

Constructing “the parents” in primary schools in Greece: special education teachers’ whispers

Evangelia Boutskou

University of Aristoteles
Thessaloniki, Greece

The Greek educational system is highly centralized and the communication between parents and teachers is considered as a marginal or a grey area in the school function. Educational legislation favours parents’ involvement rather than participation and implies an imbalance between parents and professionals. Drawing on a study using a life history approach, this paper considers the ways in which special education teachers in both special education schools and integration units perceive the parents of their students. The boundaries between expert knowledge and personal experience form a contested terrain of power relationships. These relationships are shaped by circumstances and are highly contextualized. Special school teachers deem parents in a deficit discourse while Integration unit teachers deem parents in a client discourse. The construction of the “parents” seems to be a gendered and social class issue as well. This work also reveals some implications for the teachers’ training programmes in order to ensure a more equal partnership at more inclusive and democratic schools.

Discourses on constructing the other

Discourses are constructed through ways of talking about the other through the media, policies and social practices. Through discourses we see groups of ‘other’ people in a particular way and refer to them as if they were ‘really’ thus (Parker, 1992). Through discourses we also shape our opinion about how ‘other’ people are and what it means to be a part of a group (Fulcher, 1999). Such discourses usually support the status quo and “common understandings” (Gramsci, 1971, pp326) while at the same time they work towards the concept of deviance making some groups out as different.

They ‘homogenise’ people within a group and create the ‘norm or the ‘ideal’ hiding the interests of certain groups who assumes ‘legitimacy’ over others for example professionals over parents. The creation of a dominant discourse allows the creation of ‘counter’ discourses which challenge the hegemonic discourse. The social construction model of disability is an example of questioning the authority of a discourse (Moore, Beazley & Maelzer, 1998) and the ‘orthodoxy’ (Sikes, 1997) of the professionals.

Within the official discourse of schooling the home-schools relations have been silenced in the Greek legislation.

Actually the communication between parents and teachers/ professionals is considered as a marginal or grey area. The 2817 Law of 2000 avoids the discourse “parents” and uses the phrase “the ones who care for the people with special needs”.

The only paragraph referring to parents is when it is mentioned that “(parents) are invited by the relevant services in order to state their opinion so that the course of actions should be formed” (my translation). Parents’ involvement and not participation implies an imbalance of power between parents and professionals and uses parents as facilitators of the procedures (Fulcher, 1999). The work of schools is underpinned by the powerful discourses created by ‘experts’ and simultaneously silences the voices of parents (mainly women) who are perceived as child-carers (Smith, 1987). These boundaries are perceived by feminist writers as artificial constructions (Cole, 2004). The school is where the home-private domain meets the public-professional world (David, 1993; Sikes, 1997) and as such it is a contested terrain. The aim of this work is to report the way that special education teachers of primary schools in Greece construct the notion of the “parents” of children with special needs.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Evangelia Boutskou, e-mail ebutsuku@otenet.gr

Research

This paper is based on a life history approach (Boutskou, 2006) but the purpose of this article is to present the way special education teachers refer to parents of children with special needs. I chose the words “teachers’ whispers” and not “teachers’ perceptions” because teachers were not asked directly about parents. Teachers referred to parents during the interviews while talking

I interviewed six teachers from different types of Special Education schooling (Special Schools and Integration Units) because there is a dynamic interplay between person and context.

The choice of school context was purposive but the choice of teachers was opportunistic, at random (Erben, 1998). I interviewed three teachers from Special Schools with different types of Special

Education Needs in each of the following: School for the blind, School for children with motor difficulties, and School for children with severe learning difficulties. I also interviewed three teachers from Integration Units at mainstream schools each of the following: Integration Units situated in a rural area, in an area with low socio-economic status, and in a high socio-economic status area.

The Special Education teachers who took part had a working experience between 5-17 years (Table 1). Plummer (1983) claims that a good informant should be someone who is fully aware and involved in the particular culture. Working for 5 years in Special Education is adequate time to have many experiences that help one build his/her theory and attitude towards Special Education and difference (Erben, 1998). The analysis was based on grounded theory and the constant comparative method.

Table 1: Characteristics of participants

| Teacher characteristics | SCHOOL CONTEXT | | | | | |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| | Special School | | | Integration Unit | | |
| | Blind | Motor difficulties | Severe difficulties | In high status area | in rural status area | In low status area |
| Name* | Ann | Kate | John | Mary | Michael | Leo |
| Gender | Female | female | male | female | male | male |
| Age | 40 | 38 | 51 | 46 | 40 | 45 |
| Marital status | Married, a child at High School | Single | Married, Two children at High School | Married, Two children at University | Married, Two children at High School | Divorced, Two children at University |
| Years of Mainstream experience | 0 | 10 | 7 | 17 | 8 | 8 |
| Years of Special Education experience | 15 | 7 | 16 | 5 | 9 | 14 |
| Total year experience | 15 | 17 | 23 | 22 | 17 | 22 |

* Pseudonyms have been used.

Discussion

The way teachers talk about parents, depends on the context. At special schools parents of children with disabilities seem not to have many choices. Schooling seems to be for them a privilege rather than right. Teachers deem parents of children with disabilities in a deficit approach.

“Parents think that they do their duty, they send their child at a special school. They do not have another choice since their child is

*not accepted anywhere else.”
(John)*

Teachers who work at integration units deem parents of children with learning difficulties in a client approach. This happens because parents have to give their permission in order their children to withdraw from the

mainstream class and attend some hours at the Integration Unit. This means that teachers

have to persuade parents that their teaching will be beneficial to the child.

Teachers from special schools

Teachers who work at special schools construct the parents according to a deficit approach. It is assumed that the disability of the child per se causes hardship for the family (Todd, 2003) and that the child with disabilities "disables" the whole family. Sometimes it is implied that the more disabled the child the more difficult the relation with their parents.

"Both children and parents are of low level, they also have problems" (John)

"The relations with the blind children are good. The relations with the parents of children with multiple disabilities are bad because some parents can not accept their problem. I acknowledge the dual problem they face; they as parents and their child's as well. Because the parents face the problem too..." (Ann)

There is a vicious circle. Children's disabilities are deemed as the reason for parents' deficit. On the other hand it is viewed that parents' problems create obstacles to children's progress and affects the relation with teachers. In many cases in professional literature parents (especially of children perceived as being on the autistic spectrum) were blamed and pathologized concerning their children's disabilities (Roll-Patterson, 2001). Some professionals argue that parents went through different stages (denial, isolation, reaction formation, projection and regression) and if they were not, they perceived as dysfunctional (Roll-Patterson, 2001). Foucault (1973) talked about the professional gaze as a way to show the deliberate medicalization in order to obtain power. Teachers from special schools use the deficit discourse to describe both children and parents.

The discourse of care is prominent in teachers' talking and it is used in an apolitical way that implies needs rather than rights and entitlement (Blackmore, 1999). Parents are categorized by teachers into "not caring parents" and "caring parents". The criterion of seems to be parents' attitude to teachers/professionals. If parents do not cooperate with the professionals/teachers they are viewed as not caring and if parents cooperate with professionals/teachers they are deemed as caring.

"First of all, they (parents) do not come at school...Very few parents care and they have better results with their children." (John)

"I can not stand the fact that they (parents) say that their child does

thousands of activities and exercises at home and the child can not do these at school. This is something that I can not stand and our relations are in conflict. Of course there are parents that are normal, others that are indifferent. It depends" (Ann)

Parents who are deemed as "caring" are the ones who help their child at home and cooperate with the school professionals. It is also assumed that if parents do not question the expert's work, the child has progress.

"if parents can help the child at home and cooperate with the teacher, the psychologist and the social worker there are results... Other children that have some abilities and they do not receive any help from home, they do not show progress" (John)

"We have good relation with the mothers whose children show some progress, we do not have any problem. We have a good relation because they discuss with me some things and they want to listen to my view or they ask me to consult them." (Kate)

"When parents have the power, they help their child and they choose the best professionals (for private sessions)" (John)

"Our relation with parents depends on which child we talk about and whose mother. The education level of the mother and how much time they work with the children at home play important role. Because when I see that a mother can not work with the child I can not give the child a program. When you see that the mother is able to work with the child you intensify the program and give more assignments. You increase your demands and expectations" (Kate)

It is interesting the fact that some of the above' comments reveal that the child's progress and the home-school relation is a class issue (Hanafin & Lynch, 2002) as well. "Parents" seems to be a gendered term that usually means mothers (Cole, 2004). Mothers are the ones that are deemed responsible for children's education at home.

Teachers from integration units

The nexus of teacher-parent is deemed by the teachers at Integration Units as a nexus of service provider and service recipient. Teachers think that parents behave as consumers of the educational service and

intervene into teachers' work. They negotiate about the educational process and complain as informed consumers. They are driven by individualistic concerns, private interests (Vincent, 1996) rather than by collective welfare and rights (Munn, 1993). Teachers think that parents worry about the stigma of their child.

"Parents are interested in the way you work with the child. Parents intervene in the teachers' work. Parents complain about the classmates in the Integration Unit. They do not want children of lower ability at the Integration Unit and make comparisons all the time... This derives by the fact that both children with disabilities and children with learning difficulties attend the Integration Unit. Once I discussed it with some parents and they accepted that they worried about what people would say for their child..." (Michael)

"Parents do not want their children to attend this class. They do not even want to discuss it. Although the mainstream teacher told parents that 'the child has some problems and he will receive more help there (at Integration Unit) and he can overcome his problem.' They answered 'No, I do not want my child to be mocked by the others and call him stupid.'" (Leo)

Education is also deemed as an outcome that parents should be happy and satisfied with it. This raises issues about ethical dimensions of the job and it reveals that teachers' work is seen not as the outcome of pedagogic choices but the outcome of pressures outside school.

"I was tired chasing parents and trying to persuade them to register their child at the Integration Unit." (Leo)

"When parents are involved teachers defend by doing the exact opposite of what they used to do. If he did not give assignments and parents complain, he will start giving a lot of homework. If he gave homework and parents complain about it he will stop it. You do whatever parents want, although you may know that this is not helpful for the child. This is the beaten track and you run less risks of being exposed to further criticism". (Michael)

The market ideology makes teachers think of working class parents as helpless or passive or on the periphery of the school function (Corbett, 1998; Hanafin and Lynch, 2002) and rich parents as active, energetic confirming the social class divisions (Gilbourne & Youdell, 2000).

"There is no welfare from the state. Primary education lasts for some years, after that? At this point money plays an important role. I mean rich parents can make thousand of things and interventions whereas the poor ones do not have the money." (Michael)

"The parents of the children are well informed and they know their rights and the laws." (Mary)

"Parents want their children to attend a mainstream school. They like it because they see that their children may be blind but they can compete with the seeing kids...Parents use their public relations and I do not know what else they do and they try their children to attend the mainstream school. This is how this system functions." (Leo)

Parents and teachers are actors in social fields and they create and negotiate their boundaries all the time. There is unequal power divide between the public space of school and the private space of home (Cole, 2004). The power of the teachers as professionals lies in the possession of the expertise and specialized body of knowledge and skills because of their training. On the other hand parents who share unpaid, unlimited time and effort with their children are not acknowledged as partners. However, if parents have the power and the status their voice can be heard at schools sometimes.

Concluding thoughts

Although in the literature parents' experience is placed at the center (McIntyre, 2004; Roll-Peterson, 2001) the gap between theoretical professional knowledge and practical experience it is not narrowing. Although there is a growing literature which offers insiders' perspectives of disability (Clough & Barton, 1998; Moore et al 1998) teachers seem to ignore it. There are professional assumptions which overestimate the problems of the parents in coming to terms with the child's needs (Roll-Peterson, 2001). However it is not the caring of the child but the procedure (time, money, effort, information) through which the family can claim what it has the right to acquire. Through

the deficit discourse parents’ practices are treated as problematic while teachers’ as non problematic. Through the client discourse the teachers’ and parents’ practices are driven by the market ideology and individualistic aims.

This work argues that listening to teachers is a way of gaining understandings and interpretations of the perceived imbalance of power. In both contexts Special Schools and Integration Units parents are not deemed as resources where professionals can report and exchange important information about the child. Partnership was not seen as a goal to be

achieved. Although it is acknowledged that the best results are achieved when home school and professionals cooperate, such relationships are missing from the schools. Teachers should be educated in ways to question their authority and reinvent their role showing empathy and respect to the parents. They should be willing to negotiate with a shared sense of purpose. The teacher’s training programmes should try to explore issues related to teachers –parents’ relations and their roles in an effort to ensure equal partnership between parents and professionals at more inclusive settings.

References

- Armstrong, D. (1995) *Power and Partnership in Education: Parents, Children and Special Educational Needs*. London: Routledge.
- Blackmore, J. (1999) *Troubling Women: Feminism, Leadership and Educational Change*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Boutskou, E. (2006) *Towards Inclusion? Life histories of special education teachers in primary schools in Greece*. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Sheffield, Sheffield UK.
- Clough, P. & Barton, L. (Eds) (1998) *Articulating with Difficulty: Research Voices in Inclusive Education*. London: Paul Chapman Publishing.
- Cole, A.B. (2004) *Mother-Teachers: insights into inclusion*. London: Fulton.
- Corbett, J. (1998) *Special Educational Needs in the Twentieth Century: A Cultural Analysis*. London: Cassell.
- David, M. (1993) *Parents, Gender and education Reform*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Erben, M. (1998) *Biography and education: a reader*. London: Falmer Press.
- Foucault, M. (1973) *The birth of the Clinic* (trans. A. Sheridan) London: Tavistock.
- Fulcher, G. (1999) *Disabling Policies? A Comparative Approach to Education, Policy and Disability*. London: Falmer.
- Gilbourne, D. & Youdell, D. (2000) *Rationing Education: Policy, Practice Reform and Equity*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Gramsci, A. (1971) *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (ed. & trans. Q. Hoare & G. Novel Smith). New York: International
- Hanafin, J. & Lynch, A. (2002). Peripheral voices: parental involvement, social class and educational disadvantage. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 23(1), 35-49.
- McIntyre, L. (2004) *The Time of Her Life*. London: Jonathan Cape.
- Moore, M., Beazley, S. & Maelzer, J. (1998) *Researching Disability Issues*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Munn, P. (1993) *Parents and Schools: Customers, Managers or Partners?* London: Routledge.
- Parker, I. (1992) *Discourse Dynamics: Clinical Analysis for Social and Individual Psychology*. London: Routledge.
- Roll-Patterson, L. (2001) Parents talk about how it feels to have a child with cognitive disability. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 16(1), 1-14.
- Sikes, P. (1997) *Parents who Teach: Stories from home and from School*. London: Vassell.
- Smith, D. (1987) *The Everyday World as problematic: A Feminist Sociology*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.
- Plummer, K. (1983) *Documents of life: an introduction to the problems and the literature of humanistic method*. London: George Allen & Unwinn.
- Todd, E.S. (2003) Disability and the restructuring of welfare: the problem of partnerships with parents. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 7(3), 281-196.
- Vincent, C. (1996) *Parents and Teachers: Power and Participation*. London: Falmer Press.