

# **FAMILIES IN PARTNERSHIP: A FORCE MORE POWERFUL**

**A paper to the Parents Victoria Conference in Melbourne**

On

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By

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**Families Matter: a resource for families and schools working in partnership to support the well-being of young people.**

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The national “Families Matter” initiative has been developed to recognise that parents, carers and families are essential partners with schools and communities on all aspects of their children’s learning and personal development.

This initiative is based on research which clearly demonstrates that children’s learning outcomes, health and well-being are improved when parents, families and schools work closely together.

This core value reflects the underlying truth of the saying that it takes a whole village to raise a child.

This is clearly understood by all tribal societies, from whence our own civilisation originally developed. It remains an important point for understanding, as discussed recently by Peter Senge and his team in their book: “Schools that Learn” (Senge et al 2000).

That discussion focuses on the familiar African greeting: “I see you”. Underlying this greeting is a whole range of issues about the ability to recognise each others’ identity and value them and their connectedness to our community. It is important that people around you respect and acknowledge you as a person and part of the community. This is summed up in a Zulu saying *Umntu ngumuntu nagabantu*: which translates as: **“A person is a person because of other people”**.

In this context, it will be no surprise that recent research (Mapp 2004) confirms there is a positive and convincing relationship between family involvement and improved results in academic achievement and also in relation to health and well-being.

These benefits are demonstrated consistently across all involved families irrespective of their economic circumstances or their ethnic or educational backgrounds. Nor is it just a primary school phenomenon: the positive effects are also evident in high school – where family involvement is in fact more important than any other time of their lives, there being so many other things happening to them and happening around them.

The research shows there are two main aspects of family-school partnerships:

- Where what happens in the home supports and reinforces the importance of academic and personal development with a shared understanding with the school of what is important – home learnings and home values are fully consistent with and supportive of school objectives.
- Families can then go the next step and become directly involved in provision and operation of school resources and programs to improve teaching and learning opportunities in the school and its extra-curricular activities. NB: this is about input to activities directly related to the student learning and well-being – like helping out with reading, sport, drama events – rather than the less directly related questions around parent involvement in the management and governance.

Now, while that research should be treated with respect as coming from recognised figures at Harvard and Johns Hopkins Universities, a cynic may object that it is by people who are working totally from the position that family-school partnerships are great, and emphasising the evidence that supports their point of view. What about research from other more skeptical starting points, you ask. Good question.

This brings us directly to an important recent study from a different viewpoint, to consider the factors which affect student achievement. This is by Professor John Hattie of the University of Auckland, a well-respected figure in the field of education and educational research.

His paper “Teachers make a Difference: What is the Research Evidence” sets out to identify what are the factors which contribute to variance in students’ achievement, with the view to concentrating attention on enhancing those sources of variance which can truly make the difference (Hattie 2003).

This research study considers in turn the impact of a variety of factors, and concludes that the major sources of variances lie in six factors: what the student brings to the task; the home environment; the school; the principal; peer effects; and the quality of teaching. It considers each in turn, thus:

- Students.** It is what students bring to the table that predicts achievement more than any other variable and accounts for about 50%.
- Home.** Accounts for 5-10% of the variance – with of course substantial “cross-over” of the effects of the home and family environment in the learning attitudes, values and behaviours of the student. The Hattie research stresses that “the home effects are more related to the levels of expectation and encouragement. – and is certainly not a function of the involvement of the parents in the management or governance of the schools.”
- Schools.** Account for about 5-10% of the variance . While the attributes of schools – school size, class size, buildings, equipment and financial situation – are important in that for the school to exist at all these are the elements it must have in some form and to some level of operation, their impact is not great in comparison with the other factors.
- Principals.** The research drawn on by Hattie indicates that the impact of the Principal is already accounted for as a factor in the variance attributable to Schools; and he suggests this influence is mainly in terms of the climate of the school. Principals can help “lift” the impact of the school by creating a school with a high level of student responsiveness rather than bureaucratic control, a climate of psychological safety to learn, and a focus of discussion on student learning.
- Peer Effects.** Account for about 5 – 10%. There are instances where peers can have a positive effect on learning; and at the other end of the scale peers can create a focus on negative aspects other than pride in learning, or be disruptive and bullying. But research suggests for most students the influence of peers on their achievement levels is moderate or minimal.
- Teachers.** Who account for about 30% of the variance. “It is what teachers know, do and care about which is very powerful in this learning equation.”

In reviewing this scenario, Hattie expresses some concern that much of the focus of discussion and the focus of a great many resourcing initiatives in the field have been directed to some of the elements which have lesser impact on student learning and development.

“We have poured money into school buildings, school structures, we hear so much about reduced class sizes and new examinations and curricula, we ask parents to help manage schools and thus ignore their major responsibility to help co-educate, and we highlight student problems as if students are the problem whereas it is the role of schools to reduce these problems.”

His key message is, quite reasonably: to shift the main focus of support activity to the factors which the research indicates will make the greatest difference to student learning, development and well-being. The things that help them feel valued and connected, with a sense of purpose.

As he notes, “In my synthesis of over 500,000 studies of the effects of these influences on student achievement, it can be shown that almost all things we do in the name of education have a positive effect on achievement. The aim needs to be to identify those attributes that have a marked and meaningful effect – not just a positive effect - on student learning.”

John Hattie is an educator and an academic – these are worthy and noble occupations – and quite understandably from that perspective, he gives the main focus of the rest of his paper to the importance of the need to develop the excellence of teachers and the teaching profession. His main focus is on the 30% of difference which is directly attributable to quality teachers and quality teaching.

We certainly support and applaud his focus on quality teaching and quality teachers - as one critically important focus of education. We agree with the need to ensure that this source of variance “is optimised to have powerful and sensationally positive effects on the learner.” That 30% is extremely significant.

We can also agree that where enhancing the impact of parents and families is concerned, it is not the most productive strategy “to ask parents to help manage schools” if this tends to divert the focus away from “their major responsibility to help co-educate”. This is borne out by the wider research into the dynamics of parent involvement referred to above. It is all very well and good and helpful to the effective operation of the school and its infrastructure to have parents involved in the management and governance aspects of the school. But that is something of an ancillary or add-on benefit of parent involvement.

As we have seen, the outstanding, major positive impact of parent and family involvement lies in two complementary aspects, each of which are core elements of the role of parents as the first and continuing educators of their children in partnership with their school. That is:

- Where what happens in the home supports and reinforces the importance of academic and personal development with a shared understanding with the school of what is important – home learnings and home values are fully consistent with and supportive of school objectives.
- Families can then go the next step and become directly involved in provision and operation of school resources and programs to improve teaching and learning opportunities in the school and its extra-curricular activities – matters directly bearing upon their children’s learning.

**It is that level of parent engagement plus the contribution of the home environment in terms of forming the attitudes and values and positive behaviours, which maximises that massive 60% of variance factors which the home, family and student context.**

“Families Matter” fully recognises each of the major positive factors which contribute to maximising student learning and development.

“Families Matter” sees the value not only of working to maximise the positive contribution of each of these areas – but also and above all of seeking to maximise the benefits of each of these areas working together in an effective and productive partnership. We believe that the greatest sustainable benefits can be achieved by moving all the key levers together, so that:

- Parents and families build a better understanding of the ways in which they can support their children’s learning, development and well-being and contribute to the positive attitudes, values and behaviours which their children bring to the learning processes of the school;
- Parents and families concurrently build a greater understanding of how the school is working to enhance their children’s learning and personal development and to support and enhance their well-being – so that parents and families can work to support and enhance the work of the school;
- Parents and families thus maximise their role as the first and continuing educators of their children in ways that support, enhance and encourage quality teachers and quality teaching
- Parents and families work with Principals to help “lift” the impact of the school by creating a school with a high level of student responsiveness rather than bureaucratic control, a climate of psychological safety to learn, and a focus of discussion on student learning.

In this way, “Families Matter” is working to encourage a partnership in which parents and families are contributing directly and indirectly to some **90%** of the factors which John Hattie identifies as those which make a difference to student learning and development.

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“Families Matter” is a **‘resource for parents and families working in partnership with schools to support the well-being of young people’**.

It is a process – a conversation process – rather than a product or a program. The conversation process – and the ways in which the resource is used to support the conversation – is intended to be flexible and adaptable to the context and needs of each community.

“Families Matter” seeks to strengthen community links: and to develop a strong, sustainable partnership with the school around the issues of student social and emotional health and well-being.

It recognises that:

- The aim needs to be to identify and focus on those attributes that have a marked and meaningful effect – not just a positive effect - on student learning
- it takes a whole village – a whole community working together - to raise a child
- parents, families, teachers, principals and others all have a joint role to play in this - **“A person is a person because of other people”**.

## References:

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