shaped and fashioned Michael's future opportunities in education. Lewis's journey through education which began four years earlier in September of 1993 followed a less conventional route. This is primarily due to changes to career direction through further and higher education, resulting in studying a range of self-funded qualifications at a number of institutions. Growing up in a rural area of Lancashire, Lewis's experience of primary and secondary school encompassed large schools catering for the majority of the local community. Similar to Michael, Lewis's secondary school was closely connected in location and partnership to his primary school allowing a smooth and uncomplicated transition. Lewis became the first

member of his immediate family to study at university after considerable influence from his parents and other family members to further his career prospects and development as an individual. The main difference between Michael and Lewis's educational expedition is the timing of the entrance into primary school. Lewis enrolled into primary school during a period of conservative government; on the contrary, Michael attended school during New Labour's tenure. Both circumstances offered clear diversity and focus in terms of approach to educational policy that greatly shaped their initial impressions of school life. From 1993 to 1997 conservative rule emphasized promotion of excellence, whilst post 1997 under New Labour, the focus was an inclusion and opportunity for all initiative.

Before discussing and looking through Michael and Lewis's experiences of educational policy and reform throughout their time in education, it is important to first look at the underlying political climate of education at such times. The seven years from 1986 saw vast reconstructions to the way in which the education system was directed. During this time Britain was governed and led by Conservative government in the hands of John Major. Major's predecessor, Margret Thatcher had imposed national marketization of public services, policies, social structures and, as Ball (2008) highlights as the most contested, education. As Whitty and Power (2000) demonstrate, this transformation which gained considerable momentum between 1986 and 1987, laid out the cornerstone for our own educational pathways as parental choice, school advertising and equality of opportunity helped

create a more competitive and complex route through education.

Education marketization, as described by Ball (2008), was the transition between a system internally administered and governed which supplied its own agendas by meeting the requirements of the students, parents and teachers. Through marketization, this developed into an externally influenced environment known as 'Compulsory Competitive Tendering' (CCT), where budgeting and socioeconomic choice was allocated by the schools themselves (Olssen et al., 2004). The development of marketization within education had prominent effects on the early stages of Lewis' time at primary school. One significant outcome of the incentive, highlighted by Olssen et al. (2004), was the increase in pressure from the government for students to excel and succeed. The responsibility and expectations of students to perform was measured on time-assessed, businesslike conclusions of cost, economic outcome and individual performance. This vision has, in essence, reproduced educational goals that appeared after the 1870 Education Act where a shift in political power recognized factors such as international trade and standardized education of the masses as paramount to the economic success of the country (Armytage, 1970). McCann (1970, p134) discussed the notion of having an educated workforce of 'skilled artisans' was encouraged by industrial figureheads at the time. The Conservative's agenda of creating future leaders responsible for the country's economic growth through the education system is very similar in context (Arthur, 2003).

Lewis' first memories and understanding of this ideology are from his transition between Y1 and Y2 where eight students from his year including himself were affected by the school's decision to hold certain students back, whilst progressing others a year ahead. Due to Lewis' progress within mathematics and in particular his reading, writing and communicational skills, two fellow students and himself were rerouted and merged into Y3 with another year group. This was a slightly anxious time in primary school as the group of children Lewis had spent two years building friendships with were replaced with older students whom he was unfamiliar with. In addition, there were many questions regarding the difficulty and type of activities covered, the strictness of the teacher and the potential problems Lewis may face generating new friendships. Within a short space of time however, these questions were answered with a smooth and well-balanced introduction to new classmates whilst the activities and workload was fluently and gradually developed through more familiar teaching methods and principles of learning. In reflection, Lewis has been able to pick out its advantages to his own education as many social, cognitive and communicational traits have been harnessed and developed which may have not occurred in the standard structure.

Some years later, the academy schools programme is a direct example of how marketization has developed and evolved. The notion of academy schools was launched by the New Labour government in 2000 and focused heavily in the party's manifesto as an aim to replace failing and underperforming schools (Leo, et al. 2002). This policy affected Michael's own

experience, his parents were attracted by the way his school marketed itself with academy status at the forefront of their recruitment promotion. Although the academy transformation provided numerous commercial positives for the school, it negatively affected Michael's education. As the emphasis on Religious Studies grew, Michael's preferred subject, Physical Education, was shown a considerably reduced volume of focus and funding. Throughout Michael's time at 6th form, copious amounts of trips to visit allied religious schools in central Africa and religious based field trips were offered; however this endeavor came at the expense of sports trips, as all funding was cut for the football team's overseas tours.

The 1997 elections provided one of Britain's most prominent and iconic shifts in parliamentary power cementing a revolutionary blueprint for societal, economic and educational reform (Simon and Ward, 2010). New Labour's control in parliament led to immediate changes that swiftly surfaced through the House of Lords and appeared in government appreciated by many political commentators for the party's haste (Ball, 2008). The White Paper: Excellence in Schools of 1997 which was published shortly after Blair took office, set out a long-term reconstruction of educational reform. A number of new agendas were to be implemented that, as described by Simon and Ward (2010), had the potency to completely reshape the education system. The creation of the six principles of the education reform agenda that featured in the White Paper of 1997 (DfEE, 1997, p11) helped underpin David Blunkett's foundational strategies. Four key principles helped cement New Labour's level of commitment to education by stating that, "zero

tolerance in under performing schools”, “standards matter more than structure”, “education will be at the heart of the government” and that, “policies will be designed to benefit the many, not just the few.” These statements helped demonstrate that the structure and focus of our education would be very different to that of our previous years, the effects were felt immediately.

One of the White Paper’s notable incentives, which began in September 1998 as Lewis began his fifth year in primary school, was the the ‘Literacy Hour’ where key reading, listening, creative thinking and communicational skills were portrayed through the form of books and other media in a holistic class environment (Stannard and Huxford, 2007). Lewis can remember at the time very much looking forward to the Literacy Hour as it was a learning experience that allowed his ideas and creativity to flourish through verbal interaction and by listening to what others had to offer. As a predominately kinaesthetic learner, Lewis found at a young age that his vocabulary and use of language were benefited through conversation and discussion, something that the Literacy Hour facilitated in a fresh and exciting way (Hanke, 2000). The Literacy Hour was New Labour’s predetermined pipeline aiming towards 80% of 11-year-old children to have an expected, standardized level of literacy by 2002. This target, as Hanke (2000) elaborates upon, was a step too high for the new government as failure to reach annual targets set by the secretary of state, Estelle Morris, resulted in her resignation the eve of the initiatives intended time-plan after details of consistent failures arose in the media. However, it was not only the government that suffered through the course of the programme. Many

primary teachers rejected the Literacy Hour due to the governments control over content, delivery and expected learner outcomes hindering and suspending teachers own creativity and learner relationships (Fisher, 2002). In response, Lewis notes how it is now easier to understand and relate to the pressures teachers faced at the time and the stress of reaching unattainable targets must have had. Although unaware of such dilemmas at the time, Lewis remains very appreciative and indebted for his teachers commitment and efforts to supply him with the language, communicational and creative skills that have acted as a key facilitator to his development as a learner and individual.

For Michael, it was the national curriculum assessment, also commonly referred to as SATS testing, which changed his outlook and development in education. The opening test Michael took in education was the Key Stage 2 SATS test during the summer term of 2003 and was tested on his knowledge of the three core subjects, Maths, English and Science. Grahamslaw (2011), purports that SATS testing was a government aim to show a child’s strengths and weaknesses when faced with the same question, conversely a discourse can be made, as Grahamslaw suggests that a good teacher should be well aware of how well a child is doing and there is no such need for regimented testing. Similar to that of the criticisms reported of the Literacy Hour, removing creative and personalised assessment criteria essentially seemed to overlook the White Paper’s statement of policies becoming a benefit to all. Instead, the current format continued to support the unpopular policy led educational structure that placed the

preferred teacher and learner assessment relationship further down the line. Michael found the test extremely challenging at such a young age: his SATS grade did not match his target grade set by his teacher, and Michael's self-esteem saw a rapid decline at the age of ten. An investigation carried out by Joiner, et al. (1999) provided evidence that stressful life events predicted subsequent decreases in self-esteem, underpinning that SATs testing can provide positives in terms of understanding a child's ability at Key Stage 2 level; on the other hand rigorous testing at a young age can have negative implications on personal and psychological characteristics and momentarily hinder the development of a child.

Also in 2003, another nationalized incentive of the White Paper (1997) featured during Lewis's transition between Y9 and Y10. The 'Fresh-Start' policy was an initiative that provided a bursary of money to address failing schools with a framework and opportunity to dramatically improve standards (Matthews and Kinchington, 2006). The Fresh-Start scheme took various forms of intervention starting with extra inspections and integration of LEA support, renaming and new management to more serious procedures consisting of complete closure of schools and locally relocating students to performing and successful schools (Hindmoor, 2004). It was determined that key traits of successful practice included a school's social and cultural understanding, internal leadership, lesson structures and planning and partnerships with local businesses and learning organizations. With these ideas in mind, the Fresh-Start policy collaborated with schools embedded in the

Conservative party's initiative, Education Action Zones (EAZ) to tackle educational deprivation and improve failing schools (Matthews and Kinchington, 2006). Fresh-Start action plans at the turn of the millennium were put into place to help 44 schools (21 secondary and 23 primary) all of which came from recommendations from the LEA's (Ball, 2008).

The school in which the whole of Lewis' secondary education took place was given the funding, government backing and responsibility to transform one such 'underachieving school' into an institution that would reignite community values, academic success and internal leadership. This was quite an exciting time for students at Lewis' school, as the partnership demonstrated that the school's history of success and recognition from the LEA and local government could be the catalyst towards providing better learning experiences and opportunities to a whole new community. something that Lewis was very proud to be part of. The initiative induced many changes to Lewis' education, most notably was the introduction of 30 new students to his year group and having the opportunity to share school facilities. Lewis was very interested at the time to learn from the new students what it was like to be part of, what the government deemed, a failing school. The students expressed a number of issues, most significantly the extremely poor quality of behavior management, which at times prevented any learning to take place due the severity of incidents. Hook and Vass (2011), help clarify the long term impacts poor behavior has on students who have the drive and desire to achieve by stating that consistency of sincere

learning obstruction can greatly damage a motivated learners attitude and inclination to perform at his or hers capability.. As the academic year progressed, Lewis recalls that it was plain to see that the majority of students transferred were relishing and enjoying their experiences of the new school, noting in particular the positive attitudes of teachers, staff and other pupils and how this collaboratively produced a supportive and progressive learning environment. This period of understanding other school experiences allowed Lewis to reflect on his own with a great sense of pride, fulfillment and privilege knowing that he had been part of what New Labour describes as a school raising and setting new standards for excellence and achievement (Chitty, 2009). Lewis firmly believes that realizing the distinct dynamics of education in society at a young age provided him with many valuable opinions and ethics towards educational opportunity and in particular reference to New Labour's initial vision of 'policies will be designed to benefit the many, not just the few' as mentioned earlier (DfEE, 1997, p11).

Provision of opportunity provided by New Labour government can be evidently correlated with social class shaping the future of both Michael and Lewis' pursuits into further and higher education. Archer, et al. (2003) states that almost all young people from middle class and professional families go onto university. The Robbins Report, (1963, cited in Lawton, 2005) was pivotal in the transformation of widening participation in higher education. The report concluded that there was an open pool of ability; therefore higher education should be opened to all socio-economic backgrounds and abilities that

would benefit. Prior to the Robbins Report, university was mainly provided for the elite sector in society, statistically in 1938, less than two per cent of the population attended university (Blackburn and Jarman, 1993). The previous conservative government issued a green paper in 1990 that proposed to offer university to a wider group, as this followed the report. This was due to the disappointing economic performance in comparison to its other economic competitors (DES, 1985). In conclusion to the higher education debate, New Labour government finalised the information provided by previous green papers and in 1998 government issued the white paper for Higher Education for the 21st Century. The paper focused on shifting the emphasis from elitist concept to a higher education for all approach (DfEE, 1998). For us, then, the decision to attend university was relatively straightforward, as both our career aspirations to be a Physical Education teacher mandate a degree as a prerequisite for the job. The dominant incentive for attending university was the personal aspect of development, which can be associated with Bourdieu's cultural capital philosophy. Bourdieu (2004) asserts that individuals are made up of characteristics that can be sub divided into cultural capital. The institutional concept to the four-part model purports that a person will improve their cultural capital by gaining more qualifications, supporting our initial decisions to further our studies into higher education.

In conclusion, a number of factors have had positive and negative impacts on both Michael and Lewis throughout the course of their time in education. Political reform has underpinned the

major grounds of the provision and opportunity provided for both. Numerous developments in parliament have subsequently had the foremost affect on the educational experience of both Michael and Lewis, therefore providing an explanation into why the two are where they are presently. The introduction of marketisation in schools had a significant effect in Lewis development during the primary stages, as the increase in pressure on students to maintain a strict high performance was reflected in Lewis attitude at that time. On the other hand, the introduction of the academy schools program triggered problems for Michael, mainly within the curriculum and specific subject areas in his school. As the Anti-Academy Alliance strongly support and oppose, some subject areas received higher emphasis at the expense of others, as academy status allows the school to have full jurisdiction over the curriculum delivered: this had a negative implication on Michael's time during the latter stages of his high school experience.

The introduction of New Labour into office in 1997 provided a reformation in Michael and Lewis' educational journey. New Labour provided a new incentive to education as demonstrated in the excellence in schools white paper, issued on 18th July 1997. The paper aimed to instill three principles that would improve the way in which education was delivered. Following the 'education at the heart of the government' principle, Lewis benefitted from one of the initiatives set by New Labour in 1997. The Fresh Start policy allowed collaboration with a nearby school that Lewis relished as he believed his development enhanced dramatically, as the prospect to interact and share his knowledge and understanding with

other students from diverse backgrounds and class groups allowed him to progress as a well rounded learner. Conversely, it was the national standards set by the previous conservative government that negatively affected Michael's development in education. In summary, Michael felt that the pressure at such a young age inhibited his personal experience at the time. Although many things have influenced Michael and Lewis' education, it would appear that parliamentary shifts have had pivotal impacts on both experiences; whilst social class and social mobility has also influenced the opportunities available to both. It is also important to note, that it would appear that the changes in parliament have had a negative implications on Michael's experience; however his social class background has provided numerous positive opportunities for him. Furthermore, the political shifts in power have provided the focal positive for Lewis in his educational expedition.

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