

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR FAMILY -SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS: REVALUING BOTH SIDES OF THE COIN

**A discussion paper about the complementary developmental needs of both
educators and parents as effective partners**

By

Rupert Macgregor

National Project Manager “Families Matter”

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*The complementary developmental needs of both educators **and** parents*

By: Rupert Macgregor, National Project Manager “Families Matter”

Central to the purpose and operations of both the Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO) and of the Australian Parents Council (APC), is the recognition of the extent to which research around the world clearly shows that children’s learning outcomes, health and well-being are improved when parents, families and schools work closely together.

This research demonstrates the potential benefits to be achieved when schools, families and communities work together in mutually respectful, productive and sustainable partnerships.

The need to promote effective partnerships with parents and families appears incontestable: *“parental involvement seems like the least controversial concept in education reform – just try and find someone who admits to being against it”* (quoted in McConchie 2004, p1). However, like many other supposedly axiomatic constructs in education as in other fields, this evidently desired condition does not happen of itself or without careful strategic planning and much hard, iterative work.

It is contended that in addition to establishment of generally positive intentions, hopes, aspirations and good-will by the parties, there is not only a need to raise awareness and understanding of the issues, but also for structured processes to develop and enhance the levels of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values of the parties in ways that will operate to change their behaviours and their levels of effective interaction. This strongly indicates the need for structured parallel and interactive processes of professional development –

- for current and future educators and educational leaders;
- for parents and families – and parent organisations.

The 2004 Family-School Partnerships Issues Paper by Rob McConchie, commissioned to provide context for the National Roundtables convened by Education, Science & Training Minister Hon Dr Brendan Nelson MP with the purpose of developing a National Framework for Family-School Partnerships, identified a number of barriers to the formation and development of partnerships. (For the following synopsis and supporting references see McConchie 2004, p.8)

1. Some of these identified barriers operate to limit or block and exclude the informed and willing engagement of principals and educators: in particular:-

- A belief that partnering with families in areas relating to decision making will diminish the principal’s authority;
- Teachers concerned that their professionalism is threatened seek to exclude parents from processes relating to educational practices: *“teacher concern about professional status and traditional resistance to outsider influence is difficult to overcome”*
- A view by schools they do not have a role in assisting parents and families develop a level of self-confidence to see themselves as capable co-educators of their children

- A lack of knowledge and understanding of the research findings and their application on the part of schools and educators
- A perception that parents don't know how to be involved; **and, above all:-**
- Teachers and principals have little, if any, professional preparation for a role in developing partnerships with parents and other family members. This is confirmed by US research – *“One of the most significant challenges to conducting an effective program is the lack of instruction on parent and family involvement that educators and administrators receive in their professional training.”*

These issues and concerns are also strongly highlighted by Professor Andy Hargreaves in his paper “Professionals and Parents: A Social Movement for Educational Change” (Hargreaves 1999). While noting the research and the rhetoric which supports the need for families and educators to work in effective partnerships, he recognises that “the more pervasive reality is often very different”.

As a graphic illustration of that incongruity in action, he quotes William Waller (“The Sociology of Teaching”, 1932, p.68) “From the ideal point of view, parents and teachers have much in common in that both, supposedly, wish things to occur for the best interests of the child; but in fact, parents and teachers usually live in conditions of mutual distrust and enmity”.

Hargreaves notes that his own research indicates that teachers experience more anxiety about their relationships and interactions with parents than about almost any other aspect of their work: and that “the task of establishing strong partnerships between teachers and parents is, indeed, riddled with problems.” His analysis of these problems indicates the extent to which parents and educators are interpreting and coming at the issues from different perspectives and motivations that are not always perceived as being complementary, but on collision courses.

In particular, from a teacher viewpoint, Hargreaves identifies:

“The Problem of Unpreparedness. Few teachers are trained how to interact and work effectively with parents, or even with adults in general. They are unprepared to deal with the conflicts, crises and general emotional turmoil that parent communication and criticism can throw at them.” (p.2)

Hargreaves sees the need for this unpreparedness to be overcome: for educators and educational leaders to be prepared and enabled to develop “new forms of more principled professionalism... where teachers engage with parents in relationships of reciprocal learning that are more open, interactive and inclusive in character.” (p.7). This in his view means more than showing greater individual empathy towards and understanding of parents as a teacher; this is necessarily a public project, not just a private one. “The feasibility of such a principled professionalism rests on teachers being open to, engaging with and developing understanding among parents and the public on whom the future of teaching and state education ultimately depend” (p. 9).

2... And some of these identified barriers operate to limit or block and exclude the informed and willing engagement of parents and families (McConchie 2004):

- Lack of knowledge and understanding of the research findings and their applicability on the part of parents and families (p. 8)

- Parents may feel they have nothing to contribute (p.9)
- Parents may feel unwelcome or even intimidated by the school (p.9)
- Parents may feel unwelcome and even intimidated by School Parent Organisations themselves (p.9) – formal processes, language, procedures and organisation structures of school boards and P&C or P&F Associations can be perceived as exclusionary.
- Parents and families not knowing how they can become involved and participate as effective partners with the school in supporting and contributing to the processes of education and development of their children. (“We began to discover that the local community and particularly the parents in community based organisations indicated to us that they felt a powerlessness about making any changes or accessing the system at the local level” Fege 2004)

Hargreaves strongly recognises and makes the point that effective family-school partnership is necessarily a two-way street; and that it takes two parties - who have developed a strong mutual understanding and awareness - to engage effectively in the family-school partnership tango. A superficial reading of some of the literature may suggest that all parents and families are inherently ready and intuitively prepared for effective partnerships, just waiting to be asked on to the dance floor. Hargreaves notes, however, that it would be misleadingly simplistic to assume “that all parents are virtuous and that teachers are simply insensitive villains in the partnership drama. We should avoid idealizing partnerships representing all parents (or indeed all teachers) as being altruistic and perfect. Parents can be a pain sometimes.... Such parents can be especially difficult and demanding for teachers to deal with” (p. 8). The learnings and the development must run authentically in both directions.

Both sets of developmental levers – those relating to the professional development of educators and education leaders, and those relating to the necessarily parallel and complementary professional development of parents and families – and parent organisations – most be moved together, synchronistically.

As a simple, direct illustration of this parallel dual need (the two sides of the same coin), we can consider the implications of statements drawn from a striking and important recent paper relating to the professional development of educators and education leaders, in ways that will significantly enhance professional practice at all points seamlessly, from the individual, to the school team, throughout a whole State system. This is Professor Alan Reid’s recent paper “Towards a Culture of Inquiry in DECS” (Reid 2004) – strongly recommended reading and re-reading for everyone with an interest in the professional practice of education.

Firstly, the obverse side of the coin, for educators. In Alan Reid’s words:

“...in the 21st Century, educators need to be inquirers into professional practice who question their routine practices and assumptions and who are capable of investigating the effects of their teaching on student learning. ... if the task of educators is to develop in children and young people the learning dispositions and capacities to think critically, flexibly and creatively, then educators too must possess and model these capacities.”

If we very slightly refocus these statements – with my own modifications - as an hypothesised **parent-and-family reverse side of the coin**, it seems hard to argue they do not ring as being at least as true and useful:

...in the 21st Century, to be effective as the first and continuing educators of their children in partnership with their school, parents and families, like educators, need to be inquirers into professional practice who question their routine practices and assumptions and who are capable of investigating the effects of their actions on student learning. ... if the task of parents and families in partnership with educators is to develop in children and young people the learning dispositions and capacities to think critically, flexibly and creatively, then parents and families – and parent organisations - too must possess and model these capacities.”

For the purposes of his paper, Alan Reid understands inquiry to be “a process of systematic, rigorous and critical reflection about professional practice, and the contexts in which it occurs, in ways that question taken-for-granted assumptions. Its purpose is to inform decision making for action.

Alan Reid also notes that: “Inquiry can be undertaken individually, but is most powerful when it is collaborative”.

In reading his paper, it is both instructive and challenging to reflect, the extent to which the approaches and processes are similarly applicable to both educators **and also** to parents and parent organisations. This is of course consistent with the need for shared two-way learnings indicated by Andy Hargreaves paper: and is logical in a situation where the two parties require a shared strategic understanding of the issues in order to work as mutually respectful partners in a partnership which focuses on the education and personal development of young people.

In this regard, it is certainly worth noting that the “**Families Matter**” initiative inherently seeks to encourage and develop a process of reflective inquiry in parents at both the individual and the interactive group levels, by means of an iterative and exploratory conversation which sets out to involve and engage progressively all parents and families, interactively with the teachers of the school. The purpose of this conversation is to build a shared understanding of the factors which bear upon student well-being, the ways in which families can support their social and emotional development, and how families can work together as a community to support and enhance the work being done by the school.

The establishment and maintenance of effective and sustainable family-school (and community) partnerships requires far more than generalised good intentions (the road to hell we know being paved with countless such), pious hopes and vague aspirations. The levels of knowledge, skills, attitudes, values and ultimately thus of behaviours, must evolve interactively. The learnings and the development must run authentically in both directions. . This strongly indicates the need for structured parallel and interactive processes of professional development –

- for current and future educators and educational leaders;
- for parents and families – and parent organisations.

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