QUEENSLAND COLLEGE OF TEACHERS
RESEARCH DIGEST

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IN THIS EDITION

The Research Digest is available in HTML and PDF versions on the Queensland College of Teachers website at www.qct.edu.au

The Research Digests

This Research Digest is one of a series of periodic digests produced by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) for the Queensland College of Teachers. Each digest focuses on a single topical issue, and provides a review of major messages from research on the issue. A key feature of the digests is an emphasis on what the research means for teachers and teaching. Over the course of several editions, a wide range of issues will be covered, so that teachers from different areas of schooling will find topics of relevance to their needs and interests.

Previous Issues

Parents and teachers: Working together to foster children's learning

This edition of the Research Digest focuses primarily on parent-teacher collaboration, considering what research can tell us about:

◗ why parental engagement is important,
◗ key features of effective collaborations,
◗ critical challenges and issues that teachers and parents may face,
◗ strategies that have helped teachers and parents build effective relationships.

Some examples of activities undertaken as part of whole-school programs are also included. These illustrate the kind of scaffolding that helps teachers, parents and children establish the foundations for effective interactions.

The Digest draws on searches of data bases and bibliographic resources including the Australian Education Index, Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), Education Research Complete, British Education Index and Scopus.

A selection of relevant websites is listed and a full reference list provided. Links to those references for which full-text access is freely available are also included.

ACER

A key feature of this series of research digests is that each edition makes links to the *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers* (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2012). The subject of this digest makes strong links to the domains of Professional Engagement and Professional Practice.

In the Professional Engagement domain, engagement with parents/carers is stated explicitly in Standard 7, *Engage professionally with colleagues, parents/carers and the community*.

Within Standard 7, the importance of parents/carers and teachers working together to support children's progress is clearly identified in Focus area 7.3, *Engage with the parents/ caregivers*. In this Focus area, there is explicit reference to the importance of teachers working with parents/carers at each career stage.

Standard 7, Focus area 3

Graduate
Understand strategies for working effectively, sensitively and confidentially with parents/carers.

Proficient
Establish and maintain respectful collaborative relationships with parents/carers regarding their children's learning and well-being.

Highly accomplished
Demonstrate responsiveness in all communications with parents/carers about their children's learning and well-being.

Lead
Identify, initiate and build on opportunities that engage parents/carers in both the progress of their children's learning and in the educational priorities of the school.

There is also a specific connection to communication with parents/carers regarding students' learning in the domain of Professional Practice. Standard 5 in this domain, *Assess, provide feedback and report on student learning* acknowledges the role of parents/carers in Focus area 5.5, *Report on student achievement*.

Standard 5, Focus area 5

Graduate
Demonstrate understanding of a range of strategies for reporting to students and parents/carers and the purpose of keeping accurate and reliable records of student achievement.

Proficient
Report clearly, accurately and respectfully to students and parents/carers about student achievement, making use of accurate and reliable records.

Highly accomplished
Work with colleagues to construct accurate, informative and timely reports to students and parents/carers about student learning and achievement.

Lead
Evaluate and revise reporting and accountability mechanisms in the school to meet the needs of students, parents/carers and colleagues.

A note about terms

We have used the term 'parents' to represent *fathers, mothers* and *other significant caregivers* in a child's life. While much of the literature uses 'parents' in a similar way, many studies have suggested that the mother is the parent most likely to be actively engaged in their child's learning.

A child's learning is influenced by a myriad of factors interacting in ways that are unique to that child. However, longitudinal studies and meta-analyses of research conducted over the last fifty years are disentangling these diverse influences to better understand which are most important and why. One of the key findings is that, no matter how 'learning success' is defined, parents can have a significant impact on their children's educational achievements (Harris & Goodall, 2009).

Yet, while research studies identify many examples of good practice, it would appear that successful collaborations between parents and teachers are more the exception than the rule.

Many teachers report feeling ill-equipped to establish collaborative relationships with parents, particularly with those who are not actively involved in their child's schooling. In a national survey of professional development needs, 82 per cent of Australian teachers identified skills in working with parents and community as their area of greatest need. This was far ahead of the second priority - the education of gifted and talented students at 25 per cent (Doecke et al., 2008).

Therefore, all Australian jurisdictions have introduced policies and frameworks to facilitate change. For example, the *Australian Family-School Partnerships Framework: A guide for schools and families* (Family-School and Community Partnerships Bureau, 2008) was developed, 'to encourage sustainable and effective partnerships between all members of the school community, including teachers, families and students.'

The Framework is predicated on the premise that parents and teachers make different, but equally valuable, contributions to a child's education. It outlines strategies to support the development of partnerships that are characterised by mutual understanding, clear roles, respectful communication and shared power.

Developing such sophisticated relationships is complex and challenging. Studies show that:
- although parents and teachers have the best interests of the child at heart, they are often working at cross-purposes, with different goals and priorities,
- almost all parents begin with high aspirations for their children, but some gradually withdraw, their lack of confidence sometimes inadvertently reinforced by the school system,

> *Research demonstrates that effective schools have high levels of parental and community involvement. This involvement is strongly related to improved student learning, attendance and behaviour …and can have a major impact on student learning, regardless of the social or cultural background of the family. Family involvement in schools is therefore central to high quality education and is part of the core business of schools.*
>
> *The Australian Family-School Partnerships Framework: A guide for schools and families*, Family-School and Community Partnerships Bureau, 2008

- the design of teachers' work, particularly in secondary school, operates against spending time with parents,
- many teachers feel they lack the knowledge and skills to engage effectively with parents,
- the child in the relationship plays a critical role in mediating between home and school, but is not always seen, or respected, as an active contributor.

Given that many of these issues reflect deep seated and long established beliefs and assumptions about the nature of schooling, finding ways to collaborate effectively, let alone to develop genuine partnerships, may require a transformation in parent and teacher thinking about 'education' and 'learning', about where learning occurs, and about the roles and responsibilities of home and school.

For many people, this means looking at school-home relationships in an entirely new light. This will not happen overnight. It means changing many decades of attitudes and beliefs about who is responsible for what in the raising of children. This will take time, effort and considerable awareness-raising among parents and professionals alike (Saulwick Muller Social Research, 2006).

Change of this magnitude can only occur as part of a strategic, whole-school program. However, teachers' beliefs and behaviours are critical to the development of effective working relationships in such programs, and, in the absence of a school-driven program, teachers are still the people who can make or break a relationship with a parent. 'Teachers are really the glue that holds the home/school partnership together' (Patrikakou & Weisseberg, 1999).

What's in a name?

The terms *parental engagement* and *parental involvement* are used, often interchangeably, throughout the literature. To avoid confusion, the key is to consider *engagement* or *involvement* in what?

Some studies, policies and frameworks aim to encourage parental involvement/engagement in their children's schooling, and tend to be framed from the school's perspective. Associated strategies focus on ways of getting parents to support what the school is doing, for example through attending parent-teacher interviews, reinforcing teachers' approaches to behaviour management, supervising homework and participating in school-based events. Although these approaches may have other benefits, the research suggests that they do not have a major impact on children's aspirations and learning outcomes.

In contrast, other policies, frameworks and strategies are predicated on research evidence that suggests that it is the way in which parents engage with their children's learning that makes the most difference, and that parents have their greatest influence at home.

In these approaches, the emphasis is on building what Mutch and Collins (2012, p.176) describe as 'meaningful, respectful partnerships between families and schools that focus on improving educational experiences and successes for the child.'

When schools and teachers operate from this perspective, they focus on ways of connecting with parents to support what parents are doing at home, and to lay the foundations for a collaboration in which the actions of parents and teachers complement each other.

Meta-analyses of relevant research have identified clear, measurable benefits for children when their parents are actively engaged in their learning. These studies demonstrate that the children are more likely to:

◗ develop positive self-esteem,
◗ be motivated to learn,
◗ be positive about school,
◗ achieve good grades.

Adolescents are less likely to have discipline issues, get involved in substance abuse or drop out of school early. Young people are more likely to maintain high aspirations and plan to go on to further education and build a career. Longitudinal studies suggest that they are likely to achieve their goals (Gemici, Bednarz, Karmel & Lim, 2014).

Importantly, the power of parental engagement overrides other factors that have been shown to influence a child's achievement. For example, when parents are actively engaged in their children's learning, their influence appears to outweigh

factors such as parental education, socio-economic background or the quality of the child's schooling (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Melhuish et al., 2008; Mansour & Martin, 2009; Hattie, 2009; Goodall et al., 2011).

It's all about good 'at home' parenting

Although many parents strive to become involved in *school-based activities* (or feel guilty because they cannot), and many schools focus on ways of involving 'hard to reach' parents in such activities, the research suggests that it is what parents do at *home* that really counts.

Parents have the most influence on their children's educational outcomes when they:

◗ have high expectations for their children,
◗ show interest in their children's learning and development,
◗ talk to them about things that interest them,
◗ discuss their children's educational and career aspirations.

Desforges and Abouchaar (2003) label this 'good at-home parenting'. Hill and Tyson (2009) call it 'academic socialisation', and Houtenville and Conway (2007) refer to it as 'dinnertime' effort.

Even though parents may not be actively involved with their child's school, they may well be supportive of what teachers are doing, taking an active interest in what their children are learning in school and helping them relate this to the world beyond school. In families where at least one parent or significant adult is engaged in this way, children are more likely to be motivated to learn, to see the school in a positive light and to enjoy productive relationships with their teachers (Kraft & Dougherty, 2013).

Why some parents become disengaged

Although almost all parents begin with high aspirations for their children, some become increasingly disengaged from their children's learning. As their expectations fall, so too do those of their children – and as a result, these children are less likely to achieve educationally (Jennings & Bosch, 2011).

Why do some parents withdraw in this way? In reviewing the literature, Desforges and Abouchaar (2003, p. 49) observe that:

Parents will be engaged to the degree that they see that supporting and enhancing a child's school achievement is part of their 'job' as a parent' and in so far as they feel they can make a difference.

Parents are more likely to want to be involved if their child is a high achiever, but may opt out if their child is struggling, believing that they lack the skills and confidence to provide support, or perhaps because they believe that their child was not lucky enough to be 'born with brains.' Lucas (2010, p.5) observes that this is an unfortunate situation because 'it is those doing less well at school who may need their parents' active engagement most, and those in the "middle" who may not be realising their potential.'

Many things can undermine parents' motivation and self-belief. For example, some parents believe that they should be helping children with their homework, but as their children move into higher grades, they feel less able to do so. A large study in the United Kingdoom found that the majority of parents felt ill-equipped to provide assistance, with 22 per cent reporting that they did not understand what their children were doing, and 81 per cent saying that they would welcome more guidance on how to help (BECTA, 2010). Some parents lose all confidence and abrogate responsibility for their children's education to the school, not realising that they do not have to be subject experts themselves, and that their child will benefit from their continued interest and general support at home (Harris & Goodall, 2008; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011).

The nature and degree of parents' engagement can also be influenced by their interactions with schools and teachers. A major barrier for many parents appears to be the language of schooling itself, particularly for parents with low educational

A New Zealand study (Clinton, Hattie & Dixon, 2007) found that 98 per cent of parents of young children starting school considered that education was very important or extremely important for their child's future, and two-thirds expected their children to go on to further study. However, by the end of primary school, many parents just wanted their children to get through school and 'get a job'.

Something had happened to change their perspective, and with it the nature and degree of support they gave to their children. Hattie suggests that 'too often, the alienation of the home from school' was responsible for reducing their initial expectations.

(Hattie, 2009, p.70)

attainment, for those from low socio-economic backgrounds and for those whose cultural background differs from that of the teacher.[1]

'Speaking school' is about more than using the right terminology. It involves:
◗ understanding and feeling comfortable with a set of cultural norms,
◗ knowing how to operate effectively within the school and
◗ feeling confident to navigate the education system itself, particularly when children are making important choices and transitions from one stage to the next.

If nothing is done to bridge the divide created by this barrier, Hattie suggests that the consequences for the child can be significant.

Either there can be efforts made to reduce barriers between school and home or the effect of the home on student learning can be compromised as the child is then asked to work in two worlds – the world and language of home and the world and language of school. For many children this is asking too much. It is also difficult for children in these two worlds to build a reputation as a learner, learn how to seek help in learning, and have a high level of openness to experiences of learning (Hattie, 2009, p.63).

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[1]   See Harry, 1992; Crozier, 1999; Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Hattie, 2009

Promote 'Parent Power'

Raising awareness of the power of parental aspirations and interest can help parents value, and build on, the strengths of what they are already doing.

Parents need to know that they can make a big difference when they:

◗ hold high expectations for their children,

◗ show interest in the things their children are interested in,

◗ value learning and model the behaviours of successful learners,

◗ give specific, rather than general, praise,

◗ establish routines that promote health, well being and regular study.

This may also take the pressure off parents who have mistakenly believed they should be closely supervising children's homework, or trying to keep up with their children's subject learning as they move through school.

Many parents start to disengage when their child enters the secondary system, and secondary teachers – and parents – face particular logistical challenges when it comes to trying to build meaningful relationships. Hill and Tyson (2009, p.759) suggest that an appreciation of the power of academic socialisation may offer a way forward. In addition to being developmentally appropriate for adolescents:

…it is not dependent on the development of deep, high quality relationships with each [parent] – a goal that is not feasible for even the most motivated teacher. It is dependent on parents' knowledge about how to navigate the middle school context … and builds upon the relationships between the adolescent and the parent.

Demystify the language and complexity of schooling

Whole-school programs offer the potential to establish connections with parents and build their understanding of the language and cultural norms of schooling. For example, in New Zealand, the Flaxmere project focused on improving home-school relations in primary schools where the majority of families were from low socio-economic backgrounds. One strategy that was found to be highly effective involved liaison staff meeting with parents in their homes to talk about the learning approaches being used in the classroom and ways in which parents might support their children at home.

The program evaluation found that parents increased their understanding of the language of schooling, were more willing to engage with the school and more supportive of their children's teachers. Their expectations for their children also increased. Over the five year program, the children showed a statistically significant improvement in their reading achievement, and in their general engagement with school. The study also found that parents increased their own skills, and that many moved on to higher paid employment (Clinton, Hattie & Dixon, 2007).

As children move into middle and senior secondary schooling they and their parents are faced with many challenging decisions. Not surprisingly, both parents and children can be overwhelmed by the complexities of the education system and parents who feel ill-equipped to provide advice may disengage from their child's learning.

Recognising this, the Brotherhood of St Lawrence developed the *Australian Parents as Career Transition Support Program* or PACTS (youthconnect n.d.). PACTS provides interactive, community-based workshops run by trained facilitators who tailor each session to participants' needs. PACTS aims to build parents' knowledge and confidence to help their children make successful school and career transitions. Available nationally, the program has had strong positive feedback from parents from diverse backgrounds, particularly those who had previously felt unable to help their children navigate the education and training system.

Offer guidance on how to help children at home

Close parental supervision of a child's homework has the potential to be counter-productive, and giving parents formal training in how to help their children in specific subject areas does not seem to make a difference. However, reviews of family literacy programs suggest there is value in teaching parents some specific strategies for helping their children with reading (Sensechal, 2006; Goodall et al., 2010). Interestingly, however, there is limited evidence to support this approach in numeracy. Indeed, one study found that while giving parents and children interactive maths activities did have a measurable impact on the child's performance, teaching parents specific strategies to help with maths did not. (See Box 1.)

Box 1: Reading and Maths: What should parents do?

What works best for reading?

Sensechal compared studies in which parents of children from Kindergarten to Year 3:

- taught their children specific literacy skills,
- listened to their children read or
- read to the child.

Children of parents who taught them some specific reading skills made twice the progress of those whose parents listened to them read, and this group in turn made more progress than those children who listened to their parent read.

These outcomes were consistent for children with and without prior reading difficulties, and for families from different socio-economic backgrounds.

(Hattie, 2009, p.70)

What works best in maths?

A US study of family involvement and student achievement in mathematics compared the results of eight different types of intervention:

- parent workshops on how to help with maths,
- information on how to contact the maths teacher at school,
- regular report cards on maths progress,
- parent-teacher conferences to discuss student's maths progress,
- parent volunteers tutoring students at school,
- interactive maths homework activities,
- a lending library of maths games and books.

Only the interactive home-based activities made a measurable difference. These included:

- students and parents listing ten ways they used maths in every day life,
- students showing parents new skills they had learned and talking about how they could use that skill in every day life and
- playing maths games together.

(Bull et al., 2008, p.16)

Build links through interactive home based tasks

When parents and children collaborate on interactive tasks, children learn while they spend quality time with their parents.

The process also builds a new kind of link between home and school, sending a message that the home is a place where learning happens – but in a different way to school-based learning.

Interactive Home Learning tasks

In the initial stages of a whole-school program aimed at building more effective relationships with parents, teachers at Yea High School in Victoria developed a series of Interactive Home Learning (IHL) tasks for Year 7 and 8 students.

These took many forms, but included students interviewing family members, showing their work, sharing ideas and discussing and demonstrating skills they had learned. In the process, the students increased their confidence in themselves as learners, and developed their families' understanding of what they were doing at school.

'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 ask the right questions of their child,' the principal wrote. 'It was our first "Win"' (O'Meara, 2010, p.35).

Building effective relationships

While many policies and frameworks focus on building partnerships, the developers of the *What Works* program wisely suggest:

You can't have a partnership without a relationship, and you can't have a relationship without a conversation. You've got to have the conversation. Everything starts here (National Curriculum Services).

It can be a challenge to create the circumstances for a conversation. Parents generally expect their child's teachers to initiate contact, and the way this is handled is likely to determine the quality of the subsequent relationship, and even whether any sort of relationship can begin.

The parent /teacher interface is a critical meeting ground for mutual support and understanding or for mutual distrust (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003, p.49).

No matter the context, there are many things a teacher can do to support interactions that will gradually lead to mutual respect and understanding.

Starting the conversation: What can teachers do?

Make parents feel welcome

It may be stating the obvious to emphasise the importance of making parents feel that they are welcome in the classroom, but numerous studies suggest that 'many parents feel put off from involvement by the way some teachers treat them,' (Desforges & Arbouchaar, 2003, p.41) and that it does not take much - an uninterested look or a delay in answering a request - to inadvertently send the wrong message.

When teachers in a junior high school in the United States used formal letters and flyers to communicate with parents, a study found that the parents perceived these as 'announcements or notifications, not as true invitations or requests for their participation'. Because they did not feel genuinely wanted, many parents did not respond or attend events such as parent-teacher nights. This in turn reinforced the teachers' perceptions that these parents were not interested in their child's education, and a 'Them and Us' situation developed.

'Efforts on both sides decreased, and the connection between the two groups was minimal.'

(Halsey, 2005, in Lloyd-Smith & Barron, 2010, p. 27-28)

However, it may not take a lot to make a parent feel that they can be part of their child's school world. As a New Zealand study found:

…when teachers displayed a willingness to learn about a child's background and showed an interest in the child's particular needs and interests, parents became more confident about being engaged with the school. As one Maori parent explained, 'I used to walk my child to the school gate, but now I come in.

(Mutch & Collins, 2012, p.180)

Listen to parents and focus on their priorities

When parents do accept an invitation to meet teachers face to face (often at formal parent-teacher nights or to discuss a child's misbehaviour), the encounters can be fraught. Indeed, Cullingford and Morrison (1999) found that the main characteristic of such meetings was 'mutual fear'.

Even when this is not the case, parents and teachers may be working at cross-purposes. While both want to discuss the child's progress and any difficulties the child might be having, there can be subtle, but important, differences in the ways in which they approach the discussion. In an interesting study of parent-teacher meetings, Bastiani (1989), found that the teacher was most likely to control the meeting, and that parents generally left feeling dissatisfied because the teacher usually focused on his or her goals, rather than on those of the parents. (See Box 2.)

Box 2: Parent-teacher meetings: Spot the difference

The teacher	The parent
I want to:	I want to:
▶ discuss the child's progress and any difficulties the child is having,	▶ discuss my child's progress and find out if my child is having any problems,
▶ find out from the parents how they think their child is coping at school,	▶ find out how my child is doing compared to other children,
▶ talk about ways the parents can help at home, especially with making sure that homework is done,	▶ find out more about the school and about why the teacher is using some of the teaching methods my child has told me about,
▶ get the parents' support for some behavioural problems,	▶ make sure my child is behaving.
▶ see if there are any potential conflicts with the parents and deal with them.	

(Adapted from Bastiani, 1989).

Focus on the positives

When a teacher's main interaction with parents concerned their child's misbehaviour, Patrikakou and Weissberg (1999) found that this established, and continually reinforced, a sense of division. However, when teachers regularly gave parents positive feedback:

…parents were thrilled to receive good news about their children and …the good feeling built up through such positive reporting made them more responsive and willing to listen to teacher concerns and suggestions.

The teachers at La Grange Remote Community School in Western Australia have found many ways of talking with parents, and with the wider community, about each child's progress.

All staff members visit parents regularly and share news about their children's learning successes. Early childhood teachers visit the community store with samples of children's work, and use the opportunity to talk with families about what their children are doing at school. Teachers also lead the Walking School Bus each morning. Originally an attendance strategy, this has proved to be an opportunity for each staff member to get out into the community and chat to family members as a normal part of the daily routine (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2013).

Keep parents in the loop

Parents want timely, personalised communication that focuses on their child's learning, and are highly sensitive to the way in which this information is provided, as demonstrated by the following parental feedback reported in a New Zealand study.

Mother 1: My son was placed in a reading recovery programme without my knowledge… A letter came home to inform me of the placement several weeks after he had started the program. I felt left out of the loop…

Mother 2 and father 2: We had some concerns with our child's difficulty comprehending what he was reading. His teacher gave us some wonderful suggestions on what types of questions to ask to encourage him to take in what he reads. This really helped him improve to the level he is now.

(Mutch & Collins, 2012, p.182)

Question assumptions about 'invisible' parents

Parents who do not get involved at school are not necessarily disengaged from their child's learning, or unsupportive of what the school is doing.

If teachers automatically perceive 'invisible' parents to be 'disengaged' parents, they may lower their expectations for the child, and this can have an impact on a child's educational attainment. These assumptions can also affect the potential for relationship building. As Hornby and Lafaele (2011) warn,

A partnership based on the premise that one party is a problem is likely to be doomed from the start.

Before designing a new strategy to build relationships with parents who do not normally engage with the school, studies such as that by Lea, Wegner, McRae-Williams, Chenhall and Holmes (2011) demonstrate the importance of gaining a genuine understanding of parents' perspectives on their role in their children's education, and on their expectations about the role of the school.

Lea et al. (2011) focused on developing a better understanding of the perspectives of school staff and non-participating Indigenous parents in three Northern Territory primary schools.

We were keen to find out what … staff assumed about the non-participating parent and in turn what the 'invisible' parent assumed about the importance, or otherwise, of their being involved in the school.

They found that teachers believed some parents stayed away from the school because they found it physically intimidating. As one teacher explained, 'I think we need to make the classrooms friendlier for parents, I mean I'm not saying they're *not*, but a lot of our Indigenous families are very…*ashamed* [they] don't want to, *don't* want to come *in here*.'

However, none of the Indigenous parents interviewed mentioned having such issues. When asked directly if it was a problem, they explained that 'they saw no need to make themselves known to the teacher just for the sake of it', had no problems visiting the school if asked to do so, and were comfortable with the welcome they received and with the way the school handled issues.

If they chose to initiate contact themselves, it was likely to be because their child was being bullied, or had been wrongly accused of something. As one explained, 'I'm always asking [my children] if their teachers are right with them and they say yes. Only time I get wild is if there is bullying or a fight.'

These parents explained that they were quite satisfied with the limited contact they had with the school, and did not believe that the school should – or could – do anything more to encourage them to become more involved.

Recognising the role of the child

Children shape home-school links

Edwards and Alldred (2000) observed young people in years six to nine operating in passive or active roles in home-school interactions.

Sometimes, they simply allowed things to happen, for example when they 'did not mind' if a parent contacted a teacher. At other times, they initiated home-based discussions with their parents about school matters. For example, they might spontaneously tell a parent about something that happened. Young people in this survey said that they usually discouraged their parents' direct involvement in homework, with many explaining that this was because they saw homework as their own responsibility. However, when they did ask for assistance, it was often for the pleasure of the parent's company rather than for the help they might receive.

Most of the young people interviewed reported that they had actively obstructed school-parent communication at some time, with many explaining that they had done so to save their parents from extra stress. For example, they might 'lose' notices about expensive school trips that they didn't think their parents could afford, or misplace report cards with grades that might upset a mother who already had enough to worry about.

Although their role is seldom acknowledged, children are active players in home-based learning, initiating, supporting, tolerating, resisting, and sometimes actively undermining, parents' attempts to engage with them.

They can also have a significant influence on the way in which their parents and teachers interact. While younger children may enjoy, or at least be comfortable with, their parents' direct involvement in their schooling, older students are more likely to discourage it.

In a large Canadian study, 67 per cent of 14 and 15 year olds said they would not invite their parents to visit their class, and 65 per cent would not have their parents on a class trip. However, they were happy for their parents to engage with them at home, with 86 per cent saying that they would invite a parent to help them with ideas for a project and 66 per cent saying they would work with parents to improve their grades (Deslandes & Cloutier, 2002).

Actively involve children and young people: what can teachers and schools do?

In order to establish a connection with parents, it may be necessary to challenge traditional approaches to parent-teacher interactions. The *Creating Conversations* program, evaluated by Ramsden and Quinn (2009), provides an interesting example.

The program involved Somali students in two Melbourne secondary schools who hosted community-based events for their parents and teachers. Prior to the program, many of the parents had only had contact with their child's school when teachers raised concerns about the child's behaviour.

The process was designed to provide information, model good communication and facilitate the discussion of issues and cultural norms. Critically, the sessions were conducted in Somali, with the assistance of a bilingual translator. The program evaluation found that both parents and students saw this as a sign that the school valued their traditional language and culture.

During the sessions, parents acknowledged that they had little understanding of Australian schooling and felt overwhelmed by its apparent complexity. They compared it, unfavourably, to the pre-war Somalian education system they remembered. This system reflected their cultural practices and beliefs, and was based on competitive entry, rote learning and strict discipline. Teachers were highly regarded and had authority for disciplining students without involving the family, so parents could not understand why a trained teacher in Australia might need their help with discipline, and felt their children's teachers were 'too soft'. They expressed concern that much of what their children did in the Australian system was 'play' (for example, moving around the classrooms, working in groups, discussing ideas with the teacher).

Many were worried that their children were being encouraged to act independently, question adults and make their own decisions from an early age. They feared that their children would adopt Western values that would change the family dynamic.

While many of these issues, by their very nature, could not be easily resolved, Ramsden and Quinn reported that the program showed promise 'for building trust and connections between parents, teachers and others'. It created the starting point for a continuing conversation.

While there are many ways of enhancing parent-teacher collaboration, a review of international and Australian research suggests that there are some consistent principles that apply across different contexts.

Be clear about 'why'

A New Zealand study of schools that were actively trying to engage with parents found there was often 'a lack of clarity over the general purposes of home-school partnerships', that led to fragmented, unfocused and ultimately ineffectual activity. In contrast, when schools, and individual teachers, maintained a clear focus on working with parents to facilitate the child's learning, at home and at school, perceptions of parental roles, and the nature of interactions with parents, changed (Bull et al., 2008).

Be clear about 'what'

The way in which the intended relationship is envisaged and described can also make a difference. For example, a *collaborative* relationship could be described as one in which parents and teachers work companionably together to support the child, whereas the choice of the term *partnership* might suggest mutual cooperation and joint responsibility for achieving a specific goal.

If teachers aim to build *partnerships* with parents, a critical area for consideration is that the very nature of a partnership involves shared power. This may be a challenge to long-standing beliefs and attitudes. However, it may be easier to achieve if parents and teachers recognise that sharing power does not necessarily mean sharing decision making about all aspects of a child's education. Parents and teachers have different areas of expertise, and can facilitate and support children at home or at school in different, but complementary, ways.

Whether a *collaboration* or a *partnership*, the relationship between teacher and parents is more likely to be effective when those involved acknowledge and respect their individual areas of expertise and influence. As Bull et al. (2008) observe, taking the lead in different areas:

…does not negate the need for mutually respectful relationships and good communication between home and school, it just emphasises that "equal" does not necessarily imply "the
same", and that it is important to clearly define the roles and responsibilities of each party, and the purpose of the relationship.

In laying the groundwork for this, it may help if parents and teachers explicitly discuss where it is most appropriate to defer to the other. For example, Katyal and Evers (2007) found that teachers in Hong Kong saw themselves as instructional leaders with professional expertise to facilitate children's academic learning, and that parents generally accepted this. However, some studies suggest that teachers do not always recognise and value what parents are doing at home, particularly when parents and teachers are from different socio-economic or cultural backgrounds (Goodall et al., 2010).

Clarify perspectives

Teachers and parents may have different ideas about what constitutes a 'good' education, about the 'right' way to teach and about the respective roles of teachers and parents. Although seldom articulated and explored, these differences can be particularly significant when parents come from a different cultural background to that of the teacher.

A Somali youth worker provided an insight into this when he compared Somalian and Australian approaches to teaching and learning:

The Australian schooling system is like this: The chef provides all the ingredients and talks about how they interact with one another. He gives basic cooking principles, and gets students to complete some tasks, like beating the butter and sugar, but then asks the students to choose their own recipe and apply the principles learnt.

In Somalia, the chef would provide the ingredients, teach the one recipe step by step and ask students to make an exact replica of the original (O'Sullivan, 2006, p.10).

As the *Creating Conversations* program demonstrated, it is possible to find ways to acknowledge and talk through the differences, and, in the process, lay the foundations for enduring conversations between parents and teachers. This in turn helps the children, who are otherwise caught between the worlds of home and school, and it also provides an important link into Australian society for their families.

The research clearly demonstrates the significant influence that parents have on their children's engagement with learning, and on their children's educational achievements, yet this is a relatively new, and challenging, area for many schools and for many teachers. Seeking to enhance the way in which teachers and parents relate to each other can be confronting, calling into question long held beliefs and assumptions about the nature of education and learning, about roles and responsibilities and about power and control. There are also major logistical issues that cannot be ignored.

Yet despite these barriers, many parents and teachers are choosing to accept the challenge, and are demonstrating that it is possible to build collaborative relationships focused on supporting and facilitating children's learning. There is also an increasing range of high quality programs that have been designed to provide advice and assistance.

One such is *What Works. The Works Program* (National Curriculum Services) which aims to support the learning of Indigenous children through partnerships involving parents, children, teachers and their local communities. In describing the qualities that drive teachers and parents of Indigenous children to keep striving to build strong relationships, the authors could be speaking to teachers and parents of every cultural background. They ask:

Apart from awareness, what other personal and professional qualities are useful?

- *A capacity and willingness to solve problems as they arise on a case-by-case basis.*
- *A high level of attention to the interpersonal aspects of student motivation.*
- *An ability to see past the idea or the process to the person, while still remaining focused on longer term goals.*
- *Energy and perseverance.*
- *A confident and firm belief in the value of what is being done.*
- *And a determination to succeed – to find a way.*

It is worth persevering to find ways to support parents in their engagement with their children's learning, and to support parents and teachers to work collaboratively rather than in parallel or at cross purposes. As the research demonstrates, the benefits – for all – can be significant.

Useful websites

Australian Parents' Council

This site provides research and resources to support parents' engagement and parent-school partnerships. For example, see *The Indigenous Parent Factor (IPF)* and *Successful Learning – The Parent Factor* for programs designed to build the confidence of parents and carers to engage with their child's learning.

http://austparents.edu.au/

Family-School & Community Partnerships Bureau

http://www.familyschool.org.au/files/4013/8993/8930/ Strengthening_family_and_community_engagement_in_ student_learning_resource.pdf

Harvard Family Research Project

This site offers research publications and resources to support family involvement in children's learning.

www.hfrp.org/family-involvment

Parent and Community Engagement Framework

Education Queensland

http://education.qld.gov.au/schools/parent-community-engagement-framework/

The Australian Parents As Career Transition Support Program (PACTS)

PACTS has been designed to provide parents, guardians and carers with up-to-date information on educational pathways so that they can support their children when making school and career transitions decisions.

www.youthconnect.com.au/career-transition-program

What Works. The Work Program

What Works. The Work Program is designed to help schools plan and take action to improve educational outcomes for Australian Indigenous students. The website has a range of material to support a three-step process to build awareness, form partnerships and work systematically with parents and other community members.

http://www.whatworks.edu.au

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