

Exploring the Dynamics of Effective and Innovative Family-School and Community Partnerships across Australia

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Abstract

Research under way across Australia seeks to explore the dynamics of partnership models in operation in a diversity of settings and with a variety of partnership focus “themes”. This is being undertaken within the conceptual structure provided by the National Family-School Partnerships Framework developed in 2004. The research also seeks to explore types and levels of engagement of parents and families with the processes of the school; and the extent to which and ways in which those apparently uninvolved in formal school processes, are otherwise engaged and involved in supporting their children’s learning and development. It will examine the barriers to engagement and how these can be removed: including exploration of the ways, context and communication styles and links through which families interact effectively in the wider community, and how this information can be used to develop and sustain effective and innovative partnership links with the school.

1. Introduction

The central importance in education of building partnership links between families and schools has been strongly emphasised by researchers worldwide. A study by Professor Kevin Marjoribanks, head of the University of Adelaide’s Graduate School of Education indicates that if schools are going to help overcome educational inequities they have to form strong and meaningful partnerships with parents from all social backgrounds. They have to develop that partnership from two points of view: (1) what parents do educationally for the child inside the family; and (2) how the family relates to the school. Schools need to develop supportive interactions with families, with special efforts being made for those parents who find it difficult to engage with schools. In his overview comments to his research he sets out the broad proposition thus:

“It is generally agreed that if parents are involved positively in activities associated with children’s learning then the school outcomes for their children are likely to be enhanced. As a result, education practices that address inequalities in school attainments are designed more and

more to involve parents in the learning experiences of their children, at home and at school... (and) ...teachers are being encouraged or directed to recognise the importance of parents as partners. It is an expectation that such partnerships will be associated with the formation of more enriched learning environments, which in turn will be related to more positive school attitudes and associated with improvements in children's academic performance." (Marjoribanks 2002, p.1)

The importance of developing effective links between home and school has been noted by research over many years, and is constantly confirmed in further studies. Recently, Professor Geoff Masters, Chief Executive Officer of the Australian Council for Educational Research, conducted extensive analysis of what makes schools effective and enables them to achieve high standards for their students regardless of gender, family background or socio-economic circumstances. He concludes that one of the six factors of highly effective schools is that they have high levels of parent and community involvement, with parents encouraged to "take an active role in discussing, monitoring and supporting their children's learning" and "are involved in setting goals for the school and developing school policies"(Masters 2004, p.2).

The weight of the research evidence, plus the intuitive recognition by parents and schools of the value of building strong two-way communication and interaction, provides broad support for the concept. A recent US study notes that: "parental involvement seems like the least controversial concept in education reform – just try and find someone who admits to being against it!" (Public Agenda Online 1999, quoted in McConchie 2004, p.1).

However, Rob McConchie's Issues Paper cites a range of research which emphasises that, however desirable it is to work through an effective parent-school partnership arrangement to the benefit of all students, this desired state of things does not happen by itself. There are issues which limit the engagement of many parents and families: including lack of understanding of the research findings and their applicability; a feeling they have nothing to contribute; and feelings of being unwelcome or even intimidated by the school and its formal processes. There are issues which

operate as barriers to limit the informed and willing participation of many principals and educators: including concern that partnering with parents will diminish the principal's authority, and teachers concerned their professionalism is threatened by involvement of parents in educational processes.

These issues and concerns are also highlighted by Andy Hargreaves (Hargreaves 1999). While noting both 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." Hargreaves notes that teachers experience more anxiety about their relationships with parents than about almost any other aspect of their work. His analysis of the problems in establishing strong partnerships between teachers and parents shows the extent to which parents and educators can find themselves interpreting and coming at the issues from very different perspectives and motivations: which can put them on divergent or collision courses. This requires strong commitment of the parties to work together, with great goodwill, to achieve a shared understanding of their respective roles and positions, and the areas and ways in which they can operate in an effective and positive partnership. It is a learning process. It takes a great deal of time and effort. But the results demonstrate that the effort is well worth it.

2. Australian policies regarding family-school and community partnerships

In Australia, the "Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the 21st Century" endorsed by all education ministers, explicitly recognises the role of parents as the first educators of their children, and establishes as a key strategy, the need for further strengthening schools as learning communities where teachers, students and their families work in partnership with business, industry and the wider community (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training & Youth Affairs [MCEETYA], 1999).

While all State Governments in Australia have subsequently developed policies around the role of parents in education, a common limitation of these policies is that they treat parents and

families as being homogeneous groups having similar kinds of beliefs, attitudes, capacity and skills. Also, anecdotal evidence from parents indicates that, while many schools are very effective in building partnerships in their local community, system-wide implementation – despite the existence of a range of public policy statements - is often perceived as inconsistent, patchy, uncoordinated and under resourced. “What is clear is that the existence of official policy in the public domain concerning the need for family school partnerships in both Australian government and non-government schools is not necessarily a good indicator of the extent and quality of such partnerships” (McConchie, 2004, p.1).

As noted in a recent review of the literature, a disturbing but common research finding is that school views about families are often predicated on a deficit model, which sees parents and their children in terms of having particular needs since they lack particular desirable attributes. Teachers and other professionals are charged with providing skills and knowledge to compensate for these deficiencies. This view can then lead to paternalistic practices whereby the views of parents and their children are neither sought nor valued when they are known (Thompson, 2001).

Different schools and communities display differing levels of interaction. Schools working on a deficit model perception of its community will limit their efforts to one-way communication, and if this communication is ineffective, no level of involvement can develop. Most schools will move on to encourage levels of participation through representation of small numbers of parents on parent associations, committees, fundraising or school council. Fewer schools achieve full productive partnerships which encourage and develop “shared, different but equally valued roles in the process of schooling for teachers, principals and families” (McConchie, 2004, p.3).

The meaning of “partnership” between families, schools and their communities in the education context was explored by Australian researchers Cuttance and Stokes (2000) who defined effective parent-school partnerships as:

- A sharing of power, responsibility and ownership, with each party having different roles;

- A degree of mutuality, that begins with the process of listening to each other and which incorporates responsive dialogue and “give and take” on both sides;
- Shared aims and goals based on a common understanding of the educational needs of children; and
- A commitment to joint action in which parents, students and teachers work together.

Similarly, an effective parent-school partnership must be founded on the agreed principle that: “All parents, irrespective of socio-economic status, education level or cultural background want their children to do well in school and can contribute constructively to the work of the school” (McConchie 2004, p.1).

The reasons why it is important to develop and sustain effective parent-school partnerships are well established and widely understood. The more difficult question is how schools can successfully develop and achieve such effective and sustainable partnerships. This is particularly the issue in respect of those schools or school communities where to achieve this will require a cultural change and the development of joint learning and shared understandings about ways of working together more effectively.

3. The Australian National Action Framework on Family-School Partnerships

A process to develop a National Action Framework to encourage and support Family-School Partnerships was jointly convened in 2004 by the two national Parent Associations (the Australian Council of State School Organisations [ACSSO] which represents school communities in government schools and the Australian Parents Council [APC] which represents parents in non-government schools), the Federal Department of Education, Science & Training, and the federal Minister, Hon Dr Brendan Nelson MP. In his opening address to the National Roundtable of

representatives from across the education field, on 24 May 2004, Dr Nelson set out the task in these words:

“It is time we made a concerted effort to place parents more firmly in the centre of schooling. The challenge is to spread more broadly the excellent practices that exist in many schools and to remove barriers or obstacles that might prevent parents from being more involved. For some schools, placing parents more firmly in the centre of schooling will require significant cultural change. For others, it will be simply learning from others and implementing ideas that they may not have thought about before. ... We know that investing in building strong partnerships with parents will pay dividends – not just for students and their families, but also for schools, in the form of improved learning, behaviour, engagement and community connectedness. It will be the partnerships we build between parents, school staff, students and the wider community that will ensure our schools will become models of the way we would like our society to function.” (Nelson, 2004, p.3).

3.1. Key elements of parent involvement

As an essential starting point for the development of an Action Framework, the Roundtable recognised the benchmark work in this field undertaken by Dr Joyce Epstein in the US to explore the key elements of parent involvement (Epstein, 1995). This classification lists the following six types of activity as reviewed in McConchie (2004):

- *parenting* - assisting families with parenting and child-rearing skills, and assisting schools in understanding their families. UK research indicates that ‘at home good parenting’ has the most significant effect on student achievement and social adjustment. What parents do at schools is less important. Good parenting indirectly influences achievement by shaping the child’s self concept as a learner and through setting high aspirations.

- *communicating* - developing effective two-way communication from home to school and school to home. Schools should plan for the ways that parents will be effectively informed about the nature of school educational programs and the academic progress of their children, and how they may enter into a dialogue with schools. Cuttance and Stokes in Australia have researched the issue of ‘best practice’ in communicating information on student academic achievement. They conclude that schools are often better at communicating information which is less relevant to parents than fundamental data on their child’s levels of attainment.
- *volunteering* - creating ways that families can be involved in schools or school programs, and effective ways of recruiting parents. Volunteering activities may involve different kinds of educational support, such as reading tutors, or they may be of the general support kind such as working bees, canteen assistance and so on.
- *learning at home* – linking families with their child’s curriculum through learning activities that can be done at home, as well as homework. Schools will make suggestions as to how parents may contribute at different year levels. Gender may be an issue here as US research indicates that when fathers are not involved with their children, their school performance lags behind those whose fathers are involved. This holds true for both two parent and single father families. In relation to engaging families to promote literacy skill development there seem to be at least two approaches. The first is to instruct the family on how literacy is taught at school, so that it (the family) can provide assistance. The other is an attempt by the school to understand ‘family literacies’, with a view to reconstructing school programs to build on early home learning.
- *decision-making* – including families as decision makers, advocates, and members of school councils and committees. Schools should also seek opportunities for engaging families through ways other than traditional structures to encourage a wider participation.

- *collaborating with the community* – coordinating services in the community with families’ needs, and providing services to the community. To do this effectively, schools need to know their families well and know their communities well.

Given the diversity of schools, families and communities, it is evident that there can be no simple, single answer to the way schools will form partnerships with families. Different schools will emphasise different elements of the above classification model, however it is clear that effective two way communication is a pre-requisite for all other types of partnership (McConchie 2004).

The Roundtable participants sought to address collectively the question of the extent to which and the ways in which the Epstein classification could be adapted and improved for use in Australian schools. The resulting document, “Family-School Partnerships Framework” was published as a discussion draft and widely circulated for community consultation and input, in October 2004. The full discussion draft document can be accessed at: <http://www.acsso.org.au/fsp.htm>.

The Framework is based upon these Principles:

- All families and schools want the best for their children
- All children have the right to reach their full potential
- Families are the first and continuing educators of their children
- Effective schools provide a nurturing and supportive learning environment
- Families and schools value quality teaching and respect teachers’ professional expertise
- Families and schools value the diversity of families and use this as a resource for building partnerships and communities
- Family-school partnerships are based on mutual responsibility, respect and trust
- Leadership is critical to building, maintaining and renewing partnerships
- Family-school partnerships improve student motivation and learning

- Family-school partnerships strengthen the connection between schools and their communities
- Partnerships involve all organisations that support families and schools.

3.2. Dimensions of the Family-School Partnerships Framework

The Family-School Partnerships Framework identifies seven dimensions as guidelines for planning parent and family participation in all its forms. These seven dimensions are:

1. Understanding of roles;
2. Connecting home and school learning;
3. Communicating;
4. Participating;
5. Decision-making;
6. Collaborating beyond the school; and
7. Building community and identity.

A brief description of each dimension is provided below.

3.2.1. Understanding of roles

As primary educators of their children, parents/carers and families have a lasting influence on their children's attitudes and achievements at school. They can encourage their children's learning in and out of school and are also in a position to support school goals, directions and ethos. Parents look to schools to provide secure and caring environments for their children.

Families and schools can reach mutual understanding of each other's roles and priorities in partnerships by:

- exploring the nature of the parent role in the education of their children;
- offering strategies for parents' support and encouragement of their children's learning at school;

- organising workshops/discussions/meetings and demonstrations around areas such as literacy and numeracy, home and classroom work, raising resilience and confidence in young people, transitions and careers and so on, depending on local needs and priorities;
- ensuring families understand school goals, curriculum and the social objectives of schooling; and
- ensuring schools understand family, parent and community priorities.

3.2.2. Connecting home and school learning

This dimension involves:

- families and schools creating positive attitudes to learning in each child;
- ensuring families are informed about and understand their child's learning progress;
- families and schools valuing and using the skills and knowledge children bring from the home to the school and from the school to the home;
- families and schools recognising and using literacy and numeracy learning opportunities in the home environment; and
- parents working with teachers in the educational decision-making process for their individual child.

3.2.3. Communicating

This dimension emphasizes that effective communication:

- is a two-way exchange between families and schools;
- involves not only an exchange of information, but also an opportunity for schools and families to learn about each other;
- needs to take into account cultural and linguistic diversity and not assume that all families prefer, or are able, to communicate in the same way;

- is multi-dimensional – it may be: 1) formal or informal, 2) happen in different places (both in the school and in other sites such as community centres), and 3) use different modes (oral, written, face-to-face, phone, email, etc).

Family-school communication needs to be taken seriously –it must be valued, recognised, and rewarded by schools and education systems. It is essential to provide teachers and school leaders with education and training programs to prepare them to communicate effectively with families. It is equally important to empower and encourage families to communicate effectively with schools.

3.2.4. Participating

Families' time, energy and expertise can support learning and school programmes in many ways. This may involve family members:

- working with students on learning activities in classrooms,
- participating in other school activities outside the classroom, or
- participating in activities outside the school itself.

Families participate in the school in a wide variety of ways and all contributions are valuable.

3.2.5. Decision-making

Parents can play meaningful roles in the school decision-making processes. Training and information to make the most of those opportunities can be conducted as part of the partnership programmes and processes of the school.

An inclusive approach to school decision-making and parental involvement creates a sense of shared responsibility among parents, community members, teachers and administrators. In turn, shared responsibility:

- ensures that parents' values and interests are heard and respected, and
- makes the school more accountable to its community.

3.2.6. Collaborating beyond the school

This dimension involves identifying, locating and integrating community resources. The wider community provides services to strengthen and support schools, students and their families. Schools, families and students can assist the community in return. Schools are increasingly relying on collaborative efforts with partners such as:

- local businesses,
- after-school care providers,
- higher education,
- foundations, and
- other community-based agencies.

3.2.7. Building community and identity

This refers to activities that improve the quality of life in a community while honouring the culture, traditions, values and relationships in that community. By including activities that shape students' sense of identity and culture, schools can build a sense of community in each student. Thus schools have a role to play in promoting both personal growth and cultural renewal.

3.3. *Action research and case studies*

The next stage of this process, originally intended to commence in or shortly after February 2005, involves extensive action research to test in practice the dimensions and strategies of the Family-School Partnership Framework. This will provide case studies of the experiences of schools and communities and their success in applying the strategies to form and sustain strong partnerships. The study will also assess the extent to which and the ways in which the development or extension of effective community partnerships has impacted on education outcomes and contributed to better learning and development for the students at the school. Findings will be published in 2006 and will be widely disseminated to school leaders, teachers and families across Australia, to assist all schools enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of family partnerships.

This process of action research, jointly managed by the national Parent Groups in conjunction with the federal Department of Education, Science and Training, has four major strands:

1. **Exploring a range of indicative examples of effective family-school partnerships in a representative selection of sixty-one (61) schools across the country.** This sample includes forty (41) government schools and (20) non-government schools, drawn from every State and Territory, and including both primary and secondary level schools; different sizes of school population; urban, regional rural and remote locations; and schools drawing their students from a range of demographically diverse populations, including a variety of socio-economic, cultural and linguistic factors. The final group of 61 case-study schools was finalised in May, since which point ACSSO has been working closely with each school's joint parent/school team to complete a detailed action plan including stated deliverables and performance indicators. Through the balance of the 2005 school year and in some cases into early 2006, we will continue to work with the school to monitor progress, review their experiences and the results achieved; their impacts upon learning and development of students; and aspects which can be drawn upon and applied and adapted by other schools in their local community context. In addition to providing an extensive range of case studies to assist other schools and their communities, this project will also test and validate in action the proposed national Family-School Partnership Framework, and indicate any aspects of this which may require further improvement or adjustment.
2. A number of these 61 case-study schools are already engaged in piloting a national initiative, "**Families Matter**", which similarly seeks to develop communication and partnership links between families and school, with a focus upon the social and emotional health and well-being, resilience and connectedness of young people. "Families Matter" is

unique in its approach: to equip **parents** as leaders and presenters of workshops for other parents from their school. “Families Matter” is a process – a facilitated and structured conversation process – rather than a product or a program: and is intended to be flexible and adaptable to the context, needs, issues and priorities of each school community. This conversation process seeks to provide parents, families and educators with a shared understanding of the issues bearing upon the social and emotional development of young people, the ways in which families can form strong and supportive community links, and how they can work effectively in partnership with their school to reinforce the work of the school in these areas. Some 150 schools trialled “Families Matter” in their community in 2004 and a further 150 in 2005. Extensive feedback is progressively being collected and analysed, and the experiences of all 300 participating schools will form the subject of a comprehensive national evaluation in the last quarter of 2005.

- 3. A further aspect of the research also seeks to explore types and levels of engagement and involvement of parents and families with the processes of the school; and the extent to which and ways in which those apparently disengaged and uninvolved in formal school processes, are otherwise engaged and involved in supporting their children’s learning and development.**

Some highly speculative, anecdotal (and unpublished) perceptions of levels of involvement in government schools in one State, explored through an informal focus group discussion process in 2004, suggest that while all parents are nominally members of the school’s parent association, there are perhaps 10-15% who attend formal meetings; another 10% who assist on scheduled activities under the auspices of the parent association (canteen roster, before or after school activities roster, etc); some 30% who actively assist in some way with fundraising; and perhaps 10% engaged on various other support activities such as

helping in the library, remedial reading programs, or on working bees. The extent of “cross-over” of the same participants in more than one of these activities is probably significant, but unable to be determined because of lack of any firm data. This does support the other anecdotal perception, that in many or perhaps the majority of schools, there are significant numbers of families which are not connected with the formal processes of the school and may feel excluded or unable to participate because of a range of factors, or do not realise its importance to their child.

The obvious limitation of such impressionistic data is that it can only reflect the directly visible aspects of parent assistance and participation in a particular range of structured activities happening in the school. While recognising that limitation, it is worth noting that these suggested activity levels are not dissimilar to US research reviewed by Joyce Epstein which explored parent participation in such activities and similarly concluded that while this is a prevalent form of involvement, most parents are not active in these ways at school (e.g. some 70% never help in the classroom or class trips; some 70% never participated in fund-raising activities; some 88% never assisted in the library, cafeteria or other school areas). However, this is only one aspect of the potential range of opportunities for effective involvement – one facet of parent-school partnerships - and **all** aspects need to be recognised and explored to gain a full understanding of the extent and dynamics of parent involvement and participation. (Epstein 2001, pp 158-161)

Accordingly, this aspect of the research will focus on two or three schools to provide an informed understanding of the ways in which the several types and aspects of engagement and involvement operate in different school and community contexts. These findings will enable us to develop and verify an effective research methodology that is appropriate for wider application in other school communities across the country. The research will also examine the nature of barriers to effective engagement, the ways in which they operate to

exclude some parents from participation; and how these barriers can be removed. It will also consider the ways families interact in the wider community; and how this information can be used to build sustainable partnership links between parents and the school.

4. The fourth strand of our inquiry process, the first stage of which will be commenced in 2006, will explore the implications of research which demonstrates the extent to which the formation in the family context of attitudes, values and behaviours contributes to effective learning and development at school, and how families and schools can operate in effective partnership from the earliest point of schooling to reinforce and confirm these positive values, attitudes and behaviours.

The starting point for this inquiry process is the work of John Hattie which concludes that there are six critical factors which contribute to variances in student learning and development: of which by far the greatest is that of the attitudes, values, behaviours and other attributes which students bring to the process (50% of variance) together with the closely related effects of family levels of expectation and encouragement (10% of variance). The next most significant factor is that of teachers – “what teachers know, do and care about” which contributes 30% of variance. By comparison, Hattie contends, the effects of school attributes and the impact of the principal in terms of creating an appropriate climate for learning contribute some 5-10%; and peer effects similarly from 5-10% (Hattie, 2003). Factors which contribute to 60% of variance in learning and development outcomes between students, clearly deserve further analysis.

In the context of a strong and increasing emphasis on values education across the system in Australia, and in other countries, it is important to explore the ways in which values are shaped and operate through the years of schooling, and how parents and families can work in partnership with schools to ensure congruence and mutual reinforcement of appropriate

values and behaviours. As with the other three strands of this research, this aspect will seek to take account of the diversity and multicultural nature of Australian society.

4. Last comment

The important purpose of this research was emphasised by Federal Education Minister Dr Brendan Nelson in launching the project: “Parents are partners in the schooling of their children and should be treated as such... Parents are saying they want to work together with schools because by doing so they can support their children’s learning. They want to work with teachers to bring home and school experiences together. And they want to be involved in the development of school policies and not just in supporting the delivery of what the school has already developed. After all, while we all have an interest in a highly educated population, it is the parents who are of course most concerned in seeing their child develop to his or her potential” (Nelson, 2004, p.1).

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