

## **Home-School Partnerships with Families who are Diverse- Rhetoric or Reality?**

**Leanne Longfellow**

**Tabor College Adelaide**

**leanneha@gmail.com**

Many educators encourage their students to be involved in social action through involvement in humanitarian programs in the wider community. These philanthropic activities assist in the development of important values such as acceptance of diversity and rejection of inequality and oppression. However, this activism can be undermined by the educational institution's approach to diversity, particularly in the area of home-school partnerships, which may conflict with purported values. Whilst the rhetoric of social justice is enshrined in policy, the reality is that despite a number of initiatives to lessen the differences in educational outcomes for disadvantaged groups, inequality abounds in schools (Mills, 2005). The majority of teachers in Australia are from Anglo-Australian middle-class backgrounds (Allard & Santoro, 2006) and have little personal experience of diversity. Teachers enter education with cultural scripts which shape interaction (Goldstein & Lake, 2000). Coupled with this barrier is that few pre-service teachers learn about home school relationships and their complexity and the majority of pre-service teachers feel ill prepared to deal with this issue (Goldstein & Lake, 2000).

Teachers from relatively privileged, mono-cultural backgrounds may be more comfortable with a distanced, sporadic remedying of deprivation rather than an integrated lifestyle approach which requires demonstrating a daily, personal commitment to social justice. Research reports (Zaretsky, 2003, Lytle & Bordin, 2000) that positive home-school relationships lead to improved educational outcomes for students and provide important role modelling for students in embracing difference. Despite this, many families are marginalised by the institutional authority of schools and consequently choose not to be involved in their children's education (Mills & Gale, 2004). Hence some schools may be promoting social justice through humanitarian projects but are reinforcing and developing practices which discriminate against families who are diverse. This jarring dissonance will result in a lack of critical consciousness in students who believe in superficial attempts at addressing injustice rather than embracing transformative approaches.

Conspicuously absent from the literature on parent/ school relationships is the complicity of the institution in the breakdown of these relationships and the danger in the way that parents who are diverse are described. The next section attempts to reposition the reader via a case study in order to understand one parent's lived experience of being judged for not fitting in with the dominant culture. Although this is a case study of one incident, at one specific institution, at one specific point in time, the archetypal features of this case study surround everyone, every day.

### *Case Study: Max & Donna*

Max\*, a nine year old student, had a history of being excluded from schools for violent behaviour towards other students. He was unable to read, write or identify numbers as he had spent little time at school in the past four years. His mother Donna\* was a large, colourful, dishevelled character with a challenging past which followed her, not only in her visual appearance and mannerisms which conveyed her low- socioeconomic background, but also in the form of Max's file. Whilst the file contained the sparse facts of Max and Donna's troubled lives, the gaps in the text tended to be mentally embroidered by each reader with stereotypical and prejudicial opinions on why this family struggled. Donna approached a primary school a significant distance from her home to inquire about Max's enrolment after exhausting all attempts to enrol her son at a school close to home. This school was in a low to middle-class suburb within a developing area which primarily consisted of Anglo-Australian, nuclear families with young children. Upon enrolment Max was immediately singled out as being different due to the intersecting status distinctions of poverty, learning difficulties, speech problems and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).

John\*, the Principal of the school where I was a classroom teacher, was keen to enrol Max and to seek a partnership with the family in order to reduce the parent/ professional divide. He was aware that creating an atmosphere of social justice required a bottom up approach with open dialogue and a positive relationship between the parties. He was also aware of the inequality that exists between parents from low-socioeconomic backgrounds and professionals and that institutions have structural powers that parents cannot compete against as they do not have a voice. 'Moreover the assumption that having a voice is really just a matter of choice ignores the complex matrix of power relations that define living in Australian society and that enable some and inhibit others from having their say in what

counts as “good” schooling ‘(Mills & Gale, 2004). John was aware that Donna did not have a voice and was easily discredited as a mother because she was marginalised.

\* a psueduonym

Max was enrolled in my class and the first two weeks were straightforward, a honeymoon period where Max revelled in being a new student with a fresh start. The first indication of disquiet was when Max disappeared from the classroom, reappearing thirty minutes later at the doorway with a branch that had been sharpened to a fine point at the end. He ran screaming into the classroom, lunging the ‘spear’ at a boy who was seated at his desk. Fortunately I was able to tackle Max, remove the weapon from his grasp and ask a teaching assistant to remove the other students and obtain help. John quickly appeared and assisted to defuse the situation and gather more information on the antecedents for this event. Max claimed he had been offended by criticism of his drawing, but soon it was revealed that in the hope for a new start Max was not taking medication for ADHD.

### *The Stigma of ADHD*

The diagnosis of ADHD carries much stigma and has been the subject of virulent debates regarding the place of psycho-pharmaceuticals in treating this disorder in children (Alastair, 2008). There is an over-representation of boys from low-socio-economic families in the statistics of children with this disorder (Prosser, 2006). The usual suspects of ‘too much television and video games, food additives, bad parenting, lack of discipline and single mothers’ (Graham, 2006a, p. 1) feature prominently in the blame discourse. Donna resisted labelling her child with ADHD and articulated many times that she had difficulty with the concept of medicating her child. At previous schools she had been informed that her son must be medicated to attend school. Donna had complied with this direction, particularly since she felt that she did not have an alternative and it was implied that her knowledge was inferior to the professionals. Each time Max had a bout of particularly bad behaviour it was suggested that the medication be reviewed to ensure that he was receiving the correct dose to accommodate his growing body. This resulted in a slowly increasing dose of dexamphetamine which began to have serious side effects including insomnia, nausea and appetite suppression. Donna became increasingly worried about the long term effect of these stimulants on her son but was continually reassured by the school that she was doing the right thing. Singh (2002; 2004 cited in Graham, 2006 p. 8) refers to this plea from professionals that parents could be damaging their child by not providing them with the medication they

“need” as the ‘mother love/mother guilt’. It is paradoxical that Donna was forced to suppress her beliefs and was conditioned to view her child’s problems as being caused by inadequate parenting rather than able to challenge the power hierarchy that forces parents to medicate their child.

To offset the side effects that her son was experiencing from the medication for ADHD, Donna ensured that weekends and holidays were drug free. With this new school enrolment the opportunity was taken to see if Max could manage without medication. This violent incident resulted in Max resuming medication during school hours. Graham (2006a) states that mothers not only face accusations of bad parenting when their child is diagnosed with ADHD, they are also accused of medicating their child for their own benefit. Parents such as Donna who choose to take their children off stimulants and suffer from the ‘rebound effects of that medication which incidentally can cause behaviour far worse than that for which the child was originally medicated’ (Carlson & Kelly cited in Graham, 2006a p. 8) can only be considered as heroic. A mother who was self-interested would not take away this medication to bear the brunt of the difficult behaviour. However, challenging the social construction of ADHD ‘simply works to reaffirm that which it seeks to deny (Calhoun et al. 1997, cited in Graham, 2006b, p.1)’. As a parent of a child with ADHD Donna found that she received judgement and criticism and was denied the opportunity to question the institution. She was constructed as a passive recipient of the school’s knowledge and it was implied that the ‘good parent is constructed as one who...is involved but not too involved and who supports but does not challenge’ (Nakagawa, 2000, p. 456). As a classroom teacher I felt compelled to follow directives that Max must be medicated, although I struggled with the way in which Donna was positioned as peripheral to the decision making about her son. I also wondered whether the school was merely protecting its own legal interests and whether Donna’s low socio-economic background and poor education made it easier to disregard her opinion.

### *Habitus*

Bourdieu’s (1990) notion of habitus refers to the way that beliefs, values, speech, conduct, dress and manners are inculcated within the family. This unthinking way of responding predisposes individuals to choose certain pathways. Donna was from a low socio-economic background and was constrained by the social conditionings passed on from her parents. This low social and cultural capital combined with her gender and choice to be a stay at home mother resulted in powerlessness and discrimination. Max required extra attention due to

cognitive delay and behavioural issues, however, caring for a family member is an unpaid role which has no purchase in an environment where the emotional and physical labour of care has no commercial value. The cultural conditionings held by Donna were now being passed onto her son. Delpit (1993) discusses how discourse patterns, interactional styles and spoken and written language codes are barriers to those who are not insiders into the culture of power. This lack of insider knowledge was a barrier for Donna, particularly when communicating with professionals regarding Max's needs. Over time there were more behavioural issues with Max resulting in increased interactions with Donna. A strength perspective was drawn upon to assist in relationship building.

### *Strength Perspective*

I quickly recognised Donna's strengths as a parent, particularly in relation to her concern for her son. For example Donna made contact with the school staff a number of times when she felt that Max had not been treated fairly. Despite her hostile physical stance, heated speech and occasional swear word, I recognised her advocacy for her child and her willingness to be involved in the school, even though it was in a way not traditionally recognised by schools. I saw this strength as a foundation to build on and attempted to listen carefully without interrupting to show Donna respect, something which she stated she had not received in the past. I began to view Donna's complaints as valuable feedback for the school and as an invitation to enter into a problem solving process. I sought to act promptly and non-defensively with the aim of building empathy with Donna and to see possibilities where others did not as to listen to people is to empower them (Reinharz, 1988 cited in Fine, 1994). This empathy began to bear fruit when in a team meeting Donna was asked who provided her with support and her answer was the school.

### *Humanitarian Projects*

The school had a couple of humanitarian projects resulting from various teachers' involvement with overseas aid agencies. One of the projects involved fundraising for a well in India and another entailed supporting disadvantaged students overseas. These projects had been running for a number of years, were connected with the curriculum and were well supported by the school community. Fundraisers for these aid agencies were held at intervals throughout the year and a tokenistic social justice agenda was embraced. A number of teachers at the school realised that these humanitarian projects needed to be part of the wider

discourse of social justice and expressed as part of an authentic action rising from inner convictions rather than an annual ritual.

A large part of the school community appeared to have a contradictory perception of disadvantage within Australia. Students at the school had expressed negative comments regarding Australians who are disadvantaged which juxtaposed with the attitude expressed to those requiring assistance overseas. There was a degree of immunity from the extent of local disadvantage and an unwillingness to attempt to make a substantive difference as the situation was seen as intractable, the fault of the people themselves and beyond help. Perhaps the class homogeneity of the school community blinded them to other possibilities or this resistance may have been from the fear regarding their own privilege. Power can lead to the construction of a bounded sense of morality which can detach power holders from understanding the suffering of others (Thomas n.d.). The question for the staff was how to reverse and heal the damage caused by the discrimination displayed by this conservative, mainstream school community.

The teaching staff felt that the best approach to attempt to redress the inequity of this situation was to choose to act with moral courage when parents placed complaints regarding Max's behaviour and to provide Donna with a voice in order to provide legitimacy for her situation. An incident occurred when Max was under a great deal of stress and began swearing at the end of the day when parents entered the school grounds for the school pick up. A number of angry parents approached me to state their concerns with Max's enrolment at the school but this was quelled by declaring that the school were committed to educating and supporting Max and his family. I would not have been willing to be as direct as I was without the backing of the staff and leadership within the school. The staff hoped that modelling empathy towards this family would bear fruit for the students and counter discriminatory behaviour throughout their lives.

#### *Deficit Discourse of the Disadvantaged*

Delpit (1993) states that educators need to push 'gatekeepers to open doors to a variety of styles and codes' (p. 134). This means viewing the parent/ teacher relationship in a new light, particularly in the area of power, control and creative thinking in order to reach out to those who are excluded (DEEWR, 2009). It also means awareness by educators of the discourse of 'otherness', which is identifying the way of thinking, writing, discussing and responding to people who do not fit the middle-class Anglo-Australian worldview of 'normal'. This deficit

discourse reinscribes the powerlessness of these families. Nakagawa (2000) questions educators' choice of language which dictates what parents should do and frames a particular kind of parent as being better than others. This discourse favours and empowers some parents whilst marginalizing and disempowering others.

Schools tend to define parental involvement as visible parental participation in school sanctioned activities such as canteen duty, Governing Council and assisting in literacy programs. Parents may consider themselves highly involved in the education of their child but this may not be visible to the school. In Donna's case the extraordinary lengths that she went through to drive her son to school each day and her willingness to engage with the staff regarding her son's needs deserved acknowledgement. Whilst many believe that taking a child to school is an aspect of the parenting role which does not require special recognition, in Donna's case there were peripheral factors such as Donna's own childhood difficulty with school, the lack of money in the house to afford the extra petrol for the car, her son's lack of interest in school and the social exclusion felt by Donna which made it a particularly onerous task each day. Mills & Gale (2004) state:

'By sending their children to school, parents are agreeing to participate in the game and in doing so tacitly recognise the value of its stakes. Believing in the game they are playing, it is difficult to suggest that these parents are not interested in the schooling of their children' (p. 270).

Acknowledging and honouring the non-traditional ways that parents are involved in their child's education can build relationships. This is particularly important for parents whose own negative experiences of school colour their view of their children's school experience. Donna felt insecure and intimidated by educational institutions but was willing to push pass this for the sake of her son. Schools need to move beyond the problematic sense of tradition to connect at a deeper level with families from diverse backgrounds. They need to examine the categories they are using to view the world and build up a repertoire of categories which enable teachers to see differently and to see competence. Differences of opinion will inevitably arise but concerns are more likely to be resolved when working from an attitude of respect and valuing difference than judging or blaming (DETE, 2000).

*Surveillance*

Donna was keen to inform me of the oppositional culture she had encountered when communicating with previous schools. She recounted how she believed that previous staff had attempted to cultivate allies and build coalitions against her and that she was scrutinised, labelled and condemned for her past. Parents from low income families often feel and are often treated as less valuable than professionals (Cocos, Goos & Kostogriz, 2007). Foucault (1973) discusses the concept of people being disempowered by professionals due to the amount of surveillance they require. Donna's family received much intervention and was under the constant and uncomfortable gaze of professionals. Donna and Max were monitored for signs of deviation and abnormality and were urged into compliance via a number of punitive measures such as increased intervention. This increased intervention was from a number of community agencies which were funded to support Donna in her parenting role. This implied that she was unable or unwilling to parent without assistance. The power of detecting these abnormalities lay with the 'professionals' whereas Donna and Max were the subject of the 'gaze' were regularly interrogated. The 'professionals' acted as a network of power where Donna and Max's thoughts and feelings were not considered important, only what they said and did had significance. Foucault (1977) states:

'The judges of normality are present everywhere. We are in the society of the teacher-judge, the doctor-judge, the educator-judge, the "social-worker" judge; it is on them that the universal reign of the normative is based; and each individual, wherever he may find himself, subjects to it his body, his gestures, his behaviour, his aptitudes, his achievements' (p.304).

Not only was this level of surveillance disempowering, Donna felt that each interaction with professionals was pre-emptively guarded against conflict. Freire (1996) states that when misbehaviour, violence or failure are expected or pre-emptively guarded against, these events are more likely to happen. This was another aspect of the constellation of unequal power relations which Donna faced. Donna's identity as a mother who had failed was strategically and institutionally imposed. Donna desperately desired to provide a stable, loving home for her son, yet she was thwarted at every attempt by the social construction of the 'failed mother'. Her shame and self blame were evident and she had accepted the cultural tale that she could not aspire to be like the other mothers at the school.

Donna lived in the outlying suburbs and was not only physically distanced from the school community, but also socially distanced due to her socio-economic status. Bourdieu (1999)

states, 'At the risk of feeling themselves out of place, individuals who move into a new space must fulfil the conditions that that space tacitly requires of its occupants' (p.128). Fulfilling these unwritten conditions and code of behaviour was impossible for Donna as she was not a participant in the culture of power. 'Members of any culture transmit information implicitly to co-members. However, when implicit codes are attempted across cultures communication frequently breaks down (Delpit, 1993)'. Before Donna could participate in the life of the school, she needed to learn the codes to participate in it. Being placed as an outsider both physically and socially to the school community had detrimental consequences for Donna. The school was keen to fight this cultural hegemony to allow this family to be themselves and to acknowledge that they are experts in their own lives.

### *Policy/ Performativity and Parents*

Standard approaches to situations such as the management of Max's behavioural issues left little room for initiative or spontaneous responses. Policies are re-read and refracted through the lens of practitioners and contain powerful modes of power and knowledge. The construction of problems and solutions requires an awareness of meaning making in legal and policy debates (Bacchi, 2000). In Max's situation different school sites interpreted policies in varying ways and at times these were to the detriment of Max's education and Donna's involvement with the school. For example the duty of care implications for the classroom teacher was complex. The policy in South Australian Government schools states that a teacher owes a student a duty to take reasonable care to protect him from foreseeable risk of injury. On a number of occasions Max had physically assaulted children in the school and had threatened to harm himself. This presented a legal dilemma for the staff. The Principal sought advice from Head Office but this advice was centred on legal protection for the staff rather than what was in the best interests of Max.

The institution's preoccupation with duty of care, particularly with behavioural issues, is premised on avoiding potentially costly litigation rather than with ethical practice. This is largely due to Australia's increasing litigious culture. This creates a tension between the role of an educator and upholding the legal and liability requirements of the institution. This compulsion to prevent, minimise, avoid, control and manage risk is known in our post-modern world as the 'risk society' (Beck, 1992). Max was perceived as a risk both to himself and others and as a result the institution felt a legal need to manage this risk. The deficit laden interventions to manage Max's behaviour merely appeared to perpetuate the problem.

Punitive measures such as excluding Max from school only privileged the school and added to Donna and Max's disadvantage. The Principal was willing to be called upon each time Max's behaviour became out of control. In consultation with Donna I developed a range of strategies to calm Max before his behaviour escalated such as a time out area with soothing activities.

Ball (2003) states that 'teachers as ethical subjects, find their values challenged or displaced by the terrors of performativity' (p. 216). Interactions with parents are also limited and constrained by the need to follow policy rather than acknowledging a parent's grief and anger at injustice experienced by their child. Donna experienced disenfranchised grief (Doka, 2002) witnessing her son's academic, social and personal struggles. Unfortunately our society fails to acknowledge or validate the grief experienced in situations such as Donna's. When teachers must suppress their ethical disposition of care in order to uphold the legal responsibility which has been forced on them, they may avoid the emotional aspect of caring for students and their families. There is tension between being a passionate advocate for a student and being a responsible teacher, particularly when being a responsible teacher means upholding a duty of care mediated by policy. This climate of institutional performativity constrains and limits the type of education which is offered to children with complex needs. Instead of providing a curriculum that would make just social translations, solutions are constructed in simplified ways. In Max's case these simple solutions meant exclusion from school which only perpetuated the problems this family faced.

There has been much media hype regarding single parents being a threat to societal values and interests. This 'moral panic' (Cohen, 1972) can lead to blaming the victim and fail to see the nuances and degrees of in between. Donna had a low accumulation of economic and non-economic capital and she appeared to have few friends and no social network. She had been born into generational disadvantage and her habitus (Bourdieu, 1999), that pre-conscious shared set of dispositions, had fixed her in a position of low standing. Bourdieu (cited in Zipin & Brennan, 2003) states that interactions are like a game and the more practice or experience one has with the game, the more successful one is likely to be. Donna had little practice with social interactions and consequently there was dissonance between the familial and school habitus. Donna had difficulty relating to staff and even more difficulty relating to the other parents.

*Conclusion*

After Max's first challenging year at school it was realised that this child was no longer disengaged. He learnt to write his name, count and eventually master basic literacy. He regularly attended school and stated that he enjoyed learning and school. Donna was appreciative of the school's efforts to be inclusive and remained involved with the school by assisting in the classroom and on excursions. Currently Max has completed his primary education, has caught up in Maths, is still delayed in literacy and has daily struggles with self regulation.

This paper aims to identify and give voice to alternative world views and therefore to understand the silenced dialogue (Delpit 1993) and culturally embedded inequities. Despite the fact that there are no simple solutions for these issues 'We cannot rule out certain forms of social action simply because they seem awkward or theoretically challenging or difficult' (Ball, 1993, p. 10). Whilst this paper doesn't provide a step by step approach for dealing with disadvantage, it does offer strategies for connections of empathy and solidarity with those experiencing inequity. These strategies include open dialogue, drawing on a strength perspective; awareness of the implications of policy and surveillance on marginalised groups, as well as consciousness of the impact of deficit discourse and inequity within the school. This paper also is an invitation to a conversation regarding how to confront issues of social justice and to prevent the reinforcement of an unjust status- quo. Justice oriented educators must acknowledge the power dynamics before attempting change. This paper aims to draw the need for all professionals working with children to question their current and future practices in dealing with families from diverse backgrounds.

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