Partnerships with parents

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CORRECTION

The article "The Systemic Bias of ICSEA", published in *Professional Voice* volume 8 issue 1, was written by Barbara Preston, not by Margaret Preston. PV apologises for the error.

PARTNERSHIPS WITH PARENTS

contents

Editorial

Families and Schools –
The Learning Partnership

JOHN GRAHAM

THE BRIEF WE gave to the writers for this edition of *Professional Voice* was to examine the relationship between schools and families — the ways and reasons why parents and carers are involved in schools and their role in teaching and learning. When 5-year-olds arrive in school, they bring with them a legacy of some of their most crucial years of learning, where the main educators have been their parents and families. This influence continues during the school years. Young people take on the role of "student" when they are at school but remain sons and daughters, family members and community participants throughout this time.

In his pioneering 1966 United States Department of Education study, *Equality of Educational Opportunity*, James Coleman identified the overwhelming impact of family background on student achievement. He found that family factors such as household composition, socio-economic status and parents' level of education were stronger predictors of students' educational attainment than were direct school-related factors.

Over the 40-plus years since they were published, Coleman's findings have been replicated, added to and debated, and remain an essential backdrop to any discourse about the need for connections to be made between schools and families. Subsequent research studies which built upon the implications of Coleman's work found that family involvement in children's learning can improve academic performance and

have a positive impact on other key factors, such as attendance and behaviour, which affect achievement.

The message that school authorities have taken from this research is that fostering the involvement of parents in schools and their learning programs may be one of the most effective means of improving student achievement. State and federal government education policies have increasingly incorporated the notion of a learning continuum (from birth onwards) and "partnerships" with parents as central elements. Recent examples have been the Federal Government's *Family–School Partnerships Framework: A Guide for Schools and Families* (2008), Victoria's *Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development* (2008), which includes partnerships with parents as one of its three core strategies for improving student outcomes, and both governments' Early Years Learning Frameworks (2009) which outline a learning connection from birth through to the initial years of school.

The complexities of implementation are always the hard part for top-down policies (even when they may be "evidence-based"). Schools face the same dilemma with every departmental policy — how to effectively implement systemic strategies in their own particular context, ensuring that all of their students and families are involved. A parental involvement policy which may make sense in an affluent middle class suburb with well-educated parents and highly motivated students can become beset by complexities and new barriers where such characteristics do not exist. A number of research studies question the extent to which family interactions and academic performance are independent of a child's family background and family structure. "Sink schools" in low socio-economic areas with few resources, where there may be many children experiencing family disruption and upheaval, need significant additional resources, ready access to external services, and more complex strategies to gain any traction on the positive partnerships with parents envisaged by the department. The task also becomes harder when secondary rather than primary schools are involved and the physical, cultural and academic distance between parents and the school increases.

Sharon Butler addresses many of these issues in our opening article. She identifies a set of research studies which establish that "when parents engage with their children's learning, children's learning outcomes improve and schools perform better". She believes that the evidence is sufficient to establish that this holds true "for all ages and development stages, and across all family backgrounds". The most effective family involvement strategies which lead to the greatest improvement come from learning at home. This does not mean teaching at home or more homework but conversations that "demonstrate the valuing of education, and promote high expectations and shared aspirations". Butler's advice to schools includes providing assistance to parents to overcome the barrier she describes as "the language of learning" which, if not understood, limits the effectiveness of parental learning support. She also urges schools to make the curriculum comprehensible to parents and to recognise and value the contribution that parents make to their children's learning.

Joni Samples writes about the program known as "Family Friendly Schools", which was developed in America and is being trialled in a number of Victorian schools. The structured program is built upon the premise that children's learning will improve if schools and families work together. Parents and school staff jointly develop a plan and work as equals on an agreed collaborative project which leads to the integration of learning between home and school. John O'Meara presents a case study of how a regional secondary school set out to actively engage families as "credible partners" in supporting student learning. The dilemma for the school was how to reach beyond "engaging the already engaged" to "assist those families who through economic disadvantage, rural isolation, language barriers or other hardships do not have the educational capital to invest in the academic development of their child".

Nic Abbey, president of the Victorian Council of School Organisations, looks at school family partnerships through the lens of "personalised learning". He believes that schools will only systematically improve student learning when there is a shared pedagogy within the school community. Student learning today takes place at "multiple sites" — at school, at home and in the community — so that improvement strategies should go beyond a narrow focus on classroom practice and include the other partners. According to Michael Victory, beginning teachers find relationships with parents one of the most difficult areas during their first years of teaching. Pre-service courses provide few opportunities to develop appropriate skills and there is a sink-or-swim attitude once graduates are in schools. Some of the frustrations expressed by parents about the quality of their interactions with schools may be traced back to the lack of resources devoted to professional development and support in this area.

Jill Blackmore and Kirsten Hutchison bring a more critical perspective to claims about the benefits of parental involvement in schools. They believe that the research evidence is not there to support the policy shift which has led to governments around Australia institutionalising parental involvement. They identify two "discourses" which are presently informing this policy — a "deficit discourse" which portrays parents from particular groups as failing to support their children in their learning, and an "agentic discourse" which articulates a normative middle-class model of good parenting. Policy-makers have made a leap from these positions to the notion of greater parental involvement as "the solution for educational disadvantage, in particular underachievement in literacy and numeracy".

Blackmore and Hutchison use a case study of a K-12 college in an inner city suburb of Melbourne to look at how these policies play out on the ground. They conclude: "Visible parental involvement in this school is clearly gendered and classed." Low SES parents with negative experiences of schooling were "either absent or required significant support" and the policy assumed "a ready supply of female volunteer labour". They also found that parents were looking for a more equal partnership and a sense of community.

Our interview section features the internationally-renowned sociologist of education — Raewyn Connell. In the interview Connell addresses the new government and media concentration on "teacher quality", which she sees primarily as a business

PARTNERSHIPS WITH PARENTS

9

agenda and part of the business push to influence education policy. The new agenda is characterised by a "drastic narrowing of educational ideas" and the growth of an "audit culture" which has spread across the public sector and shifted the focus of the education system from inventiveness and diversity to compliance and standardisation. Connell also refutes the claim that the focus on teacher quality is justified because the major determinants of student outcomes — social background and student abilities — are not open to policy influence. The interview finishes with a profound "essay" on the role and future of public education in Australia.

Family-School Partnerships
Make a Difference

SHARON BUTLER

DECADES OF RESEARCH and practice show that when parents engage with their children's learning, children's learning outcomes improve and schools perform better. This is irrespective of parental income or student background.[1] Furthermore, families play a significant role in learning for children and young people of all ages, including adolescence.[2]

In his synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to student achievement, Hattie[3] identified both the home environment and parental involvement in learning as two key influences on student learning. He found that both of these influences sit within what he calls the "zone of desired effects" — that is, the influences that have a greater impact on children and young people's learning than typical teacher influences. With regard to parent involvement in learning, Hattie found that it was the *type* of involvement that is important. The strongest relationship with achievement was associated with parental aspirations and expectations for achievement, followed by communication about school and schoolwork, which had a moderate size effect. The weakest effect was associated with parental home supervision of, for example, hours spent watching television or going out with friends. Interestingly for schools, one of

the key barriers identified to parents being able to effectively support their children's learning is the language of learning and school. Without an understanding of the language of learning, parents are seriously disadvantaged in the methods they are able to employ to contribute to their children's achievement.

Harris and Goodall[4] in their literature and case-study review of schools involved in the Engaging Parents in Raising Achievement (EPRA) program found that "parent engagement is a powerful lever for raising student achievement in schools. Where parents and teachers work together to improve learning, the gains in achievement are significant." Furthermore, it is the support that families provide for their children at home that has the greatest impact on achievement, rather than supporting activities at school.

In their more recent book[5], they state that in order to raise achievement, parents need to be both "*involved* in schools and *engaged* in learning" (my italics). Furthermore, the support of parents for learning and achievement is, they state, "the single most important contributory factor to increased student achievement. In terms of raising school performance, parents matter significantly."

Using data from the National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS), Houtenville and Conway[6] estimated a value-added education production function that included parental effort as an input. Their results "suggest that parental effort has a strong positive effect on achievement that is large relative to the effect of school resources and is not captured by family background variables." In measuring the effects of parental effort, Houtenville and Conway distinguish between two types of parental effort which they term dinner-time effort and school-related effort, to determine which has a greater effect than money or years of education.

Dinner-time effort relates to (1) the discussion of activities of particular interest to the child, (2) things the child studies in class, and (3) discussion relating to selecting courses or programs at school. School-related effort involves (1) attending school meetings and (2) volunteering at the child's school. Their modelling clearly showed that all three types of dinner-time talk were positively related to student achievement whereas of the two school-related effort measures, only attending meetings had a positive and statistically significant relationship with student achievement.

They also showed that the estimated magnitudes of the effects of parental effort were significant. For example, changing from "never" to "sometimes" in parental survey responses "is estimated to increase achievement by more than four (six) additional years of education for the mother (father) or $1000 in additional per-pupil expenditures."

Interestingly, they also found that parents appear to reduce their effort in response to increased school resources, which they suggest indicates a potential offsetting of the effect of school resources.

Dr Joyce Epstein, director of the Centre on School, Family and Community Partnerships and the National Network of Partnerships Schools at Johns Hopkins University, has written more than 100 publications on the effects of school, classroom, family and peer environments. She has produced a research-based framework that

identifies and explains six types of family and community involvement[7]. These are: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making and collaborating with the community. It is this research that underpins the Australian Government's Family-School Partnerships Framework.[8] Her research indicates that all types of family–school–community partnerships are important, but the one that provides the greatest lift in improving children and young people's learning outcomes is learning at home. This is reflected in Harris and Goodall's research and the economic modelling performed by Houtenville and Conway.

COMPLEMENTARY LEARNING

When children and young people are placed at the centre of learning, the positive interaction of schools, families and the wider community becomes even clearer. In 2009, the Harvard Family Research Project published a research report[9] on the benefits of what they term "complementary learning" — an approach that redefines where and when learning takes place to encompass locations and environments beyond the school. Research to date has shown that complementary learning is particularly effective when working to improve the learning outcomes of the most disadvantaged children and young people.

Given that children and young people spend less than 20% of their waking hours in formal schooling, researchers from the LIFE Center[10] have found that:

> … if educators make use of the informal learning that occurs in the homes and communities of students, the achievement gap between marginalised students and mainstream students can be reduced.[11]

Therefore the broadening of family–school partnerships to encompass the wider community also enables significant improvement in children and young people's learning outcomes.

THE AUSTRALIAN CONTEXT

The Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians[12] states:

> Parents, carers and families are the first and most important influence in a child's life, instilling the values that will support young people to participate in schooling and contribute to broader local and global communities.

The **Family School Partnerships Framework**[13] was prepared by the national parent bodies in Australia (the Australian Council for State School Organisations and the Australian Parents Council), the Commonwealth Government and other key stakeholders, including state and territory government and non-government school authorities, and school principals associations. The framework provides a resource for school communities to encourage the development of sustainable family–school partnerships. It draws on the work of Epstein and identifies seven key dimensions of

PARTNERSHIPS WITH PARENTS

family–school partnerships. These are:

- A.   Communicating
- B.   Connecting learning at home and school
- C.   Building community and identity
- D.   Recognising the role of the family
- E.   Consultative decision-making
- F.   Collaborating beyond the school
- G.   Participating.

The framework provides strategies for each of these dimensions of partnership and is supported by a website[14] which also contains case studies, a newsletter and blog and links to Australian and international research.

The **Smarter Schools National Partnerships**[15] are a set of agreements between the Commonwealth Government and all states and territories that "aim to improve student engagement, educational attainment and wellbeing in participating schools and make inroads into entrenched disadvantage." The national partnerships aim to facilitate reforms across six priority areas, one of which is external partnerships with parents, schools, businesses and local communities.

In addition, a taskforce drawing on a broad range of representatives from government and parent organisations has been established to develop, direct and decide activities to be included in a national toolkit as part of the Parental Engagement in Schooling and Low SES Communities Project:

> *The Parental Engagement Project is focusing on the following targets:*
> - *Commencing case studies of what works in parental engagement*
> - *Building a national toolkit to assist schools in developing school, family and community partnerships, and*
> - *Liaising with the Australian Institute for Schools and Teaching Leadership to understand the standards for parental engagement for teachers.*[16]

THE VICTORIAN CONTEXT

The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) explicitly recognises that "families have the first and most significant influence on their children's learning, development, health, safety and wellbeing."[17] The Families as Partners in Learning website, launched earlier this year, contains the DEECD's vision for family partnerships, an overview of the research, identification of some of the obstacles to effective partnerships as well as a comprehensive set of resources for use by schools and early childhood services.

The resources have been developed to be consistent with the seven dimensions of family–school partnerships (previously described), and include tip sheets, case studies, PowerPoint presentations for staff and families, and a "Working in Partnership with Families" video. The website also contains resources for early childhood services.

The Catholic Education Office Melbourne (CEOM) has long recognised that

communities, families and schools play an important role in supporting and promoting the development and wellbeing of children and young people. The Schools as Core Social Centres (SACSC) began in 2002, through a partnership between the CEOM and the Victorian Health Promotion Unit (VicHealth). This initiative provides the opportunity for schools identifying "school community" as a priority area in their school improvement plan to work within a cluster to address these issues. The school improvement framework assists schools to identify issues and SACSC can be part of a local strategic response. In the initial stages the project worked with a cluster of three inner-city Catholic primary schools within the Archdiocese of Melbourne. The project has expanded to include the original cluster and seven new clusters, comprising 26 schools from across all regions. It should be noted that the Kyneton cluster comprises a mix of both Catholic and Victorian government primary and secondary schools working together to provide the best possible outcomes for student in their community.

The Catholic Education Commission Victoria has recently introduced a Family School Partnerships (FSP) project as one response to the national partnerships initiative, and which builds upon the work of the SACSC project. The key elements of this initiative include:

- Identified schools working in clusters
- A family school partnership convenor (FSPC) for each cluster
- FSPCs appointed to each diocese across Victoria
- The FSPCs have community development and engagement skills
- A key aspect of the FSP initiative is to build the capacity of schools and school leaders
- The initiative is community focused and aims to build links/partnerships with families and the broader community
- The initiative is process focused in that it does not promote a preferred approach but rather enables school communities to build on their existing strengths and approaches.

THE IMPLICATIONS

There is enough evidence to show that family involvement in children's learning is positively related to achievement. This holds true for all ages and development stages, and across all family backgrounds.

As the research makes explicit, of all the types of family involvement strategies, those that focus on learning at home provide the greatest lift in children and young people's learning outcomes. It cannot be stressed strongly enough that learning at home does *not* mean teaching at home, or providing more and more homework. Rather, it is about enabling conversations that demonstrate the valuing of education, and that promote high expectations and shared aspirations — that is, Houtenville and Conway's "dinner-talk".

To enable families to engage meaningfully with their child's learning, schools need to assist families to:

- Understand the language of learning

PARTNERSHIPS WITH PARENTS

- Make the curriculum transparent and comprehensible so that opportunities to support school learning can be found
- Recognise what they currently do that is effective
- Acknowledge and value the out-of-school environment.

The focus needs to be on the child or young person, not the school. Outreach strategies to connect with families in their own environment, school environments that are welcoming, and specific strategies for engaging families from diverse backgrounds are all needed.

Those schools that are highly effective in engaging families from diverse backgrounds share three key practices. They:

- Focus on building trusting collaborative relationships among teachers, families and community members
- Recognise, respect and address families' needs, as well as class and cultural difference
- Embrace a philosophy of partnership where power and responsibility are shared.[18]

School leaders need to ensure that partnering with families is part of the core business of schools. When developing strategies for improving literacy and numeracy outcomes, for example, actions relating to learning at home need to be identified and implemented. Partnering with families, and in particular connecting with learning at home, need to be integral to how schools operate, not a bolt-on extra to the "real" work. Effective school–family–community partnerships need to be promoted and modelled from the top — the principal must be committed to making them happen.

But effective partnerships won't happen by wishing or by accident. Families and school staff need tools and development opportunities if they are to build their capacity to engage meaningfully so as to improve children and young people's learning.

For many families, this capacity-building is best provided by peer-educators or in the community, not by teaching staff. It needs to focus on building parental efficacy through developing confidence in parenting, an understanding of the impact they have on their child's achievement, as well as practical strategies such as communicating with teachers and school leaders, and how to advocate for their child.

Pre-service education for teachers needs to ensure that new teachers are effectively prepared in how to work with families. Similarly, more experienced teachers and school leaders need strategies and tools to enable them to more effectively welcome and work with families. In addition, family and teacher capacity building needs to be meaningfully resourced on a sustainable basis if it is to succeed.

In conclusion, developing effective, trusting and mutually respectful relationships between school staff and families is not always easy, but family engagement in learning is one of the most under-utilised resources we have for improving children and young people's learning, and therefore life, outcomes.

NOTE

The terms "family" and "parent" have been used interchangeably throughout this paper, as all family members often contribute significantly to children and young people's development.

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PARTNERSHIPS WITH PARENTS

Ambivalent Relations

The tricky footwork of parental involvement in school communities

JILL BLACKMORE AND KIRSTEN HUTCHISON

PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IS unproblematically portrayed in policy, in local community discourses and in schools as a good thing, despite the lack of research evidence to support this claim (Mattingly et al 2002). It is increasingly linked in policy discourses to improving student achievement.

In Australia, the Early Years Literacy Program of Education Victoria is a whole school approach to the development of early literacy. Introduced in 1999 and continuing as the dominant approach to literacy teaching in primary schools, the program emphasises "strategically planned home/school liaison" and highlights three interconnected processes underway as a result of over a decade of neo-liberal reforms in education. First, the *institutionalisation* of parental involvement formalises relations between parents and schools, resulting in new modes of governing the child, the family and education. Second, post-welfarism has produced a re-privatisation of responsibility for the self, the family and the child back onto the family. Edwards and Alldred (2000) refer to this as a process of *familialisation* indicative of increased dependency of the young on the family with the shift to post-welfarism in post-industrial nation states. Third, both these processes are framed by more generalised processes of *individualisation* in which the individual as a reflexive subject

increasingly takes greater responsibility for their life choices, including education, and bears the consequences of wrong decisions.

THE CONTEMPORARY POLICY ENVIRONMENT

The dominant discourse of the past two decades has been that parental involvement is beneficial for schools and for individual children. Educational reform policies in Australia and other Anglophone states during the 1990s were predicated upon largely unresearched assumptions linking student learning outcomes to parent involvement in schools such as Schools of the Future (Victoria, 1993–99); Partnerships 21 (South Australia, 1999); the Education Reform Act (UK, 1988); and Schools for Tomorrow (New Zealand, 1990).

The most recent shift in policy since 2000 towards institutionalising parental involvement derives from multiple trajectories: research linking literacy learning and family literacies (Cairney et al 1995); restructuring policies promoting parental choice in devolved systems of educational governance; and school effectiveness research identifying the significant impact of family background on student learning outcomes (Mulford, Leithwood and Silins 2004). Consequently, it is increasingly "impossible to impose clear demarcations between literacy policy, national curriculum initiatives, school retention debates and post-compulsory schooling policy" (Green and Beavis 1996, 7). More specifically we argue that policies assuming or advocating parental involvement, including those focusing on literacy, not only simplistically equate poor literacy to disadvantage, but also exemplify particularly gendered and class-based notions of parental involvement and parenting.

Currently, two readily identifiable discourses inform policy. A *deficit* discourse portrays particular parents — largely working-class, Black, immigrant or sole parents — as failing to be good parents due to their inability to support their children in their learning, as evident in their invisibility in schools. An *agentic* discourse links parental involvement to student learning outcomes, articulating a normative middle-class model of good parenting characterised by active involvement in various facets of schools: school governance, parents' associations, fundraising, professional expertise, tutoring, etc. These deficit and agentic discourses have converged to link parental involvement and notions of disadvantage and advantage respectively to student learning outcomes. That is, greater parental involvement is now a solution for educational disadvantage — in particular, underachievement in literacy and numeracy. But there is an ongoing lament, echoed cross-nationally, about the inability to "transform the need for involvement into practice and effective programs" (Dehli 2005, 1).

We argue that discourses and policies about parental involvement fail to recognise the significance of teacher and parental agency and how such discourses both control and empower parents and teachers. Policies advocating parental involvement also ignore the complexity of relations between schools and family, teachers and parents. They often depict teachers and parents in ways that deny the multiple subject positions among parents and teachers arising from their different philosophical views about,

and experiences of, education. Finally, they ignore the economic, socio-cultural and racialised relations and the material conditions that inform particular "situated relations" between parents and teachers. Collectively, these factors lead to some ambivalence among both parents and teachers towards parental involvement in children's schooling.

The following section explores how issues of inclusion, voluntarism and partnership are enacted in one Australian school.

ADDINGVALE COLLEGE: A PORTRAIT

Addingvale College is a kindergarten to Year 12 school, located in a culturally diverse Melbourne inner-city suburb, close to a government high-rise housing estate. Addingvale has a diverse student population, a correspondingly diverse parent community, and a wide range of programs offered across primary and secondary year levels. Addingvale has a relatively small enrolment, and has struggled to maintain a strong academic reputation, given the high number of students who are independent of family, on Educational Maintenance Allowance, as well as the proximity of a shopping centre that has high levels of drug-related crime. Nevertheless, the school is perceived to be responsive to the needs of the local community. The majority of students live in the adjacent government housing estate and are from low-income families. Many are from single-parent families, most headed by women. A significant proportion of students are cared for by their grandparents as a result of family breakdown due to parental drug addiction. An additional population of students live independently, having arrived in Australia as refugees without their parents. The school has embraced waves of refugee populations, most recently from East Timor.

AMBIVALENT RELATIONS: PRINCIPAL, PARENT AND TEACHER PERSPECTIVES

From this relational position, we now explore tensions and issues expressed by the principal, teachers and parents around the themes of inclusion, voluntarism, partnerships and the invisible pedagogical work carried out by mothers.

Inclusion

Policies advocating increased parental involvement produced a number of tensions for Georgina Davis, the long-term principal of Addingvale College. She was aware that a range of class and culturally imposed constraints constituted significant barriers to direct involvement in schooling for particular parent groups who were excluded from the school community through social and economic circumstances: minimal education, substance abuse problems, LOTE backgrounds, or a view of school as a domain best left to those with expertise in education: teachers. The principal clearly understood exclusion as both process and the result of socio-economic circumstances.

Aware that fear and alienation from school environments were barriers to parental involvement at Addingvale, the principal fostered a culture of inclusion and aimed to

PARTNERSHIPS WITH PARENTS

create an environment where parents felt welcome and comfortable and relationships between parents, teachers and students could flourish. Unlike more traditional notions of parent involvement as service to the school, Georgina Davis invited parents to contribute to community building through cultural activities, such as art and cooking classes. The school had a number of community gardens, a regular market where fresh food and produce made from fruits and vegetables grown in the community gardens were sold, and a parent room for meetings, socialising and craft activities. A number of parents spoke passionately about the powerful community capacity generated by these initiatives.

Valuing voluntarism

While philosophically and ideologically committed to inclusion, the principal was sensitive to discourses of exploitation. As a feminist, she was acutely aware of the competing demands on women's time and expressed discomfort at discourses of parental involvement which assume a willing and able supply of parent volunteers. Consistent with other studies of parental involvement in education, our research confirms that parent involvement in education at home and at school is largely a gendered field. Four of the seven participants were single parents and only one mother referred to her husband's involvement.

As Georgina Davis is aware, with the detraditionalisation of social relations of gender arising from women moving into paid work and requirements that welfare recipients actively seek work, very few parents are available for volunteer work in schools. Neoliberal policies have discouraged familial reliance upon the state; consequently, Australia has a high rate of private (family) investment in education. Since the welfare state has withdrawn funding, the reprivatisation of care has reverted back to the family and to volunteerism to run core school programs.

Parents as partners?

Familial independence is also considered a key part of "good" parenting, providing for and taking responsibility for one's children. While resorting to old notions of familialism, which celebrate the virtues of the nuclear family, the nurturing roles of women and the subordination of children, these policies now converge with the new familialism associated with elongated periods of student dependency on parents as young people undertake intermittent lifelong learning in more volatile education and labour markets. The discursive construction of parental support in schools is shaped by class-based assumptions of parenting. Education policies tend to treat all families alike. Yet underachievement in literacy by minority groups is often attributed to the failure of non-normative families: female-headed, Indigenous, working-class and non-English-speaking background parents, despite evidence that most parents want their children to do well at school and actively support their children's endeavours however they can.

Invisible work

In spite of the difficulties faced by some families, teachers were impressed by the complex, arduous and largely invisible pedagogical work of mothers at home and the difference such work made for adolescent students. They were aware of the extent of the effort expended by some mothers to keep their children engaged in schooling, who drew on social and cultural capitals from beyond the family in order to redirect their children. They spoke of mothers who sacrificed their leisure time and confronted the limits of their own education in encouraging and demanding that their children complete required tasks

Parents also see teachers as including or excluding them in their children's learning on the basis of perceptions of class and culture. While many parents at Addingvale viewed academic support in the form of help with homework, projects and exam preparation as critical aspects of their involvement in their children's schooling, they were conscious that the nature of this support was shaped by the school. Parents were welcomed as voluntary workers but rarely valued as "partners". The welcoming and retention of parents within this diverse school community is a key strategy for creating productive relationships between parents and teachers. The sustained support required to build this sense of community is emblematic of the complexity of parental involvement policies. Schools are institutions shaped by gendered, classed and racialised relationships between students, teachers and parents and their aspirations.

Strategies

Strategic management by the principal is necessary to balance her desire to protect her teaching staff from excessive workloads with the need to run effective programs, despite inadequate human and economic resourcing. Her solution is to employ additional staff to carry out the welfare and support work necessary in this community. She is aware of the importance of the social relationships, material conditions and networks required to support learning, and employs youth workers to liaise with families and ensure that students at risk attend school, if necessary by collecting students from homes and delivering them to the breakfast program run by staff on a voluntary basis and funded by a philanthropic organisation.

A free homework support program, staffed by paid coordinators, teachers and pre-service teacher education students, allows access to teachers and library resources for homework completion. Thus the school has instituted programs which parallel and in some cases extend the roles traditionally carried out by families in the service of schooling.

Teachers' pedagogical and welfare work in socio-economically disadvantaged communities such as Addingvale is complex. The principal has developed a number of key strategies to support teachers' work and encourage parent participation. Retired elders in the community act as classroom volunteers, although the issue of volunteerism is a vexed one for the principal.

A community liaison officer has been employed to foster communication between teachers and parents and encourage dialogue and input into school

PARTNERSHIPS WITH PARENTS

policy. Nevertheless, the Parent Association and the School Council membership is predominantly "articulate middle-class parents". The principal has allocated parents a variety of spaces within the school: a parent room, where coffee-making facilities provide a place for mothers to sew and make craft items for the market; a series of community gardens; and a weekly market where parents, teachers and children mingle to buy organic produce and art and craft items. It is in these more open settings that culturally diverse parents meet and develop social connections while sharing a cup of tea or tending the gardens.

These are the strategies mobilised by the principal to develop community capacity under partnership policies. Increasingly in Australia, the changing nature of principals' jobs requires that they do this work, particularly in low socio-economic areas and the costs of doing this demanding work are extreme.

CONCLUSION

It is clear from these accounts from the principal, teachers and parents in one school that family–school relationships are complex and at times contradictory. The constitution of parental involvement in education is inflected by issues of class, gender and culture. Policies advocating increased parental involvement appear to be based on normative assumptions about families and their resources. There is little systematic recognition that schools in low socio-economic communities require additional funding in order to provide some of the advantages middle-class children receive at home.

What the present study shows is how tensions do arise between teachers, schools and parents through subtle processes of exclusion. Furthermore, our inability to gain a sample of parents to interview, representative of the culturally diverse school community, is perhaps indicative of the difficulties principals and teachers face in creating an all-inclusive community, despite their commitment to partnership. It confirms reviews of research on parental involvement indicating considerable variation in levels of involvement that are largely dependent on the socio-economic position and ethnic background of the parents.

Visible parental involvement in this school is clearly gendered and classed. It is middle-class parents with social and economic resources and flexible work practices who respond to policies advocating parental involvement. Parents from low socio-economic communities who have had negative experiences of schooling themselves are either absent or require significant support. Their presence in classrooms can subvert rather than augment teachers' work. Furthermore, our self-selecting sample confirms that educational work contributes to the invisible work of mothers. Some teachers in this school were sharing emotional work with mothers in offering a vast repertoire of support, in the form of encouragement and confidence-building and engagement of children in school learning. They clearly valued the partnership and indeed required it, if they were to make a difference with children at risk. Both mothers and female teachers were critical of a policy which assumed a ready supply of female volunteer labour and spoke of their discomfort at the expectation that mothers' time

and labour were required to run core programs.

Finally, this case study has uncovered the desire for a sense of community underpinning parental involvement in this school. Parents were increasing looking for a closer set of home–school relationships, in which parental agency was not elided by institutional demands, and a more equal partnership. The creation by parents of physical spaces, such as the gardens and craft market, where power was not entrenched in the hands of school personnel and interactions were more often social than official, allowed for the development of less hierarchical relationships between parents and teachers. It is ironic that policies of choice, such as parental involvement, when framed by neo-liberal market philosophies promoting ideas about individual freedom, may be highly prescriptive and interventionist into a normative model of family life. Rather than enhancing parents' involvement in children's education so that school learning is supported, mandated policies and partnership initiatives may serve to constrain the development of inclusive relationships between families and schools. On the ground, the practices of inclusion in school communities and parent–teacher relationships are troubled by a sense of ambivalence not recognised in policy.

NOTE

Pseudonyms have been used throughout for the school and all participants. This is an edited version of an article that first appeared in *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, April 2010. The full article can be found at tinyurl.com.au/z0j.

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PARTNERSHIPS WITH PARENTS

Family Engagement in Learning Works

JONI SAMPLES

THIRD-GRADE, BRIGHT RED hair and almost as tall as me, Tommy's arms and legs never seemed to move in a smooth order. He didn't exactly amble, it was more like a stumbling shuffle, but he got where he wanted to be. I taught special education, and Tommy was in my class. During class one day, Tommy went to the library. He came back a few minutes later ready to chew nails.

"You have to talk to me," he said, as I sent the other children out to recess. "If you don't talk to me I'll knock everything off this desk!"

This was a child I'd been trying to reach for months. "What's going on?" I asked.

"You have to teach me to read. I want to read now," he said.

A statement like that is music to any teacher's ears, but what had brought on this desire? While working on a computer in the library, another child asked Tommy what he was writing. He didn't know.

I didn't analyse further. He wanted to read. That was enough for me. Tommy was already behind for third grade. He was a kid with test scores most teachers and administrators don't want in their classrooms. He was far below basic skills and not improving. Now, all of a sudden, the desire was there.

As one of his teachers, I could certainly help, but he had more than one teacher.

His mom waded in too. By giving mom some ideas about how to read with Tommy at home, how to help him with letters and words, and what to do with spelling and writing, she joined his classroom teacher and me in the effort. By the end of fourth grade, Tommy was in a gifted program — not for his reading, but for his ability with art. His reading had improved to grade level, and his confidence was soaring.

Tommy's success was due in large part to the team effort. Mom and teachers working with him to make learning possible had helped turn Tommy into a successful student. Usually we assume the school is the major player in a child's education, but Family Friendly Schools insists that it takes both the school and the family to support a child's success.

Researchers have studied parent involvement for years. Researchers like Joyce Epstein from Johns Hopkins University and Karen Mapp from Harvard have done numerous studies and published numerous articles stating that a student's achievement improves, as do attendance and behaviour, when parents are engaged in a child's learning. Tommy's did. All of the above happened for Tommy.

Effectively engaging parents in learning isn't as easy as it seems. There's a long history of schools being the ones responsible for education. They are. Teachers go to college to learn to teach. Teachers practice teaching. Teachers teach everyday. Yet a child's first and foremost teacher is his or her parent. Have you ever met a child and you know immediately to whom he belongs? He walks like his dad. He talks like his dad. He looks like him. He has his mom's eyes and her smile. That child spent the first five years almost exclusively with his parents. Now he spends maybe 30 hours a week at school and 130-plus hours a week with his family. And that's only during the school year. He's home during school breaks. There's a great deal more time spent with family members than with teachers. It makes sense to engage parents in learning if we want children to be successful learners.

Because it isn't on our radar systems, most schools aren't sure how to engage parents. Many parents are concerned about how to engage in learning. So oftentimes, nothing happens.

Family Friendly Schools was set up to change that dynamic. FFS begins by asking parents in a parent survey how things are going at their child's school, specifically around how welcoming the school is, whether the school's communication is two-way, whether parents feel engaged in the school's activities and get support for helping with learning at home.

After a data review, there's a workshop for teams from participating schools. Team members include administrators, teachers, parents and support staff. The process, called P-TAG (Parents–Teachers A to G), takes the team through a series of activities, from A to G of course. FFS facilitators encourage participation by everyone and help teams to create a plan of action that breaks down barriers and builds up a collaborative effort to support children's learning.

The teams leave with a plan, but evidence indicates that often plans from a workshop or conference end up on a shelf and folks go back to their desk or their laundry and not much happens, so FFS follows-up with coaching. EdCoaches coach

the teams for the next six months, reminding folks of their plans and commitments to each other and the children. As the teams move through their process, changes begin to occur. What changes? That depends on the school and their plans.

Four schools in Bendigo are leading the way in Australia for FFS. They came together for an FFS Engage! workshop, but for three of the schools it was more than just engaging around connections with parents. Eaglehawk, Comet Hill and Bendigo North Primary Schools are merging into one school by next year; the Family Friendly Schools workshop brought them together for the first time. It has been a controversial merger and one in which misunderstandings are easily possible. The goal was to have a collaborative session with parents participating. The fourth school, Eaglehawk Secondary, also going through major renovations, provided a great sounding board for the needs of older students. For this article, we're going to focus on the three merging schools, but please know the secondary school has created its own plan and is moving ahead with support from the FFS staff.

The workshop trainers endeavour to build collaboration and, in this case, collaboration is exactly what is required to merge schools. The three primary teams began by working separately, identifying current issues and working through the attitudes held at their separate sites. It didn't take long, however, for the teams to begin the process of building new attitudes and working on new ways of doing business, and doing it together. By day two, barriers began tumbling for the three school teams and a joint vision for a new school began emerging.

Parents were as involved in the process as the teachers and administrators. Parents who will be sending their children to the new school, teachers who will be teaching in the new facility, and support staff and administrators who will be helping make this transition work dropped whatever role they currently carried to create a new role and a new school designed the way they envisioned it to be.

The FFS Engage! process is based on building trust, then creating a plan agreeable to all parties. Usually creating a collaborative project is a new experience for school staff members and parents. The school is used to running the school programs. The parents are used to figuring out car-pools to soccer games. Collaborating around a project of joint interest is a new concept and takes a bit of getting used to. In this case, the project needed to focus on something the three schools could do together, not only because of the merger, but because these folks will be working together for a long time to come. Why not get to know each other now?

The project emerged: a joint field day. Having kids actively engaged in a performance of almost any kind brings parents out. Bringing all the kids, families, teachers and staff together in an open, relaxed atmosphere helps everyone build relationships and get to know each other.

The field day planning is already underway. The group was so committed; a Facebook page announcing school progress went up the day after the workshop, set-up by an enthusiastic mom.

FFS is committed to the success of the schools. After an Engage! workshop, the teams receive EdCoaching for the next six months. The collaborative plan is

PARTNERSHIPS WITH PARENTS

the vehicle to begin coaching. If you've ever been to a trainer for fitness, you might recognise an assignment to do 42 sit-ups, 37 push-ups and 10 laps around the track. After you've called the trainer a few names and perhaps pulled several muscles or quit altogether, the experience has turned into something less than desirable.

FFS coaches aren't "tellers". EdCoaches use the school team plans to guide teams with a series of specific questions, in the direction(s) a school team chooses and at the speed at which a team is ready to proceed. As a team completes one task, the coach will help them explore their next project in order to build the relationships necessary to create a successful school climate that will support learning for all children.

Bendigo's new school, Lightning Reef Primary, is already moving forward with its plans for the joint field day. The Facebook site is up. The team has met. Their coach is meeting with them by phone, and all efforts are in the works.

Some of you may be asking, how does this help learning? A field day is great, but we send our kids to school to learn to read. How does a field day help them do this? Family Friendly Schools is all about schools and families working together to make a difference in children's learning. So where's the learning?

If a community is not currently collaborating toward common learning goals, there are reasons why. The school may be used to doing all the teaching. The parents may not have been encouraged to help at school. Parents are intimidated by helping with algebra. Teachers may be afraid parents will teach the wrong way and create confusion. There are all kinds of reasons why schools and families may not yet be working together to support learning.

The FFS process starts with something that can build the trust and the relationships that will encourage learning support to happen. The teams start with a project at their school where both school staff and parents can be equally involved. Working together, with a goal in mind, creates collaboration. Those collaborative relationships create more projects until they are ready to take on reading or even algebra. They've done enough together to know it's safe — safe to make mistakes, safe not to know all the answers, and safe to work together. When that happens, the biggest benefactor is the children. The child knows he'll read a story at school and he'll be reading one at home too. He'll be learning fractions on Friday morning and reading the recipe for cookies on Saturday while measuring out the ½ cup of sugar and the ¼ cup of butter.

Family Friendly Schools' process is based on data, training, coaching and evaluation. The results mirror what the research has shown for years: student test results increase, attendance is improved, and behaviour is better. In addition, students whose parents are engaged are more likely to finish school and go on to post-secondary education. Family engagement is a win-win for everyone. Bendigo is leading the way, but we're sure your school is close behind. Our local Australian contacts are happy to help you get started. Contact John Jones at **0419 113065**.

The What, Why and How of Family Engagement

JOHN O'MEARA

IN A PRESENTATION to educators and parents in Sydney in September 2010, Professor Alma Harris from the Institute of Education at the University of London identified the two most powerful levers for raising student achievement: parents and teachers.

What was surprising was the proportion of influence each contributed: home contribution was 80% and the school contributed 20%. This presented the challenge she termed "joined-up thinking" — how could we harness the power of both and realise the full possibilities for achievement for every student?

The words **involvement** and **engagement** are often used as substitutes even though they mean very different things. Clearly, families can be involved in their child's school without being engaged in their child's learning.

The key benefits accrue when the family is actively engaged as a credible partner in supporting the child's learning. Family engagement therefore means all those actions and activities that directly support their child's learning.

The task for educators is to work out systems to help families do this. Put at its most basic, it is to enable them to ask a better question of their child than "What did

you do at school today?" — to change the focus of school communication from "what has happened" to "what is happening" or, better still, "what is going to happen?"

Report cards and telephone calls about a student's lack of performance or disciplinary matter give families little scope for engagement — their chance to affect the outcome has passed. Changing the orientation to one of planning and engaging in a conversation has more chance of gaining a family member's investment in the learning of the student.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS?

Henderson and Mapp (2002) examined over 50 studies on family involvement and found that regardless of the income or background, students whose families were engaged with school:

- Gained improved educational outcomes
- Had better attendance
- Developed positive attitudes and behaviour
- Improved their completion rates
- Had greater enrolment in post-secondary education.

Clearly, family engagement is central to high quality education.

Educational leaders must be careful not to fall into the trap of congratulating themselves on engaging the already engaged. What of the uncertain, hard-to-reach or disengaged family?

How can schools assist those families who through economic disadvantage, rural isolation, language barriers or other hardships do not have the educational capital to invest in the academic development of their child? The challenge is to develop cultural change mechanisms within the school's operations which will address the need for *every* family to be equal partners in their child's education.

WHY DON'T FAMILIES OF SECONDARY STUDENTS ENGAGE MORE OFTEN?

When "family engagement" is mentioned in a secondary context it tends to be limited to volunteering, fundraising or perhaps the school council or committee. As a general rule, parents tend to be more reticent to engage with secondary schools. There are a number of reasons:

- Rigour and level of academic work at high school changes parents' beliefs as to their ability to help their children
- Adolescence suppresses an active interest in overt parental involvement
- Secondary schools are larger and more compartmentalised — often no single teacher is primarily responsible for a particular student
- Larger geographical area creates transport issues
- High school teachers have larger numbers of students assigned to them
- Some parents seek to transfer the complete responsibility for their children's education to the school
- Schools often set up narrow parameters for family participation.

WHAT INFLUENCES A PARENT TO BECOME ENGAGED?

A parent's sense of personal efficacy will be a telling factor in whether they become engaged with their child's learning. A key issue will be if they see their parenting role as having a strong educative bent. Additional factors will be their level of confidence in assisting the child and the "authenticity" of the offers from schools to become engaged in their child's learning.

Parents with a high sense of efficacy believe they can:
- Help their children do well in school and be happy and safe
- Overcome negative influences
- Keep their children away from troublemakers, illegal drugs or alcohol.

According to Harris, the higher the level of efficacy, the closer the involvement with school was likely to be and the more likely students were to do well in school and report feeling happy, safe and stable.

Another major influence is **school culture**. I remember Dr Steven Constantino once remarking: "Culture eats reform for breakfast! If you want sustainable change, re-culture your organisation."

School culture embraces the attitudes and beliefs of those both inside and outside the school; these are the greatest determinants of success when seeking to form partnerships in learning with families and the community. Culture diffuses itself across everything:
- How people act
- What they talk (or avoid talking) about
- Whether they seek the assistance of colleagues
- How teachers feel about their work, students and students' families
- How families feel about their child's education and the school
- How the community views the school.

Often teachers believe they have the trust of families by virtue of the position they hold, when in fact the trust of families is an earned privilege.

There is little doubt that the levels of family engagement are in part driven by the way families feel about the school and its teachers.

In a study of working-class parents and their interaction with their local school, Hanafin and Lynch (2002 p46) found "… a widespread feeling of being unwelcome when visiting the school premises, and parents reported feelings of anxiety, nervousness and intimidation when meeting individual teachers."

This must have an effect on how genuine the offers of inclusion and partnership from the school are seen to be by these parents. This is despite the researchers finding that "parents understand a great deal more about schooling and education than middle-class professionals give them credit for."

The choice for educators is simple — do we believe families are an asset or a liability? If the former, a large body of evidence would give us confidence that we can lift the performance and outcomes of every student. The latter leads us to a "fortress school" mentality where one of the greatest forces for improved student performance is marginalised.

PARTNERSHIPS WITH PARENTS

ONE SCHOOL'S JOURNEY: YEA HIGH SCHOOL

As the principal of Yea High School I had grappled for some time with the need for our school to be more connected to our parents. In 2006 I was fortunate to be given a copy of Dr Constantino's book *Engaging All Families*. A number of points really resonated with me. It was rare to hear of a secondary school that had tackled family engagement with such positive results.

I shared my reading with my school council and suggested we form a working party of parents, students, school staff (both teaching and non-teaching), administrators and community members to go through the evaluation process suggested by Dr Constantino, and consult our families on issues such as:

- Does our school say welcome?
- Are we clear about our mission and governance?
- How will we establish staff availability and time for communication with families?
- How will we establish two-way communication with all families?
- How will we access community funds of knowledge and skill?
- How will we engage families with their students?

We also ran focus groups with families, students and teachers. These working party and focus group meetings were some of the most insightful and meaningful I have attended in my career. I was forced to examine carefully my assumptions about parent engagement in my school and change my point of view as to what concerned parents.

One of the strong themes which emerged was the need for the school to develop a policy statement, to make clear how it saw the role of families and how the school would work with families.

We framed a draft policy in July 2006, using the same framework that we had used in the evaluation as our starting point. So there were statements on:

- A welcoming school culture
- Communication
- Assisting with home learning
- Valuing family members' skills
- Encouraging family members to participate in school programs and decision-making processes
- Using community resources to strengthen families.

I was pleased to see the school council so keen to take up the debate on the policy and it was consulted widely across the Yea High School Community. In November 2006 the school council endorsed the final draft.

The council also formed a sub-committee called the Partnership Action Team (PAT). Its make-up closely mirrored that of the original working party and it was charged with working on the specifics of the policy statements, identifying preferred strategies to be implemented within the school's implementation plans.

Interactive home learning

One area which came in for comment in consultation was that of homework. We could

see this was an opportunity for families to be drawn into their child's academic life. We also realised that the concept needed to be reworked as "more than just minutes" and an opportunity to create a meaningful dialogue between family members and their child.

Staff embraced redefinitions of three key concepts of family engagement which were based on work by Joyce Epstein (2002), director of the National Network of Partnership Schools:

- "Volunteer" — anyone who supports school goals and children's learning or development in any way, place or time — not just at school during the school day
- "Learning at home" — not only work done alone, but also activities shared with others at home or in the community, linking schoolwork to real life
- "Help from family members" — encouraging, listening, reacting, praising, guiding, monitoring and discussing — but *not* "teaching" school subjects.

At Yea we pondered what we could do to put these redefinitions into practice. Our answer was the development of interactive home learning (IHL) tasks for students in Years 7–8.

IHL tasks, given to students at regular intervals over a semester, required them to conduct conversations with a parent or family partner around certain parts of the student's learning. We found that these tasks built students' confidence by requiring them to show their work, share ideas, interview, discuss, demonstrate a skill and present their learning to their family.

These tasks also linked schoolwork with real-life situations and helped family members to understand more of what their children were learning at school, while the parent comment section enabled family members and teachers to communicate frequently.

This program offered families one way of meaningfully engaging in their child's education and fostering a genuine interest in lifelong learning. It helped them to ask the right questions of their child. It was our first "win".

Big Picture learning

I had been intrigued by the Big Picture schools (Littky 2004) for some time. The Big Picture schools I had visited in the United States had strong ties to families, student advisories, authentic tasks, assessment by exhibition and internships/mentors.

Following further research by the PAT, four Big Picture concepts were trialled in Year 7 in 2008:

- Student advisory groups led by a teacher advisor
- A genuine attempt to promote two-way communication
- Individual learning plans (ILPs) for each student negotiated with their parents
- Student-led conferences.

Advisories were made up of 14–17 students. The plan was to build a close relationship with our families and invite them into a genuine partnership, with multiple contacts between advisor and parents across the term.

PARTNERSHIPS WITH PARENTS

Families also had the opportunity to attend and participate in student learning expos and student-led conferences. Family attendance at these events was close to 100% — a major improvement on parent–teacher interviews, where attendances were routinely 25%–35%.

In 2009, we further developed and extended the advisory concept. Students were now required to conduct two exhibitions on "passion projects" completed in their advisory classes. This year we introduced a Big Picture-inspired curriculum at Year 9.

We followed the Big Picture model of developing our own distinguishing features. Yea High School's key distinguishers are:

Advisory — The core of our model. The teacher advisor's role was to manage the student's personalised learning plans. The advisor must get to know each student and his or her family well.

Rigour — For some time we had examined ways to foster a culture of high expectations. Part of our answer was found in *An Ethic of Excellence* by Ron Berger (2003). With the ILPs and exhibitions, excellent work is on public display and celebrated by the whole advisory and their families. Students have access to a repository of excellent work produced by their peers — they have a much clearer understanding what high quality work looks like and entails.

Learning in the community — Students are encouraged to seek learning opportunities in the real world through student work on shadow days and internship projects.

One student at a time — Students are encouraged to pursue their interests and grow academically through their ILPs.

Authentic assessment — Students are assessed against the learning goals, real-world standards within their Internship Project and at their quarterly exhibition.

Families are enrolled too — Families are engaged through ILP meetings and exhibitions each term. Families are resources at these meetings because they know their children well. They can suggest mentoring possibilities and use their local knowledge, assets and networks in ways that support the school.

Creating futures — We show faith in our students and work to create opportunities for them. We plan backwards to expose students to opportunities through, for example, challenging learning plans, visits to universities and TAFEs, educating families about the process, and building relationships with local colleges, universities and businesses.

After close to a year of running this model we have noticed:

• Very high levels of family engagement
• Maturing of the partnership in learning with families
• Quieter, more focused and productive classes
• Improved attendance and student motivation
• Minimal referrals to administration for poor student behaviour
• Greater connectedness with school and peers
• Greater capacity of students to reflect, identify and understand the next steps
• Increased use of experts in the field

- Improved public speaking skills
- Increased interest in developing a pathway.

AND FINALLY...

I start my work as an educational leader with the belief that all families want their children to do well. All educators must sincerely believe that all students in their care can learn. We must work closely with families to create opportunities for all children to build success into their lives. The more we do this, the more productive schools will become and the more inclined their young people will be to achieve success.

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PARTNERSHIPS WITH PARENTS

Beyond the Classroom

Beginning teachers' communication with parents

MICHAEL VICTORY

I actually had one parent who came along and abused me … He kept on saying, "It's a problem with you; [my child] gets on well in every other class." It was scary … he just sat there and abused me. So you end up thinking, "Well I suck. I can't teach" (DEST 2002, p67).

AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENTS ARE vitally interested in the results of public education investment. Governments want improved school results and better performance from teachers. One pressure point for governments is on the relationship and communication between teachers and parents[1]. Whether this approach is prompted by research that demonstrates the efficacy of parental involvement in the learning process (which is abundantly available), parents' dissatisfaction with current arrangements, or some other motive, change will beset the teaching workforce. Whether teachers, particularly beginning teachers, are prepared for this change is the question.

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1 The word "parent" is used throughout this paper for convenience. The term is used inclusively to recognise all people whether step-parent, grandparent or significant adult who act in a parent role for any given student.

In Victoria, the Education and Training Act 2006 entrusts parents with a legal responsibility to ensure their children attend school. It also provides to parents a right to be "actively involved" in their child's education. The Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) Blueprint for Victorian schools elaborates further. It demands more of the relationship between schools (and therefore teachers) and parents, and for the first time it refers to all schools, government and non-government.

The direction is consistent with research findings that where schools and families work together, children have higher achievement levels and stay in school longer. The research is conclusive that parental involvement in schools, even a family context that is positive toward schooling, is indeed beneficial to student learning.

WHAT IS THE CURRENT STATE OF PLAY?

There is evidence in the literature of parent dissatisfaction with the relationship with teachers (Walker, 1998; Warren and Young 2002; Westergard 2007). Articles in metropolitan newspapers suggest that the teacher–parent relationship remains fraught with tension.

Newspaper articles contribute to the anecdotal evidence that teachers are experiencing greater pressure from some parents, and clearly there is frustration among parents with communication by teachers.

In contrast, there are also documented instances where teachers despair at the lack of involvement of parents with the education of their own children. Skilbeck and Connell (2004) reported in their influential paper to MCEETYA:

> *Teachers … focus on what they see as a breakdown in values within the community and particularly in parenting. The role of the teacher has become more complex as is the situation of children and families within many Australian communities. In this context, teachers commonly report the changing nature of their work, lack of time to teach and difficulty in meeting the broadening demands of their work* (p106).

Many government reports cite the relationships with parents as contributing to difficulties for beginning teachers and also a causal factor in turnover among new teachers. According to the conclusions in one report:

> *Beginning teachers who are young, inexperienced and possibly struggling for classroom control are particularly vulnerable to demanding or aggressive parents who expect the best for their children, and define that in terms of experience and order in the classroom. Many teachers pointed out that communicating with parents was something they had had no experience of during teaching rounds, and, given their age, a particular source of anxiety* (An Ethic of Care 2002 p67).

THE CLASSROOM TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVE

In the midst of this pressure from governments, demands from "committed" parents and the difficulty of "absent" parents sits the classroom teacher. The parent relationship has the potential to be deeply personal for teachers. One teacher (interviewed by the author) comments:

> *I was completely panic stricken for three days before we actually met as to what had gone wrong … I would go in every morning terrified that there was going to be complaints (from parents) about something or other … I was scared of the parents, I didn't feel confident.*

And from the same teacher just a hint of animosity at the preciousness of some parents:

> *… Some parents will overreact about their precious little child and you've just got to deal with that.*

THE SCHOOL LEADERS' PERSPECTIVE

Mullins (2002), in a study of 35 principals of independent schools in Australia, finds an overwhelming response from these principals that beginning teachers are not well equipped to deal with the relationships with parents. They are often fearful of parents and they actively seek to reduce contact with them. Mullins concludes that much work is required to establish a broader understanding of the term "partnership with parents" and that beginning teachers need to "build specific skills of proactive communication and of dealing with emotional parents".

THE SCHOOL PERSPECTIVE

The most common point of interaction between teachers and parents is the structured school-based "parent–teacher interview". Walker's study (1998), *Meetings without communication*, raises serious questions about the efficacy of parent–teacher interviews. While teachers raise some positive views about the interview process, "all but one of the teachers … found parent evenings exhausting. And nearly all admitted that they resented the time spent at the end of a long day." Walker quotes from the narrative of a "young female teacher" who says:

> *You can also soak up an awful lot of hassle from parents. And maybe hassle that you don't necessarily think is appropriate or right. … There are too many competing expectations of what it's about. And no real, clear idea of what it should be about.*

Walker also quotes extensively from parent narratives in which they talk about being "nervous", "fearful", "going into battle", and then makes the summative statement:

"Almost without exception, the parents interviewed in this study found parents' evenings a frustrating experience; and for many, deeply distressing."

THE SYSTEM PERSPECTIVE

The share of government budgets consumed by school education ensures that schooling has a political dimension. Freebody (2003) contends that the education funding debate (not just the private/public funding debate but the size of the total government funding pool available to schools) has impacted on the teacher–parent relationship. He argues that the contest over the allocation of education funding has seen the introduction of productivity measures and has driven education to becoming a commodity that is tradeable. The government "contracts" teachers to maximise the child's performance against certain measurable productivity measures, eg tertiary entry scores, national test results for literacy and numeracy. The teacher is seen as the expert capable of ensuring results are achieved for which parents then agree to the funding requirements (taxes or fees) needed by these "experts". In this "contract", teachers seek to deliver the measurable results for the student demanded by the government. The government expects parents only to fulfil their financial obligations (taxes or fees) but many parents still seek a "social contract" with the teacher. This "social contract" is not supported by the system — teachers are not given the time or resources to interact with parents.

At the simplest level it is about the lack of proper facilities made available to teachers for the purpose of contacting parents. One beginning teacher (interviewed by the author) relates his experience of phoning parents:

> Most of the time I just got message banks and answering machines and that sort of thing … It's hard to find time to do it because you've literally got to wait until the end of your day. You're packed up and ready to go … you've got everything prepared for the next day, and then you've got to sit down and make five or six phone calls and the phone is not in your room, you've got to go and find the phone and make the phone calls, and you've got to try and wait until there's no one around so that you've got no noise in the background so you can hear.

PLANNING FOR IMPROVEMENT

(i) Adopting the right philosophy

Louise Porter, child psychologist, teacher and author on education and parenting issues, suggests that the teacher–parent relationship is "based on a flawed model that entrenches a power imbalance between parents and teachers" (2009). She suggests there are three models at work that characterise the teacher–parent relationship. The first model she describes as "teacher-dominated": the teacher is the professional, "exclusively qualified to apply a specialised body of knowledge … with parents

expected either to accept professionals' advice, or go elsewhere." The second model she describes as the "family allied stance" of educators: parents have the role of helping teachers to educate their child, but "this parental engagement is often only in token activities that do not challenge teachers' domain, with teachers directing parents, and the two working in parallel rather than jointly."

In Porter's third model, where she seeks to create new thinking about the teacher–parent relationship, she argues that the only sustainable model involves teachers recognising that:

> … more than being mere consumers or even equal participants in a partnership with you, parents are actually your employers. Their function is not to help you teach their children, but the reverse: they employ you to assist them in raising skilled, knowledgeable and well-adjusted children. They hire you for your expertise as an educator and pay your salary by way of private school fees or taxes for public education. Therefore, your task is to further their aims for their children.

Porter's contentious parent-driven model does appear to be consistent with that being proposed by the Victorian Government Blueprint.

(ii) Improve teacher professional development

It can be said with some confidence that when beginning teachers have positive experiences in their early interactions with parents, they grow in confidence as professionals. Whether, if the initial experiences are negative, teachers are able to overcome the early setback is not as clear.

The conclusion is clear that greater proactive support is needed in the early years for beginning teachers. Many schools operate on a deficit model — support is provided only when a teacher is experiencing difficulty or expresses concerns. If no-one recognises the difficulties then no support is provided. The alternative model of development would have teachers building their capability against a set of criteria or a standard of excellence and support provided from the first day of employment.

(iii) Improve pre-service teacher training

A national survey of 1,545 beginning teachers by the Australian Education Union found that 85.6% of respondents felt that their "teacher training had not prepared them adequately for dealing with difficult parents and colleagues" (AEU, 2009). This is supported by the lived experience of teachers:

> I think that my university could have probably done more formal instruction regarding just people skills and conflict resolution … I did have one or two instructors who gave me some really effective pearls of wisdom (interview with the author).

Also:

PARTNERSHIPS WITH PARENTS

> *There was more of this theoretical stuff about the social context of skills, that you know middle-class schools would have a higher parent involvement than the local high school, but nothing about how to deal with parents. … It left me completely unprepared … I had two practicums and the quality and the feedback I got depended on the quality of the teacher who supervises* (interview with the author).

Intriguingly, one beginning teacher interviewed by the author was a trained professional with successful experience as a lawyer, and as a union organiser with expertise in negotiation and conflict resolution, and he found that he was inadequately prepared for the complexity of communication with parents when he retrained as a teacher.

(iv) Recruit for the right skills
There is evidence that teachers who themselves are parents communicate effectively with other parents and show a great capacity for empathy with the parent community. This presents an intriguing challenge for teacher educators and employers. Clearly, being a parent cannot be a criterion for entry into teacher training courses or for gaining employment as a teacher, but it should be a prompt to investigate the skills, knowledge and attributes that good parenting involves that might be transferable to the teacher education process.

In the complex relationship between child, parent and teacher there is a reliance on the teacher to be an effective professional in the learning environment with the student, and also an emotionally mature adult in interactions with the parent. Once again this raises issues for the profession, for teacher educators and for employers. What level of maturity or emotional intelligence is required of a teacher to manage the issues that occur "beyond the classroom"? One teacher interviewed by the author relates his experience of meeting with parents:

> *I was the same age as or older than most of them, so I felt I was in with my peers; it wasn't looking like I was early 20s looking up to 40-year-olds, so I felt comfortable in that sense. I have a level of social skills to deal with them, and … I was able negotiate problems freely and comfortably and knew how to put people at ease.*

And one more teacher:

> *Some of the parents are younger than me too, and they see me in that job and they don't sort of question how long I've been teaching … most of my peers going through uni who were younger than me were complaining at the end of the four years, sort of three or four months before they were going out, that they hadn't been prepared enough, they didn't know enough, they hadn't had enough practical placement, they weren't told stuff. And I really think that came down to lack of maturity on their part,*

that they hadn't been in the workforce before for an extended amount of time, and they were waiting to be spoon-fed a little bit more than that they had been (interviewed by the author).

CONCLUSION

Given the conclusiveness of the research about the benefits of parent involvement in children's education, it is worth contemplating what are reasonable expectations on teachers to ensure effective communication with parents. It is a broad question, and an issue that is implicit in the emerging pressure from governments and parents on the teaching workforce. Much is asked of teachers by governments and parents; considerable responsibility is being passed to teachers to increase the quality of communication with parents from their school community. While this may prove to be good education policy and, in responding to parent demands, good political policy, it will not be an effective policy if teachers are not supported in this most complex relationship.

If teachers are to improve their communication with parents then the knowledge, skills and attributes they need for this have to be understood and the methods for transferring these capabilities through teacher education and professional development need to be trialled and tested. Governments will need to invest more time and resources into developing effective models of parent–teacher partnerships. Teachers, particularly beginning teachers, will need more support if the current trend from government and parent lobby groups for more effective engagement of parents continues.

NOTE

This paper is adapted from a longer paper of the same name. The teacher interviews referred to in this adaptation were conducted as part of the data gathering for that thesis. The full paper is available on request from **mvictory@tln.org.au**.

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Personalised Learning Through Partnerships

Shaping the future of education and schools

NICHOLAS ABBEY

THE QUESTION OF how to build education systems and schools around personalised learning through better partnerships and governance is arguably *the* educational challenge of our time. Indeed, in educational practice and research in relation to improving schooling and learning outcomes and life opportunities for all students, two things stand out:

1. Increased "personalisation" of learning for all students, with the potential to reshape education systems and schools around all learners' needs, aspirations, talents, interests and fundamental right to all-round personal development.
2. Principals, teachers, parents, students and community members as real partners in reshaping education, bringing to the fore school–family–community partnerships and the need for better governance to make these partnerships more effective.

Personalisation and partnerships (Hargreaves, 2004; Leadbeater, 2004) are two sides of the same coin and comprise a paradox (Weigel, James, and Gardner, 2009: 2): learning becomes more personalised and focused on an individual's needs and development, and yet more social (involving teams, networks and partnerships on an unprecedented scale).

This article affirms that personalisation of students' learning through strong partnerships may be the way to end the performance plateau in education systems and to close the gap in educational attainment between students of different social backgrounds. It may also be the source of renewal in public education and the best way to build parent participation.

Given the boldness of these claims, in this article we discuss three key questions:

1. What is personalised learning and is it the "next big thing"?
2. What are the barriers to the development of personalised learning?
3. What would a framework for personalised learning look like?

WHAT IS PERSONALISED LEARNING?

There is obviously a long history of personalisation both as an ideal and as a practice in schools, colleges and universities. Educators already have a rich repertoire of ways to assess students' respective strengths, weaknesses and learning needs, and tailor teaching methods and the curriculum in response. Certainly parents favour an education that supports their children to become well-rounded individuals and caters to their individual needs (Saulwick Muller Social Research, 2006: 31). Personalised learning builds on these practices and aspirations.

Given what we know by way of research findings and the ideas and creative work of teachers over decades — notwithstanding the resource, curricular and system constraints on what schools can provide — four key dimensions of personalised learning are:

1. **Co-creation and control:** The extent to which students can lead, manage and co-create (Leadbeater, 2004) their own learning, participate in significant decisions affecting student learning and progressively take control of their own learning journey. The journey is *for* the individual, not a narrowly defined and institutionally prescribed academic, vocational or other "pathway". Student voice drives this personalisation (Fielding, 2004; Hargreaves, 2004). Student talk via dialogic teaching serves to develop student learning and understanding and mainstream student voice, participation and leadership.

2. **Deeper and more powerful learning:** The extent to which students' personal everyday experiences, ideas and insights and formal school instruction are combined to engender deeper student learning, knowledge and understanding. As per Vygotsky, when students' personal experiences and ideas and an educator's scientific concepts (which are not limited to science subjects) merge, learning is deeper. By contrast, concepts abstractly presented to students with little or no connection to their concrete, empirical and personal experience are empty formalism (Renshaw & Brown, 2007) and make it more difficult for students to develop their own personal and empowering blend of both deep academic knowledge and practical and applied learning and real world problem-solving.

3. **Whole life learning:** The extent to which students' learning can draw upon, and make robust connections between, the multiple areas of their life (eg, Abbot et

al, 2009; West-Burnham, 2010). These include the school, extra-curricular settings, home, workplaces, community and culture. Challenges are how best to monitor the whole student, as opposed to progress in specific subjects (Johnson, 2004), and how to empower students, parents and the community. The Harvard Family Research Project (2008) uses the term "complementary learning" for integrating school and non-school learning.

4. **Personal futures planning:** The extent to which students are able to make use of personal futures planning to target individual as well as common life and learning goals and to specify activities that may enable the attainment of these goals (eg, Duckett and Jones, 2006). Some schools are, through the joint work of teachers, students, parents and others, as well as the optimum use of new technologies, reworking personal learning plans for students to better support the needs and aspirations of learners, as well as longer-term goal-setting for learning and personal well-being.

All four of the above dimensions are interlinked. If one is diminished, the other three are weakened. Together, the dimensions comprise a coherent model of personalised learning.

NEXT BIG THING OR ANOTHER FAD?

Is the potential of personalised learning real and what are the risks? Or is the flurry of interest little more than hype? In short, is it the next big thing or another fad? The term "personalised learning" can be a new label for what is old. As Hargreaves laments, governments can pollute the term by "using it as a clothesline on which to hang existing policies" (2009).

There are also risks. If only cashed-up parents can purchase for their children the best and most customised education, personalisation will widen inequalities. Middle-class homes can obviously be far more conducive to personalised learning than homes that may have less space and fewer computers and books.

But there is enthusiasm among teachers, students and parents for personalised learning. Parents of diverse backgrounds can relate to personalisation and feel that they can do something about it. As well, the capacity to further personalise learning for *all* students will continue to improve, driven by teachers' pedagogical innovations and Web 2.0 tools and other technologies.

Personalisation does signal something new but is double-edged and contested, consistent with the tensions between old and new ideas of personalised learning. The former UK Secretary of State for Education and Skills, Charles Clarke, suggested:

> The central characteristic of [the] new system will be personalisation — so that the system fits to the individual rather than the individual having to fit to the system (Department for Education and Skills, 2004: 4).

Such hyperbolical statements beg basic questions: What *kind* of new system? What can be done to build new systems? What barriers exist that impede this development?

PARTNERSHIPS WITH PARENTS

WHAT ARE THE BARRIERS?

The factory system of mass schooling was historically an efficient way of delivering consistent, uniform instruction to large numbers of students, thus vastly improving levels of education. However, with a tendency to suppress difference, complexity and diversity and increasingly preoccupied with targets and standardised testing, this system now constrains the emergent and exploratory in schooling. The effect of this is simply to postpone systemic change and frustrate teachers working to further personalise learning. As Green et al explain:

> For many teachers, the idea of personalisation is familiar and is one of the ideals that brought them into the profession. However, at times, the assessment, funding and institutional contexts in which they operate act not as a driving force for personalisation but as a barrier to it. Personalisation asks us how these systems can be re-shaped around the needs of the learner (2005: 3).

There is a looming contradiction between the multiple sites of a student's personalised learning and the narrow focus of school improvement efforts on classroom practices.

With students spending only 14 per cent or so of their time at school (Bransford et al, 1999), learning experiences at home, in the community and during leisure time, posing learning challenges to be solved (Marsick & Watkins, 2001), mean that formal education will continue as a *central site* but also as one site of learning among many. There is likely to be an exponential increase in forms of informal learning. As Wyn writes:

> Young people take what they need from a wide variety of sources, of which formal education is only one element. Formal education is only one part of young people's learning repertoire, and if it remains in its current form, it may become increasingly marginal to learning and ossify as a credentialling mechanism for university, further education and employment (2009: 35).

But although the school, family and community are the three "overlapping spheres of influence" which directly affect student learning and development (Epstein, 1995), many education systems are singularly obsessed with classroom practice. The effect is to:

- Weaken the partnership between school, home and community and undermine the partnership-building role of parent groups and school councils/boards, even making such important vehicles for parent participation and partnerships vulnerable to irrelevancy
- Prevent continuity and coherence across these three learning arenas
- Place stress-creating pressure on teachers to achieve within the confines of the classroom what really can only be tackled through partnerships across all three spheres

- Obscure the fact that the quality of teachers' classroom work, which culminates in the capacity to personalise learning, evolves in tandem with a school community's parent participation, partnerships and shared pedagogy
- Make it impossible to develop truly personalised learning for every student and thus thwart significant improvements in learning outcomes for all students.

School strategic plans can compound these problems, particularly if they are so full of departmental goals, targets and knee-jerk reactions to "the data" that there is no space for truly shared school–family–community goals that reflect a school's shared pedagogy.

TOWARD A FRAMEWORK FOR PERSONALISED LEARNING

If broad agreement on a framework for personalised learning could be reached, and if it could be promoted by teachers, parents, students and other stakeholders, an exciting, transforming and 21st-century movement (O'Toole & Meyer, 2006: 30) might be created. As grounded in the work of schools and informed by research, a comprehensive and coherent framework for personalised learning may include the following four key areas. These are:

1. Shared decision-making in a school, comprising the interplay between:
   a. Leadership
   b. Governance
   c. Management
2. Deeper and more powerful learning for all students, bringing together:
   a. Pedagogy
   b. Technology
   c. Content knowledge
3. Reorganising education, as achieved through the links between:
   a. Complementary practices
   b. Systemic change
   c. Performance
4. Resources and facilities.

We briefly discuss each of these four areas.

SHARED DECISION MAKING

Leadership

School leadership for personalisation can only be dispersed (West-Burnham & Coates, 2005; Allen & Onyett, 2009). Many more schools will develop leadership teams, comprising teachers, parents and students, focused on the different aspects of personalised learning through partnerships such as a whole school community strategy for the optimum use of learning technologies or a P–12 cluster of schools. For parents who may feel uneasy in formal meetings and school settings, such teams, by tapping into everyone's knowledge about students' learning, can be vehicles for participation. Some schools have also created family and community liaison positions.

Governance

Without addressing school governance, efforts to develop personalisation will amount to no more than tinkering around the edges of an outmoded system. School councils and boards can spread responsibility for personalisation throughout the whole school community. School councils as mechanisms for partnerships and policy-making will be renewed through this work. Key initiatives may include developing shared school–family–community goals in a school's strategic plan and a learning compact that defines the shared goals and contributions to personalised learning of the school, students, parents and community groups. As well, VICCSO is developing good governance guidelines.

Management

Both leadership and governance are underpinned by high-quality management; indeed, if personalised learning is to develop to a new level, school management will be decisive. West-Burnham (2010) is among the few who has discussed management strategies to personalise learning, including giving students greater say in curriculum design and rethinking the way that time, space and people are organised in a school. Among the key challenges is managing students' personal learning plans. Models are needed of how plans can best be managed via online tools, without imposing a burden on teachers, and how the roles of parents, mentors and community members can be best developed.

DEEPER AND MORE POWERFUL LEARNING FOR ALL STUDENTS

Pedagogy

Broad agreement about pedagogy is *the* basis of partnerships for personalising learning. Alexander distinguishes between teachers' work in the classroom and pedagogy which includes, but is broader than, teaching and argues that "this wider context matters no less than what goes on in classrooms" (2008: 4). Teaching practice and pedagogy are the two halves that have to be brought together to further develop personalisation.

In other words, the very best teaching practices are most likely to evolve in tandem with the core values, vision and goals, links to evidence and research and school policies — in short, the shared pedagogy — of a school's leaders, staff, parents, students and community. To assist school communities with developing a *shared pedagogy*, VICCSO is creating a school community "conversations and planning toolkit" called www.talkandaction.org.

Technology

New technologies are obviously pivotal to personalised learning. Web 2.0 tools have huge consequences for the school–home–community partnership, but, notwithstanding the truly pioneering work of many schools, the potential uses of these tools to strengthen these partnerships are yet to be fully realised. Examples from

schools of the contribution of new technologies to personalised learning include a resource bank for the opportunities available for each student's learning in the school, home, extra-curricular settings, workplaces and community and making it easier for students to develop and monitor personal learning plans and for teachers to provide personalised feedback.

Content knowledge

Hopkins rightly emphasises the curricula implications of taking personalised learning seriously (2010). This requires a comprehensive and content-rich education, not a narrow focus on the "basics" or literacy and numeracy, given that the possibilities for genuine personalisation depend critically on the quality and range of the curriculum (Alexander, 2004: 12) that includes science, the arts and languages. As Alexander argues, the old — and still current — formula of "basics plus the rest" must be abandoned, for it denies universal entitlement and thus erases genuine personalisation and student choice.

REORGANISING EDUCATION

Complementary practices

Banks (2004), like Hargreaves (2004), affirms that the best results will be obtained when change initiatives are linked in a complementary way, providing integrated support for the different aspects of personalised learning. The Harvard Family Research Project (2008) also proposes "complementary learning" to integrate both school and non-school supports. Schools can map their current and potential complementary practices that will propel systemic change (Reigeluth, 1994) toward personalisation and performance gains.

Systemic change and performance

With a broad focus on the multiple areas of a student's life, a school cannot work in isolation from all of the other partners (West-Burnham, 2010: 28) that contribute to a student's learning and development. The challenge is to draw teachers, peers, parents, mentors, health workers, community leaders and others into stronger partnerships, which is how schools bring about a shift from piecemeal to systemic change. As per complementarity theory (eg, Pettigrew et al, 2003), such complementary practices in schools may lead to significant improvements in performance and outcomes.

Resources and facilities

Personalised learning encourages us to focus on the totality of resources available for learning, at home and at school (Leadbeater, 2004). It may mean that the more that services become personalised the more that public resources will have to be skewed toward the least well-off (Leadbeater, 2004:22). Johnson also suggests:

PARTNERSHIPS WITH PARENTS

If the concept of personalised learning is really intended to generate debate about change this radical, it may be that there is an urgent requirement for a modelling exercise to test whether such an organisation could be affordable within any likely budgetary constraints (2004: 13).

The costs may be offset, via a strong policy of school collaboration and partnerships, by economically efficient forms of reorganising education around personalisation.

CONCLUSION

To provide the quality of education required to improve the achievement of all students and reduce the achievement gap, it is essential for schools to be adequately supported and resourced to further develop four dimensions of personalised learning:

1. Co-creation and control
2. Deeper and more powerful learning
3. Whole life learning
4. Personal futures planning.

In turn, personalised learning requires a coherent framework which can be used to:

- Influence educational policy and inform practice and further research
- Help to develop a movement for 21st-century education and schooling.

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PARTNERSHIPS WITH PARENTS

Raewyn Connell on teacher quality and the problem with markets
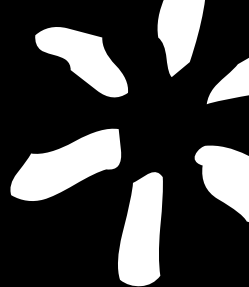
INTERVIEW BY JOHN GRAHAM

RAEWYN CONNELL, UNIVERSITY PROFESSOR AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY, IS ONE OF AUSTRALIA'S LEADING SOCIAL SCIENTISTS.

IN THIS INTERVIEW, CONDUCTED BY EMAIL, SHE EXPLORES ISSUES OF TEACHER QUALITY, THE STANDARDS AGENDA, AND HOW TO CREATE A MORE EQUAL AND SOCIALLY JUST EDUCATION SYSTEM.

JG: *At present, governments and large parts of the media are focused almost exclusively on improving teacher quality as the means of improving student achievement. How do you see the "teacher quality" agenda?*

RC: We have to be worried when policymakers start talking as if teachers were machines tumbling off an assembly line that need "quality" checks and tests to see if they have been properly assembled.

We should be clear about where this agenda comes from. The current "teacher quality" agenda is primarily a *business* agenda, promoted by business pressure groups and

business-oriented think tanks, built around personnel management techniques developed by businesses to lower their costs and raise their profits. In their vision, an individualised workforce, unsullied by unions or any old-fashioned idea of the common good, compete with each other for rewards and bonuses. Short-term goals are set and short-term fixes reign. Measures of input, measures of output, and measures of efficiency in the pursuit of profit underpin this discourse.

In order to apply this kind of thinking to education, a drastic narrowing of educational ideas has to occur. The purposes of education have to be squeezed into the mould of competitive tests; the complex realities of teaching have to be reduced to a few input measures; the role of institutions, cooperative labour and creativity have to be marginalised. I think this is a profoundly destructive agenda for education, whatever we think of it as an agenda for the economy. The fact that it is taken seriously by Labor Party governments is a measure of the grip that business ideology has now gained in Australia.

JG: *Linked to the teacher quality agenda is the development of a set of standards or competencies for teachers. The standards of the various state-based registration authorities are being "harmonised" under a new set of national standards. What is your view of the development of standards/ competencies for teachers?*

RC: There have always been ideas about the competencies that teachers need, and rightly so. Teacher education programs — whether in universities, teachers' colleges, or the bad old days of the pupil–teacher system — have always used such ideas, frequently debated them, and sometimes changed them. For instance, some knowledge of special education has become a requirement for teachers generally.

What is particularly important now is the embedding of elaborate statements of required competencies in the procedures of new teacher registration institutions. This has immediately impacted on teacher educators, since teacher education programs now have to show in detail how they meet the criteria spelt out in these statements. It does not have such an immediate impact on the wider teaching workforce, but we can expect a considerable effect in the long run.

JG: *What do you think of the lists of standards/competencies you have seen so far?*

RC: The lists from different states have a lot of overlap, so the approach is already partly national. They are all dot-point lists, in similar style, and cover much the same topics. Here's an outline of the content of a fairly representative statement:

(a) Summaries of the educational literature that trainee teachers should have studied and absorbed (eg, "Have a sound knowledge of current learning

theories and of pedagogical models from which they draw their practice")

(b) Field-specific knowledges (eg, "Be aware of the key concepts, structure and developments in their content areas")

(c) Generalised educational approaches (eg, "Know how to integrate learning and student understanding across a number of content areas")

(d) Specific pieces of know-how needed to operate in a school (eg, "Be aware of tools and practices for assessing, recording and reporting student learning progress to parents and other stakeholders")

(e) Statements of attitudes or beliefs that teachers should hold (eg, "Regard all students as capable of learning and demonstrate an understanding of, and commitment to, equity in their practice").

Now, much of this is good, practical common sense, as you might expect, because the committees that drew them up included many experienced teachers. A beginning teacher could do worse than read such lists. They summarise the kind of advice that older teachers would be likely to give, in the staff room — if not quite in that language.

But these lists don't arise from any coherent view of education as a field of study or practice — so they are not an adequate guide for teacher educators. The lists are weighted towards the institutional needs of school systems as they currently

are, not as they might be — so they are not oriented to emerging issues. Most worryingly, their language is strongly influenced by corporate managerialism. The texts are heavy with "challenges", "goals", "stakeholders", "partnerships", "strategies", "commitment", "capacity", "achievable", "effective", "flexible" and "opportunities". Are we so short of *educational* ideas that corporate-speak has to invade our fundamental conception of who a teacher is? I hope not.

JG: *You have written about how teacher work can be characterised by its collaborative nature. Do you think the standards/competencies recognise this? Are there ways they could be written to take this into account?*

RC: The standards documents are written to define requirements for an individual. Inherently, they don't address the capacities of a group or an institution. Yet a great deal of what happens in education is a matter of groups and institutions, not isolated individuals. When we meet up with good teaching, it often has to do with a well-functioning department or effective support and lively practice among the group of teachers in a school or group of schools.

I can't see how you could re-jig an inherently individualised document to recognise this dimension of collaborative work in teaching — except to include as required skills for the individual the ability to collaborate and to make the

institution work — which to some extent these statements already do. (See eg, "d" above.)

JG: *What do you see as the characteristics of a "good teacher"?*

RC: I don't think there is a coherent way of specifying the characteristics of a good teacher.

We can often recognise good teaching, and I hope I have done some of it myself; and I know I have done some bad teaching at times, and regret it. But when I reflect on the difference between the two, it isn't about my characteristics as an individual. It concerns the changing match or mismatch between what I did and what the students at the time needed; the background and needs of those students, and the situation in which the educational process happened; the supportive relationship between my work and the work of colleagues with whom the same students had worked. I have seen some electrifyingly good teaching by a colleague — good teaching can make you sit up and cheer! — who in another situation confessed himself baffled. Good teaching is not a fixed quality of a person.

I think the "teacher quality" discourse is a very impoverished way of talking about some important and complex issues in teaching: the state of the labour process, the state of the profession, the character of educational knowledge, and the *formative* character of education as a process.

JG: *Another part of the teacher quality agenda is the commitment by federal and state governments to the introduction of performance pay. What is your view on performance pay?*

RC: I have one word for the introduction of performance pay: stupid.

It is hard to think of anything more likely to create distrust among colleagues, more likely to produce "teaching to the test" and narrowing of curricula, than a payment-by-results system. No government that really cared about education would do such a divisive and destructive thing. The fact that it is considered at all is a striking measure of the influence of profit-seeking business models in contemporary government.

We should bear in mind that performance pay was familiar in the 19th century, and *every* school system that used it, abandoned it — for good educational reasons.

JG: *The teacher quality agenda has also become the teacher education quality agenda. The national project to develop teacher standards, for example, includes standards/competencies which graduates should have attained by the end of their pre-service courses. Do you think there is a need to improve teacher education? Is the standards approach a suitable means of achieving this?*

RC: Teacher education can always be improved. Who would deny that? But there is no reason at all to think

teacher education programs were in such a dire state 15 years ago that they required an external authority to shake them up. In fact, teacher education programs were the base for much of the constructive thinking in Australian education.

What happens with the imposition of external monitoring — we have seen this in many fields outside education, with the growth of "audit culture" across the public sector — is that teacher educators become preoccupied with formal compliance. They have to be, even when (as has happened) the "standards" documents disrupt the internal logic of a course or program. However tactful and thoughtful the staff of the teacher registration institutions — who are mostly teachers and educational administrators themselves — the way these institutions operate creates a pressure for standardisation of teacher education programs. I worry about that, as I think we need more inventiveness and diversity, not less.

JG: *In a recent article you criticised the view that teacher quality had to be the focus of government policy because the major determinants of student outcomes — social background and student abilities — are not open to policy influence. Can you explain your position on this matter?*

RC: Here I was criticising an influential OECD report. (Note how the Organization for *Economic* Cooperation and Development has become an *educational* authority.)

The report defended a focus on "teacher quality" on the grounds that the other major predictors of student outcomes — social background and student abilities — are not open to policy influence.

This is a striking falsehood. Social conditions *are* open to policy influence.

For instance, we could reverse the policy settings that are producing growing levels of economic and social inequality in Australia today. Student abilities are also subject to policy influence. Witness the greatest educational revolution of our time, the rising levels of literacy among women across the world. It is only by ignoring wider social processes, and focusing on short-term outcomes, that the OECD agenda becomes plausible. And it too has a long-term agenda of cultural change, promoting more market orientation and more competition.

What the "teacher quality" agenda most strikingly ignores is the biggest determinant of learning — the curriculum. The curriculum figures in this story only in the sense that it has to be standardised, so that we can test the students constantly and, by calculations based on their scores, work out which teachers are the best.

JG: *What do you see as the consequences of national testing, the My School website and school league tables for social justice in schooling?*

RC: National testing and the MySchool website will have no good

PARTNERSHIPS WITH PARENTS

educational effects that I can see. None.

They will help to fragment the school system, by constituting schools as firms competing with each other. They invite conflict between parents and teachers — Julia Gillard invited that explicitly when she launched the website. These mechanisms create pressure to narrow the curriculum, teach to the test, and treat social diversity as deficit.

The curriculum is not brought into question by these mechanisms; and the curriculum we have is dominated by the knowledge systems and the learning practices of the most privileged groups in our society. Most policymakers don't see this because they are part of the world of privilege; the conventional ideas and practices on which the testing and competition regime are based are taken for granted in their world.

We don't yet have substantial research on the consequences for social justice in education in Australia — though we do have research on the impact of heightened competition and quasi-privatisation of schools from other countries, and the picture is not pretty. Australian governments won't want to know, so this research will be difficult to do. The effects are likely to be long-term anyway.

If we think about the conditions for socially just schooling, we can get some idea of the likely trend. These conditions include relevant curriculum, community participation in curriculum-making and active school life, cultural diversity and solid support for teachers engaged in innovative, adventurous and patient work. The "audit culture" of national tests and competitive websites is very unlikely to encourage such education.

JG: *How do you see the role and future of public education in Australia?*

RC: Not a simple question! So here is an essay about it. I think of public education as based on three principles: inclusion, equality and optimism.

The 19th-century creators of public schools spoke of "education for all". That was a radical idea when the upper classes thought of the populace as little better than animals. It is still a radical idea. In an inclusive system you do not fence people out, and you do not price people out.

This is based on an ethical principle — mutual responsibility. Through a public system, I share responsibility for your child and you share responsibility for mine. We share because we have a collective interest. The better education your child gets, the more my child benefits, and the more the whole society benefits. As everyone who has taught in a classroom knows, this is also a pedagogical principle. By and large, the better one pupil is learning, the better others will learn.

In a public education system, mutual responsibility is embodied in educational institutions — public schools and colleges — and the

system of administration and teacher training behind them. The institutions are never perfect, but they are necessary for the ethical principle to have a continuing effect.

Inclusive education has another side, which I call "encounter". A public education system, because it provides for all, must embrace the deep diversity of modern societies. Our schools today include Muslim, Christian and atheist, boy and girl, straight and gay, athletic and disabled, Indigenous and new immigrant — and that's just the beginning. Contemporary public education makes social diversity work *for* education, rather than treating it as an obstacle or a source of anxiety. It designs learning processes around the encounter between different experiences, cultures and perspectives.

We can't do that easily in a single teaching/learning format. Public systems are now creating centres that support a range of teaching/learning activities in a variety of formats — conventional classrooms, electronic learning networks, vocational workshops and laboratories, community-based programs, etc. We need institutional richness in education, and public systems are in the best position to create it.

Public education is based on an underlying principle of equality, which has several dimensions. The first concerns justice. Public education embodies a community guarantee that all children, regardless of wealth, race or region, will have a decent basic education and access to advanced education. Thus an inclusive public system expresses the idea of equal rights in the sphere of education.

The second dimension concerns equal respect. A gated community attempts to keep out the rabble; public education denies that there is a rabble. Public schools respect the tremendous range of experiences and cultures that their students bring into the classroom each day. This can be hard, given social tensions and inequalities; but public schools constantly deal with these issues, most with competence and some with rousing success.

Giving equal respect involves the curriculum. The old competitive academic curriculum still dominates Australian education, and it is a powerful machine for reproducing privilege. To have a monocultural, socially exclusive curriculum dominating Australian schools is not just outdated; it is damaging in a world of global diversity and increasing global interaction. Public schools, especially schools in Victoria, have led the search for more inclusive curricula, valuing the experiences and using the resources of different social groups. Australia owes them a lot for doing so. This is the strategy that will keep us relevant in the 21st-century world.

Thirdly, public education embodies equal provision. Our colonial predecessors built lovely public schools, real temples of education, in working-class suburbs and remote country towns as well

PARTNERSHIPS WITH PARENTS

as middle-class suburbs. They didn't do the same for Aboriginal or Chinese children — and Australia is still struggling with racism. Yet the principle of equal provision remains important. It means offering education to the most marginal and the most troublesome, as generously as we do to the most respectable and the most "gifted".

Making equal provision has traditionally meant state-supported education, and in modern conditions there is no other way of doing it. Tax revenues are the only way of supporting a large enough teaching workforce, while neutralising (however imperfectly) the income inequalities of the market.

In helping each other, and each other's children, to learn, we are jointly building a society and a culture. In that sense, commitment to the public sector embodies a view of education based on hope, rather than fear.

Education is, in a large perspective, where culture grows. In the moment of transmission between generations, our culture is tested and changed. Public education assumes that we want constructive, enriching change. Through communication across diversity, we can build institutions that embody shared interests. In that very fundamental way, public education expresses the idea of democracy in education — since democracy (in the real sense) means constructive power in the hands of the people as a whole.

At all age levels, there are democratic ways of teaching — ways that maximise student involvement, student/teacher interaction, and shared authority in the learning process. This is the principle that should guide teaching and learning in a public education system. It means, at a basic level, we trust the learner. We don't assume learners have to be flogged by endless tests, rewards and punishments. We look for joy in learning, for relevance in learning.

A public education system regards teachers, too, as citizens — not just hired hands — who are carrying a particular responsibility on behalf of other citizens. Public education also requires that, at a fundamental level, we trust the teacher. We give teachers respect as professionals. We provide the tools they need to do the job. We support the renewal of their occupational culture, creating connections among schools, sharing methods and experience, developing professional pride.

JG: *How do you believe our schooling system can be improved to create more equal outcomes?*

RC: It is possible for our education system to move towards more equality, rather than less. It would require a major change in funding mechanisms — currently our society funds the education of children from privileged social backgrounds more than it funds the education of the less privileged. It would require a reshaping of curriculum and pedagogy, in ways that are currently well documented but in practical

terms marginalised. It would need a shift in dominant images of our society, recognising that the fundamental problem is not a small minority of "socially excluded" people, but the mechanisms of privilege and inequality that stretch across the whole social order and the whole school system. Yes, it is possible; but neither of the major parties currently shows any intention of doing this.

PARTNERSHIPS WITH PARENTS

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