EARLY EDUCATION: THE PARENTS' ROLE
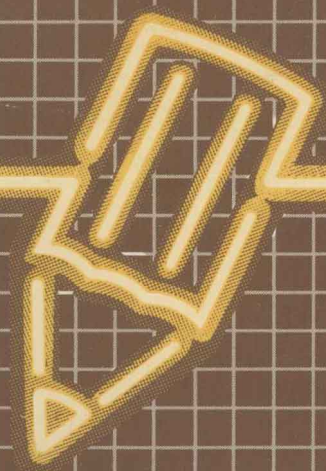
A SOURCE BOOK FOR TEACHERS

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EARLY EDUCATION: THE PARENTS' ROLE

A Sourcebook for Teachers

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CONTENTS

Section Three

PARENTS, TEACHERS AND SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

INTRODUCTION

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN HOME AND SCHOOL RELATIONS

The involvement and participation of parents in school life are a comparatively recent phenomenon, which emerged in the late 1960s largely as a result of government attempts to increase the participation of citizens in decision-making. Viewed in this sense, Beattie (1985) suggests that parental participation was but one small part of much wider changes which 'affected government, places of work and tertiary educational institutions as well as schools. These changes centred on the idea that democracy should be extended beyond the formal periodic elections of political assemblies' (p. 3), and with respect to the issue of parental participation in the running of schools, it was 'an attempt to actualize a more idealistic and dynamic notion of democracy' (p. 4).[1]

Long (1986) sees the Plowden Report (CACE, 1967) as the starting-point in the process of involving parents since it espoused a perspective which was effectively 'school supporting' and gave official recognition to the problem of 'good relations' between teachers and parents by advocating positive action and thought from schools on parental involvement, home visiting and increased community involvement (p. 1).[2] It is certainly the case that the Plowden Report recommendations for parental involvement in schools were profoundly influenced by recent sociological research which suggested the importance of the relationship between the educational process and parent participation through the formal structures of the school. Beattie (1985) affirms that the Plowden exhortations were 'basically an exposition of the newly popular sociological perspective on the family':

> A strengthening of parental encouragement may produce better performance in school, and thus stimulate the parents to encourage more; or discouragement in

the home may initiate a vicious downward circle. Schools exist to foster virtuous circles. They do this most obviously through their direct influence upon children . . . Some schools are already working at the same time from the other end, by influencing parents directly, and the children indirectly through the parents. (Quoted in Beattie, 1985, p. 180)

In the last two decades there have been increasing demands for more meaningful, closer and effective links between the home and the school,[3] with the result that far-reaching changes and innovations have been brought about in the field of home–school relations, changes which Bastiani (1987) suggests, 'at different times, appear to be characterized by widespread and deeply held *beliefs and values*, rather than differences of form and approach' (p. 89). Bastiani argues that the dominant beliefs and values that characterize the nature of home–school relationships have influenced policy and practice over the years; that sometimes the dominant ideology and related forms seem to have emerged as a gradual adaptation to slow changes in social contexts and attitudes, whilst at other times the dominant ideology appears to have resulted from more radical departures from cherished beliefs and practices. Thus, beliefs about home–school relationships appear to be sometimes characterized by general consensus and at other times by disagreement and conflict (p. 89). Halsey (1987) captures this sense of 'fluctuating' ideologies in his comments on the 'lesson' of Plowden twenty years on:

We learnt painfully that educational reform had not in the past and was unlikely in the future ever to bring an egalitarian society unaided. Plowden policies in effect assumed fundamental reforms in the economic and social institutions of the country at large. Given these reforms, which include the devolution of power to localities, democratic control by community members over national and professional purveyors of expertise in planning, health, employment and education, income and capital equalization, co-ordinated employment policies and well planned housing and civic amenities, realistic demands can be put on the education system. The schools can be asked, in partnership with the families they serve, to bring up children capable of exercising their political, economic and social rights and duties in such a society. They can be so constituted as to socialize children in anticipation of such a society: but to do so without the wider reforms is to court frustration for individuals if not disaster for the social order. (p. 7)[4]

Bastiani (1987) discusses four 'home and school ideologies' which he suggests encapsulate the main beliefs and values that have characterized the field of home–school relations over the past two or three decades and which have greatly influenced policy and practice. The four ideologies, together with their salient central values, political ethos and pragmatic translation into key policies and strategies are shown in Table I.1. Bastiani argues that *compensatory ideologies* have not only dominated theory,

research, policy and practice in the field of home–school relationships for many years in post-war Britain, but continue to this day as a powerful and important influence, especially when the relationships between school and working-class communities are being considered. Thus, large-scale surveys and researches in the 1960s, such as Plowden, 'in their concern to chart educational access and performance, became increasingly concerned to unravel something of the differential effects of home, school and neighbourhood in ways that were to influence both policy and practice. Within such a perspective a powerful "environmental correlates" tradition developed' (p. 91).[5]

Table I.1   Home and school ideologies

	Central values/political ethos	*Key policies and strategies*
Compensation	Environmentalism and social engineering Ideology of equal opportunity	Compensatory and positive discriminatory measures Family intervention
Communication	Consensus politics Rationality as the basis of social behaviour	Enhanced professionalism (through improved communication and relationships) The 'good practice' model of educational change
Accountability	Consumerism: interests rights and responsibilities Monetarist economic and social policies	Identifying and meeting customer needs and wishes Working with external audiences, e.g. parents, employers, etc.
Participation	Participatory democracy and the 'Open Society' – devolved power and shared responsibility – partnership between equals – pluralism and diversity	Parental involvement at home and at school Parents as educators Community education and development

Adapted from Bastiani (1987), p. 90. Reproduced by permission of the publishers: NFER-NELSON, Windsor, England.

The view, espoused by Plowden (and widely accepted and embraced by the teaching profession), that 'the major forces associated with educational attainment are to be found within the home circumstances of the children' (Wiseman, 1964), in short, that parental attitudes and interests in their children's educational development are of significantly more importance than home circumstances, such as family size, income, material conditions of the home, etc. led to the logical conclusion that one of the major tasks facing schools and teachers was that of 'making the least "successful" families more like the most "successful", opening the door for the extensive application of deficit models of family life and the implementation of the interventionist, compensatory and positive discriminating strategies of the late 1960s and early 1970s' (Bastiani, 1987, pp. 92–3).[6] By the mid-1970s, however, politicians had become increasingly disillusioned with the proposition that economic growth could be stimulated by educational investment. Furthermore, many educationists were coming to realize the limitations of their influence on individual and social development and to appreciate that their belief that the extension of educational provision would produce socially equalizing effects and fulfil democratic ideals had not happened on anything like the scale they had originally envisaged. The Plowden Report had also strongly emphasized the importance of contact and communication with parents – 'the school should explain to them so that parents can take an informed interest in what their children are doing. Parents will not understand unless they are told.' Bastiani (1987) comments that 'from such a viewpoint, problems of relationships between families and schools can be largely attributable to failures of communication. If parents do not know, it is because they are not adequately informed. If they do not understand it is because they lack appropriate opportunities to see, to discuss and to become involved' (p. 95). Thus, the increasingly important policy of rational and open *communications* attempted to overcome any sense of alienation parents might feel by directing their attention to the extent and quality of practical facilities and arrangements available for contact and communication between teachers, parents and children (p. 97). This ideology (see Table I.1) was but part of important changes taking place in the primary education scene as a whole, for until the mid-1970s, when criticism and controversy over primary pedagogy and curriculum had reached a peak, no detailed investigation of either teaching methods (*formal* or *progressive*) or curriculum (*range, structure, appropriateness, consistency, continuity*) had been attempted. It was not until 1976 that a number of attempts were under way to examine aspects of pedagogical and curriculum dissension more rigorously. Increasing

government concern about the cost-effectiveness of schools, the coherence and relevance of the school curriculum, the worries about 'standards' and the need for schools to be more responsive to public needs (Munn, Reading 6), represent an ideological shift of emphasis away from liberal egalitarianism towards *accountability*[7] – a market forces or 'consumerism' ideology. Thus, within the context of accountability policies, parents are seen 'as a major external audience with whom schools, to be effective, need to create and sustain a dynamic and constructive relationship, based upon mutual respect and the full exchange of information' (Bastiani, 1987, p. 100).[8]

The last home and school ideology suggested by Bastiani is that of *participation*. In a sense, participatory ideologies (by definition) have always been of crucial importance to the furthering of home–school relations, but in recent years ideological shifts of emphasis have significantly changed and extended the notion of 'participation' as a model of interpersonal and institutional behaviour. The most important characteristic of a participatory ideology, according to Bastiani, is that 'it recognizes the existence of both shared goals *and* complementary roles for teachers and parents. The only way in which such divergent elements can be reconciled, however, is through the devolution of power and shared responsibility, where teachers and parents work together, despite their differences, through non-hierarchical relationships, in a partnership of equals' (p. 100).

A participatory perspective then, in emphasizing the role of parents and teachers as a 'partnership of equals', would stress the importance of co-operative rather than joint activity. Wolfendale (1983) distinguishes between the characteristics of parents viewed as 'clients' and those of parents perceived as 'partners' – these latter include:

- parents are active and central in decision-making;
- parents have equal strengths and 'equivalent expertise';
- parents contribute to, as well as receive services;
- parents share responsibility, so they and professionals are mutually accountable.

In recent years, for example, more and more parents of children with special educational needs have become directly involved in processes of assessment and diagnosis, taking on the role of teachers of their own handicapped children.[9] In such cases, their involvement is based on the premises:

- that parents are experts on their own children;
- their skills complement professional skills;
- parents can impart vital information and make informed observations;

- parents have the right to be involved;
- parents should contribute to decision-making;
- parents can be highly effective teachers of their own children. (Wolfendale, 1986, p. 33)

As valuable as ideological analysis is as a means of teasing out and examining the attitudes, beliefs and central values which underpin and fashion educational policy and practice, it would be a mistake to assume that attitudinal change is a linear, one-dimensional process. Pathological and compensatory ideologies (the deficit family model) continue to be widespread and influential to this day and participatory ideologies, theoretically attractive as they are, tend to be highly elusive in practice (Bastiani, 1987, p. 103).

PARENTS AS EDUCATORS

Perhaps the most important influence on the nature of home and school relationships which has gained momentum in recent years is the recognition of the *complementary* status of parent and teacher roles. Of the many and varied forms of parental involvement, parents' involvement in their children's reading progress and parental involvement with children who have special educational needs provide the fullest expression of this complementary relationship between parents and professionals. In Topping and Wolfendale (1985), Topping poses the question: 'If home factors are so powerful an influence, why has the education world been so slow to attempt to mobilize this power? In the hurry to put together "compensatory" programmes (which served only to give disadvantaged children more of the same and knock them deeper into the hole they were already in), parents tended to get overlooked – at least until recently' (p.22).[10] Topping illustrates the importance and effectiveness of parental involvement on children's reading behaviour in the following way:

Main factors in effectiveness of parental involvement

Compared to teacher input, parental:
M   Modelling – is more powerful
P   Practice – is more regular
F   Feedback – is more immediate
R   Reinforcement – is more valuable

(Topping and Wolfendale, 1985, p. 25)

Figure I.1 illustrates the various ways in which parents are involved in their children's reading.

We have seen earlier how the idea of enjoining the efforts of parents to assist children's educational progress and development is largely rooted in
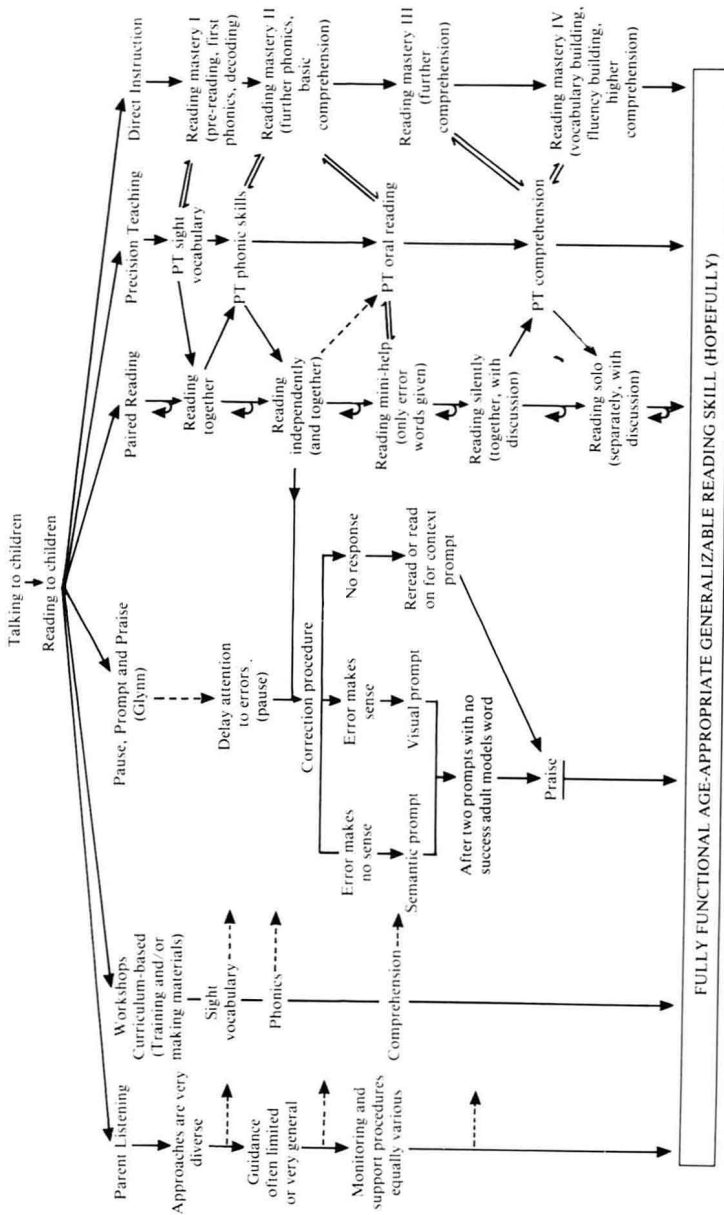
Figure I.1 Parental involvement in reading: the options and their interaction (Topping and Wolfendale, 1985, p. 30)

For a discussion of 'pause, prompt and praise' (Glynn) see Reading 4.
For a discussion of 'paired reading' see Reading 2. Source: Glynn (1981).

a compensatory ideology. Goode (1987) suggests that 'from Plowden onwards, a central focus has been the family's contribution to the outcomes of schooling. Studies have been dominated by a problem-oriented approach – the decline of the extended family network, the disintegration of the nuclear family, family dynamics requiring therapeutic intervention, the life-cycle of the family in terms of crises. Writings on the family are doom-laden' (p. 109). She argues that when the family is looked at *in its own terms* rather than from the viewpoint of its contribution to external systems, a quite different picture emerges for, seen from this perspective, the school context and outcomes are but one part of an environment which is infinitely rich in opportunities for children's intellectual, social, developmental, affective and experiential learning to take place in ways which may or may not be compatible with school-based learning. This is precisely the point which is examined in a number of readings in the sourcebook (see particularly Atkin and Bastiani, Reading 1, Tizard and Hughes, Reading 3 and Hughes and Watt, Reading 8).

Goode (1987) refers to the concept of 'educative style'[11] (Leichter, 1974) when examining (over the whole range of the outcomes of familial education) what parents *do* as opposed to who and what they are. 'Educative style', then, is an approach which concentrates on processes of interaction, 'What might be called the "hidden curriculum" of the home – the processes within the home which lead to the development of educative styles – are also significant for what has been called "deutero-learning" or learning to learn: learning how to ask questions, how to organize activities, how to appraise external valuations. They are all important for an understanding of education, even if they are not explicitly seen by participants as educational, and even if they do not necessarily involve "teaching" and "learning"' (pp. 109-110).

It follows that examining what parents *do* and how families evolve 'educative styles' suggests the need for a different theoretical framework – one based upon an ecological approach (Hobbs, 1978; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Apter, 1982). Such an approach would involve the idea of mapping each child's particular ecosystem in order to study the juxtaposition of that child to his or her parents, siblings, relations, locality, friends, the school network with relation to teachers and peer groups, thus enabling one to analyse the systems of which each child is a part so that the information could be used as a basis for problem-definition and problem-resolution (Wolfendale, in Topping and Wolfendale, 1985, p. 7). In similar vein, Dowling (1985) considers how the two most influential systems in an individual's development (the family and the school) may be

brought together as part of a therapeutic strategy to deal with problems in children. She examines the concepts of general systems theory as they apply to family and school functioning, specifying particularly the interaction between them when difficulties and problems of an educational nature occur in this dual context. Dowling discusses a systems way of thinking as referring to 'a view of individual behaviour which takes account of the context in which it occurs. Accordingly, the behaviour of one component of the system is seen as affecting, and being affected by, the behaviour of others' (p.6).

What parents *do* about their children's 'education', then, would appear to be of immeasurably more importance than educators have hitherto suspected. The same is true of what parents learn from their children.[12] In short, as Newson (1976) has argued, *parents are experts on their own children*. The overarching influences on parents' educative roles are illustrated diagrammatically in Figure I.2.

Until comparatively recently, there has been little evidence about *how* parents develop understandings of educational processes in general, how they make sense of their children's schooling and how they behave as educators in their own right. In Reading 1 Atkin and Bastiani add to the discussion of Goode (1987) by providing a clear picture about *what* parents experience and do in relation to their children's education and *how* they think about it. The authors suggest that their data demonstrate that parents' concepts about teaching consist of a loosely knit collection of ideas and beliefs which can be described in relation to three dimensions:

1. *Teaching as ideology*: which draws attention to the different values and beliefs that are held about education (particularly in relation to how children learn and to the nature of the adult role with regard to learning).
2. *Teaching as pedagogy*: which relates to the range of strategies, techniques and materials which parents use to promote learning.
3. *Teaching as context*: which ranges on a continuum from 'teaching happens in any environment' to teaching which reproduces the essential features of classroom life.

Figure 1.1 (see p. 30) illustrates the range and variety of parental viewpoints about 'teaching'.

The research suggests that parents' ideas about teaching and learning are by no means obvious or straightforward, and that like teachers, parents have widely differing educational philosophies, which lead them to interpret educational roles and tasks in a variety of ways. In fact, rather than parents and teachers having *different* understandings, there is as much variety amongst parents in relation to concepts of teaching as there
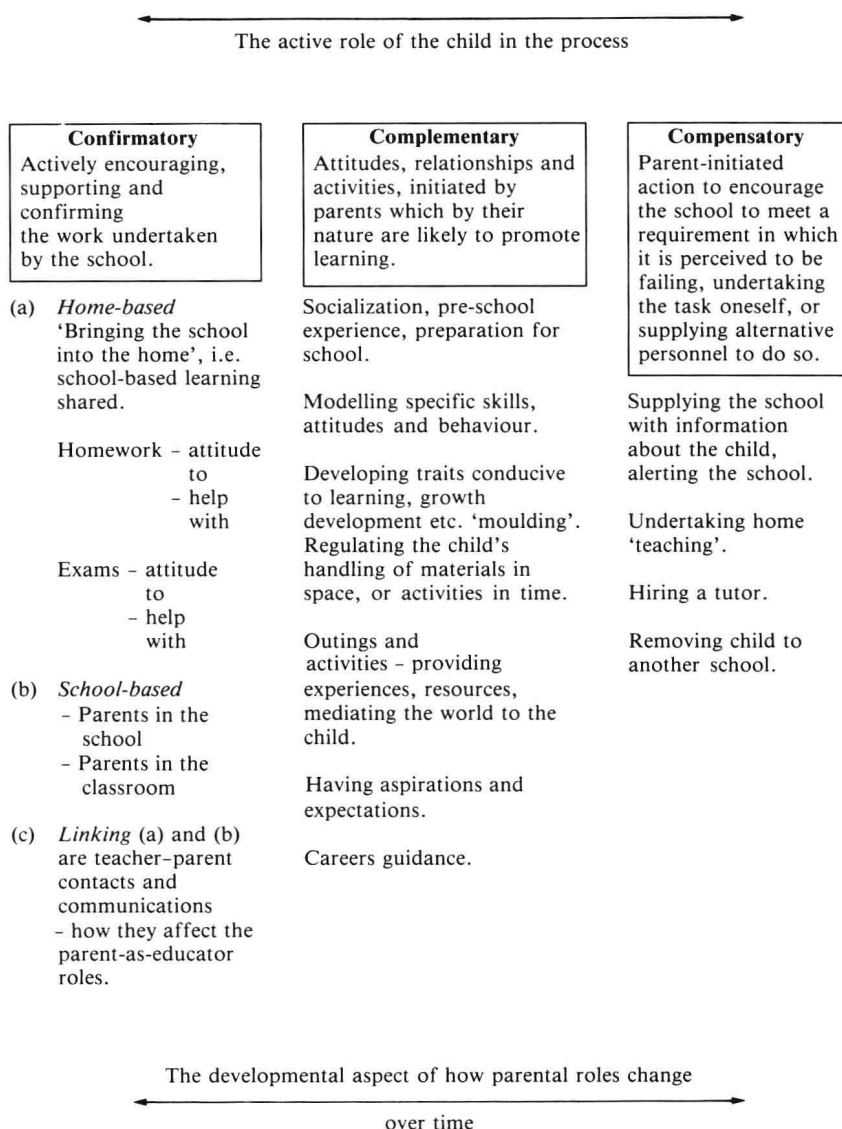
→ **The active role of the child in the process** →

Confirmatory	**Complementary**	**Compensatory**
Actively encouraging, supporting and confirming the work undertaken by the school.	Attitudes, relationships and activities, initiated by parents which by their nature are likely to promote learning.	Parent-initiated action to encourage the school to meet a requirement in which it is perceived to be failing, undertaking the task oneself, or supplying alternative personnel to do so.

(a) *Home-based* 'Bringing the school into the home', i.e. school-based learning shared.

    Homework – attitude
               to
               – help
               with

    Exams – attitude
             to
             – help
             with

(b) *School-based*
    – Parents in the school
    – Parents in the classroom

(c) *Linking* (a) and (b) are teacher–parent contacts and communications – how they affect the parent-as-educator roles.

Socialization, pre-school experience, preparation for school.

Modelling specific skills, attitudes and behaviour.

Developing traits conducive to learning, growth development etc. 'moulding'. Regulating the child's handling of materials in space, or activities in time.

Outings and activities – providing experiences, resources, mediating the world to the child.

Having aspirations and expectations.

Careers guidance.

Supplying the school with information about the child, alerting the school.

Undertaking home 'teaching'.

Hiring a tutor.

Removing child to another school.

The developmental aspect of how parental roles change

← over time →

Figure 1.2   Parents as educators – a typology (adapted from Goode, 1987, p. 118) Reproduced by permission of the publishers, NFER-NELSON, Windsor, England.

is amongst the teaching profession.[13] This perspective, which stresses the range and diversity of parental viewpoints, offers evidence which is of potential value in the development of more effective communication, contact and involvement between families and schools, particularly in relation to children's learning.

The readings in this sourcebook have been selected with the aim of providing a comprehensive account of current issues and emphases in the field of home-school relations. Two major themes of paramount importance have influenced the editor's choice. The first theme echoes a sentiment expressed in the Court Report (1976): 'we have found no better way to raise a child than to reinforce the ability of his parents to do so'. The second theme is concerned with a fundamental principle which underpins the 'participatory' ideological perspective – the idea of partnership:

> (Partnership is) [...] a relationship in which the professional serves the parents, by making appropriate expertise available to them for their consideration. The relationship is, therefore, one of *complementary expertise,* since the expert knowledge of the parents, on themselves, their aims, their situation generally, and their children, complements what the profession has to offer including professional knowledge and skills to communicate it. [...] Using this framework of partnership therefore, the professional accepts his/her expertise and limitations; perceives parents as knowledgeable; acknowledges that many of the problems are not easily resolved; and believes that the best approach is to pool their expertise and to experiment together in mutually agreed ways. Although the parents are seen as having ultimate executive control, the professional's role is to offer for discussion alternative ways of viewing the situation and intervening. Decisions, therefore, are made on the basis of negotiation[...][14] (Davis, 1985).

NOTES

1. Beattie (1985) lists four main reasons for the introduction and extension of participatory democracy (suggested by Pennock, 1979):

    Institutional and conservative aims
    (i) *Responsiveness*: participation should improve governmental output by increasing flows of information and enabling a more flexible response to needs.
    (ii) *Legitimacy*: participation should make governmental output more acceptable to the governed.
    Reformist and revolutionary aims
    (iii) *Personal development*: individuals may achieve their full moral and intellectual development *only* if they have some responsibility for matters which affect them.
    (iv) *Overcoming alienation*: participation should bring individuals together and thus enable them to understand more clearly the collective purposes of society. (Adapted from Beattie, 1985, p. 5)

It is equally important to note, however, that until the mid-1960s what interaction there was between parents and schools usually took place on 'assumptions delimiting traditional spheres of influence'. Thus, in matters concerned with curriculum, methods, resources and the like, decisions were totally in the control of professionals (teachers and administrators) who were themselves ultimately, though distantly, answerable to the political system of the day. The specific responsibilities of parents were confined to the health and care (physical, moral and religious) of their children (Beattie, 1985, p. 2). Darling (1986) observes 'that the *full* educational potential of the parent–child relationship has been inhibited as a result of a loss of parental confidence induced to a part by the school system, the consequence of which is that parents have tended to see teachers as the ''experts'' who possess specialized skills and knowledge which they, as lay persons, do not possess. Thus, where parents are convinced of the teachers' ''mysterious knowledge'' they become inhibited from doing their best to teach their own children and are effectively persuaded to hand over control of their children's education' (p. 22). The author wryly comments, 'Making people feel inadequate has become a growth industry' (p. 23), yet the reality is that 'what parents are usually unaware of is that teachers themselves are confused and anxious about their own role and how to execute it' (p. 24).

For a succinct historical account of parental involvement in schools see Hurt, J. (1985) 'Parental involvement in schools: a historical perspective', in Cullingford, C. (ed.) *Parents, Teachers and Schools*, London, Robert Royce, pp. 17–39.

2. For an interesting account of the notion of 'community involvement', see Reading 8.

3. For example, in government reports over the last two decades:

    The Plowden Report (CACE, 1967): 'By involving the parents, the children may be helped' (para. 114). The Report devotes a whole chapter to 'participation by parents' (pp. 37–49).

    DES (1975) Green Paper: *Education in Schools. A Consultative Document,* London, HMSO: 'Until recently many parents have played only a minor part in the educational system. The Government are of the view that parents should be given much more information about the schools and should be consulted more widely' (p. 5).

    DHSS (1976) *Fit for the Future* (Court Report) London, HMSO: 'Families could be better at bringing up their children if they were given the right information, support and relationships with the caring professions when it was needed and in a more acceptable way' (p. 25).

    DES (1977) *A New Partnership for our Schools* (Taylor Report) London, HMSO. The Report called for increased numbers of parents as school governors, a recommendation which was subsequently adopted in the 1980 Education Act. 'Both individually and collectively the parents constitute a major source of support for the school. It is not a source which has been tapped fully in the past. We believe that governing bodies should encourage the widest and deepest parental commitment to their schools' (p. 87).

    DES (1978) *Special Educational Needs* (The Warnock Report) London, HMSO: 'We have insisted throughout this report that the importance of the role of parents in the education of their children with special educational