Involving parents in the literacy activities of secondary school children: An evaluation of the Effective Partners in Secondary Literacy Learning program

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1. INTRODUCTION

It is something of a truism to state that parents have a vital part to play in their children’s education. We know from practical experience, and extensive research, that parents are children’s first teachers. From birth they introduce children to the mysteries of language, as they seek to communicate with them, and jointly make sense of their shared world. The parent’s role in this is as a listener, prompter, information giver, asker of questions, and fellow meaning maker interested in the communication process (Cairney, 1989a; 1989b; 1990; Lindfors, 1985; Snow, 1983; Wells, 1983; 1986).

There are some who seem to believe that parents cease to influence children’s learning at age 5 (once school is entered). However, research has found that school factors (e.g. resources, class sizes, classroom organisation and methods) account for only a minor proportion of variability in student achievement at school (Hanushek, 1981; Jencks et al., 1972 & Thompson, 1985). Differences in family backgrounds appear to account for a large share of variance in student achievement. Some have gone as far as to suggest that the cumulative effect of a range of home related factors, probably accounts for the greatest proportion of variability in student literacy performance (Rutter, Tizard & Witmore, 1970; Thompson, 1985).

Another consistent research finding is that specific cultural groups experience greater success at school (Heath, 1983). But why? The answer seems to lie in the definitions of literacy that dominate and are encouraged in our schools. The reality is that schools staffed by middle class teachers, reflect middle class culturally defined views of what literacy is, and how it is best developed. It takes little effort to determine why specific cultural groups experience difficulties coping with literacy in such contexts. As Bourdieu (1977) has pointed out, schools inconsistently tap the social and cultural resources of society; privileging specific groups by emphasising particular linguistic styles, curricula and authority patterns.

One way in which these basic cultural influences can be minimised is by involving parents more closely in school education. The purpose in breaking down the barriers between home and school is not to coerce, or even persuade, parents to take on the literacy definitions held by teachers. Rather, it is to enable both
teachers and parents to understand the way each defines, values and uses literacy as part of cultural practices. In this way schooling can be adjusted to meet the needs of families. Parents in turn can also be given the opportunity to observe and understand the definitions of literacy schools support, and which ultimately empower individuals to take their place in society.

Parents are not simply a minor part of the educational process; some variable to be considered and addressed. Far too often it is assumed that parents have only a limited responsibility in relation to their children as learners and that the school is the site of the ‘main game.’ As a result, schools often only offer parents a token role in children’s education.

In contrast to such views, is an alternative which sees learning as a social process which has its beginnings in the meaning based relationship that parents establish with their children. The home provides both the beginning and foundation for learning. It is because of this that parent participation and partnership is essential.

Attempts to bring schools and communities closer together have taken many forms, and at times have been anything but helpful. Bruner (1980, in Briggs & Potter, 1990) has pointed out that parent involvement in schooling is often a “dustbin term” which can mean all things to all people. Potter also points out that parent involvement programs are often “shallow, ineffectual, confusing, and frustrating to both parents and teachers” (Briggs & Potter, 1990).

One of the reasons for the failure of some programs is that many teachers have negative attitudes about parents and parent involvement. These teachers sometimes claim that parents are apathetic, and come to school only to criticise (Briggs & Potter, 1990). These teacher attitudes appear to be particularly prevalent when the parents are from lower socio-economic groups.

Others have suggested that the failure of some programs to attract parental interest, may be due to parents not feeling competent to deal with school work. As well, it has been argued that this phenomenon may reflect the fact that these parents feel insecure in the school setting, and fearful about participation in the learning of their children (Moles, 1982; Greenberg, 1989).

As Mavrogenes (1990) points out, teachers and principals may need to question the assumption that low-income parents do not care about their children's education. It is likely that most parents are willing to help with their children's education, but many may
have little idea concerning how to provide this help.

Halsey and Midwinter (1972, in Briggs & Potter, 1990) have argued that the best way to overcome some of these problems and to empower working class students, is to change the nature of education to equip students with the knowledge and skills necessary to gain power over their own community. This they argue requires the transformation of primary schools into focal points for their communities, thus bringing teachers and parents closer together, and leading subsequently to changed attitudes on the part of both parties. These schools, it is argued should aim to develop self-esteem and provide students with power over their lives.

Unfortunately, some schools have adopted a very narrow definition of parent involvement, which primarily seeks to determine what parents can do for teachers, rather than what schools can do for families. This view is often evidenced by parents filling a variety of unpaid teacher aide or custodial roles.

Parents must be viewed as equal partners. There must be a reciprocal relationship. We need to go beyond token involvement and recognise the vital role that parents play in education. As Kruger & Mahon (1990, p. 4) point out, “parental involvement in literacy learning has much greater value than as an add-on to what teachers do”.

There are a variety of ways in which we can involve and communicate with parents. All schools use some of these strategies, but few could claim to have gone far with partnership initiatives. Cairney & Munsie (1992a) suggest that such initiatives can be categorised into five major types: school policies and procedures; curriculum information; classroom information; student feedback; and parental support of their children.

In this paper we want to describe an example of one parent support program. We believe that the most vital form of parent participation is involvement in the specific literacy activities of children. The Effective Partners In Secondary Literacy Learning (EPISLL) program is designed to provide increased opportunities for parental involvement.

EPISLL was an outgrowth of the Talk To A Literacy Learner Program (TTALL) which was originally funded by the NSW Ministry of Education and Youth Affairs and was designed for parents of primary aged students (see Cairney & Munsie, 1992b & 1992c). The EPISLL project has been funded by the Disadvantaged Schools
Program. It was developed in response to former TTALL parents’ need for assistance with their secondary aged children.

The project was designed to support and raise parent participation with children’s literacy learning and study skills in Years 7 to 10.

2. AIMS OF THE PROJECT

The aims of the project were to:

* Increase community awareness of literacy learning and its importance for schooling and entry into society.
* Improve attitudes towards reading and writing in the school and within the whole community.
* Encourage the school and the community to see reading and writing as relevant to themselves and society.
* Develop and maintain a training program which could have widespread use within this school community and other DSP schools.
* Encourage teachers, parents and students to work together to achieve the highest standard of literacy possible across the whole curriculum.

The project aimed to develop a parent program with the following intended outcomes.

Students will:

* Develop stronger self esteem.
* Display improved attitudes to and interest in literacy learning.
* Place a higher priority on a range of experiences with reading and writing.
* Gain new and improved strategies for using reading and writing in all key learning areas.
* Develop or acquire better strategies for studying in the home.
* Improve communication between students and their parents and increase the student’s regard for their parents advice and skills.

Teachers will:

* Have an opportunity to communicate more effectively with the home and gain the support of parents to implement their
curriculum aims with the student.
* Gain increased understanding of the role parents can play as partners in education.
* Increase the teacher's awareness of literacy problems experienced by their students both physical and emotional and how to overcome them.

Parents will:

* Improve the quality of interactions with their children as they read, write and study.
* Have greater participation in the literacy and learning activities of their children.
* Be able to help identify and use a variety of reading material relevant to their children's learning.
* Gain new knowledge about literacy and learning.
* Grow in confidence and self esteem.
* Have increased expectations concerning literacy learning and education.
* Acquire skills which will make them valuable resource people for the wider community.
* Increase the parents' awareness of literacy problems experienced by their children both physical and emotional and how to overcome them.

3. PROGRAM OVERVIEW

The program was designed to be conducted by a part time co-ordinator and selected school and community resource people. The program contained a mixture of short lectures, workshop activities and demonstrations. A critical part of the program was the practical activities and demonstration of all strategies.

The package of materials was designed to provide detailed direction and guidance for the co-ordinator and resource people who conducted the program.

The program consisted of nine two hour sessions designed to be spread over a five week period. Participants also talked and worked with their children on suggested home tasks.

The program was based on an interactive learning model which was developed as part of the TTALL Program (see Figure 1). Each session contained a number of important elements. These components were presented in a cyclic way with frequent opportunities for group interaction of participants.

Figure 1: The Educational Cycle Used in the EPISLL Program
The basic components of each session included:

**Shared Reading**

The participants were involved in listening to, reading and sharing adolescent literature.

**Leader Input**

The co-ordinator introduced and discussed a range of issues and strategies concerning literacy, study and research skills.

**Demonstration**

An opportunity was provided for participants to visit classrooms to observe students in learning situations.

**Discussion and Reflection**

In every session participants were given the opportunity to discuss the content of the sessions and reflect upon their insights and learning.

**Practical Experience**

Participants put into practice the practical ideas introduced to them in each session by working with their children at home on directed tasks.

The content of the program covered the importance of positive relationships, setting realistic personal goals, learning, the nature of the reading and writing processes, strategies for assisting with their work (summarising, notetaking, understanding the textbook), organising time for study and strategies for researching information (see Appendix 1).

4. METHODOLOGY

Subjects

The subjects were 17 adults who volunteered to participate in the
program following advertising in school newsletters, and following verbal presentations by the full-time co-ordinator of the program at a year 7 information day for parents, and during visits to year 7 and 8 roll call classes.

The community from which they were drawn is in the western suburbs of Sydney and is essentially working class. It has a high proportion of welfare housing and higher than average community levels of crime, family crises, vandalism and juvenile problems. The school academic attainments are below state averages.

The parents who chose to participate in the EPISLL program were as diverse as the community itself. They had an average of slightly over 3 children (see Table 1), were largely Australian born (see Table 2), and on average had left school before year 11 (see Table 3).

Evaluative data collected

Following the completion of the EPISLL program two major sources of evaluative data were collected.

Written Evaluation - a written evaluation was completed by all parent participants at the end of each of the two programs run during 1992. The evaluation required the completion of a total of 35 multiple choice and open ended questions, the provision of background information and an opportunity to offer more extended additional comments. The evaluation took approximately 30 minutes to complete.

Interviews - a number of structured interviews were conducted with a variety of staff and parents associated with the project. These people included:

* Leading Teacher
* Head Teacher Mathematics
* Community Liaison Officer (CLO)
* Support Teacher Learning Difficulties (STLD)
* 25% of all parent participants

The interviews were conducted by a part-time research assistant using a structured schedule of questions for each interview. Two slightly different schedules were used, one for parents and one for school staff. Interviews were for a period of 15-30 minutes.

Analysis of data
Using the principles of 'grounded theory' the various sources of data were analysed to derive the major themes evident. As Wilson (1983) points out using 'grounded theory' is not a haphazard process. Rather, it requires the researcher uses previous research and theory to inform the focus of data collection and interpretation. Grounded theory allows the researcher to identify key issues or themes that are evident within the data.

Once these themes are identified data are further analysed using the constant comparative method (see Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This method involves four major phases: comparing observed events, comments or outcomes to themes or data categories derived; testing the themes or categories derived and if necessary redefining them; 'delimiting' the theory as categories are changed, and the number of original themes is reduced; constructing a clear theoretical position to explain the data.

As a result of this process of inductive analysis nine major themes were identified. Each of these will be discussed.

5. RESULTS OF THE EVALUATION

The results of the evaluation will be outlined in three major categories which match the original outline of expected outcomes for parents, the school and students.

Impact of EPISLL on Parents

Because the program was designed essentially to be conducted with parents it was expected that the greatest impact of the EPISLL program would be upon this group. It appears from our data that the program has had a significant positive impact upon parents.

Before describing these data it is important to describe the parent group involved. As can be seen from Tables 1 to 3, parents in this project had higher than average numbers of children, they were largely of English speaking background, and they had almost all left school prior to Year 12.

Table 1: Background Information
Table 2: Information About Language Use

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Language other than English spoken in home</td>
<td>1 (6%) 16 (94%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language other than English written or read in home</td>
<td>1 (6%) 16 (94%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do children read/write in other languages</td>
<td>2 (12%) 15 (88%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Year in Which Parents left School

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year Left</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>2 (11.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>9 (52.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>4 (23.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>1 (5.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>1 (5.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>1 (5.9%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In Table 4 is found another interesting piece of data. In general, most parents had only minor contact with the school prior to EPISLL with a median participation rate of just one contact per month.

Table 4: Amount of School Contact Prior to EPISLL

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Amount of Contact</th>
<th>Daily</th>
<th>Weekly</th>
<th>Monthly</th>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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</tbody>
</table>
As mentioned above, the major sources of data for our evaluation were interviews and a written evaluation. In analysing these data 6 major themes emerged in relation to success of the EPISLL program:

* The program has been seen as well planned, structured and delivered.
* Parents have gained new strategies to use to assist their children.

* Parents have experienced improved communication with their children and better personal relationships with them.
* Parents have gained new knowledge about literacy and learning.
* Parents have grown personally as a consequence of the program.
* Parents have gained in confidence.

Each of these themes will be discussed.

The program has been seen as well planned, structured and delivered

The written evaluation results indicated that parents felt the EPISLL program was well planned, structured and delivered. As Table 5 indicates, 95% of parents believed that the course met their needs and that it helped them to understand the needs of their children.

Table 5: Parent Responses Concerning Course Structure
The course helped them to understand the needs of their children  11  (64.7%)  5  (29.4%)  1  (5.9%)  -  -

Some of the specific parent comments concerning the structure and delivery of the program included:

I think the course was set out quite well (Helen).

The course co-ordinator, Lynne Munsie, was very interesting and allowed group discussions when remarks were offered by participants. This enabled me to build my own confidence which helped for me to absorb more information (Ruth).

She makes the lessons easy to understand and enjoyable (Fiona).

She knows the stuff and delivers it very well. Is confident with the subject matter and interaction with parents. Is very aware of group dynamics and encourages these subtly. This aids the continuation of interest through to other educational activities. Has good rapport with participants some of whom were difficult and very negative situations were avoided (Narelle).

The co-ordinator showed positive communication skills. Was willing to help when needed (Carol).

The course co-ordinator was very clear and concise and able to understand home situations and how parents and children relate to each other (Trish).

Participants were positive about the work of the co-ordinator of the program and the methods she used. As Table 6 shows, participants showed virtual unanimous support for the quality of the co-ordinator’s work. While this in part reflects the personal qualities of the person concerned, it also reflects the quality of the program planned.

Table 6: Parent Comments Concerning Course Delivery

          SA    A    N    D    SD
Co-ordinator communicated well  16  (94.1%)  1  (5.9%)  -  -
Co-ordinator responded effectively to their needs  11  (64.7%)  6  (35.3%)  -  -  -
Co-ordinator provided opportunities for relevant discussions
10 (58.8%) 6 (35.3%) 1 (5.9%) - -
Co-ordinator showed that she: - understood the way
children learn to read and write 13 (76.4%) 4
(23.6%) - - - - - understood
participants needs 11 (64.7%) 5 (29.4%) 1 (5.9%)
- - - was aware of the realities of helping
children in the home 14 (82.3%) 3 (17.7%) -
- - -

Parents have gained new strategies to use to assist their children

The results of the written evaluations make it clear that parents believed that EPISLL taught them new strategies. Parents indicated that the content of the program was highly relevant, challenging, enjoyable, interesting and practical (see Table 7). The various strategies introduced as part of the program were also seen as useful (see Table 8).

Table 7: Parent Responses Concerning Course Content

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SA</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>SD</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants found the content:</td>
<td>- Challenging 10 (58.8%)</td>
<td>6 (35.3%)</td>
<td>1 (5.9%)</td>
<td>- -</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- New 8 (47.1%)</td>
<td>7 (41.1%)</td>
<td>2 (11.8%)</td>
<td>- -</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relevant to their needs</td>
<td>8 (47.1%)</td>
<td>8 (47.1%)</td>
<td>1 (5.8%)</td>
<td>- -</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relevant to children’s needs</td>
<td>9 (52.9%)</td>
<td>8 (47.1%)</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enjoyable</td>
<td>10 (58.8%)</td>
<td>7 (41.2%)</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interesting</td>
<td>11 (64.7%)</td>
<td>6 (35.3%)</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practical</td>
<td>9 (52.9%)</td>
<td>8 (47.1%)</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- -</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 8: Parent Assessment of the Usefulness of the Strategies Used in the Program

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SA</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>SD</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judgement of Usefulness</td>
<td>Notetaking 10 (58.8%)</td>
<td>7 (41.2%)</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Researching a topic</td>
<td>11 (64.7%)</td>
<td>6 (35.3%)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
One parent commented on the incidental learning that occurred as her child was engaged in research:

"I now know how to look up information - encyclopedias, the library, index, cross referencing, etc. I now I know what to do with the unknown. Not just go to the teacher. I'm learning at the same time. I'm the chauffeur. I have to go to the library, so I say that's interesting I'll look that up for myself. Reading strategies too. Looking up in the Dictionary or the Thesaurus. Before if there was a word we didn't understand I would just say I don't know, look in the dictionary or speak to the teacher. Now we don't stop at the dictionary we go to the Thesaurus, or you know we go a book we have at home that tells you how to work crosswords out - that's something else we are into - and that's all part of the learning strategy, because there are so many words that mean more than one thing and its getting the different meanings and building up our word power - getting our own little lexicons in our heads. That's another thing, I've learnt - personal lexicons.

The children are very good at telling me to do my homework and because I'm doing mine their apparently has improved." (Narelle)

Another parent commented on the new insights that she gained concerning questioning:

"I've learnt how to help my children when they ask a question. I'm communicating with my children better. I'm able to take the information home. My daughter has asked if I could get extra notes, sometimes she has asked for certain weeks, because they show her things she wouldn't normally be expected to know, for example how something should be laid out. Children didn't get told those things properly." (Ruth)
Trish on the other hand pointed to the way the program helped her to get her children into their books:

"Yes, I've learnt to help them to get into their books. I keep asking if she is doing any reading or revision work things like that. I ask about her studies.

She asks me why I'm asking her these things and I tell her its part of my course. She is curious and wants to know why I'm doing it. I caught her looking through my sheets the other day. She doesn't go through the other course - the literacy course I'm doing, but I caught her going through this, so she must be interested in it." (Trish)

Parents have experienced improved communication with their children and better personal relationships with them.

One of the most encouraging observations was the finding that communication between parents and children improved. Narelle commented:

"Well I think a lot has to do with communication and I've been able to help get my daughter on the right track as regards borrowing from the Library for specific projects, research area and I've been able to, not do it for her, but tell her where to look. She can operate the machines in the library and look it up on the FICHE. So I was able to explain to her how and where to look it up in the index. (Helen)

Related to this was a perception by many parents that relationships with their children had actually improved. Narelle expressed it this way:

"I think the fact that I can relate better to my eldest child in regards to her work and also understanding the problems associated with her age group in study. She's 13, in year 8. There are a lot of different problems in High School in relation to study, than there are in Primary. EPISLL program is wonderful and related to problems peculiar to High School." (Narelle)

Trish also indicated that better communication was an outcome of the program:

"It's brought something else into our lives to talk about. Better communication. We always had a good relationship. It just added another subject into our lives, something else in common." (Trish)

Similarly, the Community Liaison Officer pointed to the
Improvement in communication between parents and their children:

"I have sat through it twice - the two groups have got so much out of it - but they talked much more about the communication that went on. The hometasks are invaluable to start communication. My program, Staying On for next year is 'Students as Risk'. It's too late by year 9 and 10. Need stuff with children in year 7 and 8. This program will fill that need."

"I sat through EPISLL twice with the parents. There is no session that we do that we don't talk about a hometask. Even when we didn't get to a hometask one day, the parents were still going home to talk about what we had been discussing that day and the kids are all sort of saying 'What are we doing this for and its much more than literacy'." (CLO)

Interestingly, when asked in the written evaluation if they now talked to their children in different ways concerning schoolwork, 89% felt that they did (see Table 9). Similarly, when asked whether they were "more capable of dealing with their children's problems", 94% of parents felt that they were.

Table 9: Response of Parents Concerning Specific Changes as a Result of the Course

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SA</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ideas changed concerning the way they talk to their children about school work</td>
<td>6 (35.3%)</td>
<td>9 (52.9%)</td>
<td>2 (11.8%)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More capable of dealing with children's problems</td>
<td>7 (41.2%)</td>
<td>9 (52.9%)</td>
<td>1 (5.9%)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased understanding of the way school works</td>
<td>4 (23.5%)</td>
<td>11 (64.7%)</td>
<td>2 (11.8%)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home organised in a different way to help children with their learning</td>
<td>4 (23.5%)</td>
<td>7 (41.2%)</td>
<td>5 (29.4%)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Parents have gained new knowledge about literacy and learning

The results of the written evaluation also made it clear that the program had an impact on parent knowledge of literacy and learning (See Table 10). The majority of parents felt they had gained new knowledge concerning learning (94%), writing (82%), reading (82%), spelling (71%), study habits (88%), research topics (94%) and time management (88%). As well, parents indicated that their ideas had actually changed in most areas (See Table 11).

Table 10: Parent Responses Concerning the Impact of the Course on Their Knowledge

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating</th>
<th>SA</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge gained about:</td>
<td>Learning</td>
<td>7 (41.2%)</td>
<td>9 (52.9%)</td>
<td>1 (5.9%)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>7 (41.2%)</td>
<td>7 (41.2%)</td>
<td>3 (17.6%)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>7 (41.2%)</td>
<td>7 (41.2%)</td>
<td>3 (17.6%)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Spelling</td>
<td>4 (23.5%)</td>
<td>8 (47.1%)</td>
<td>5 (29.4%)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Study habits</td>
<td>5 (29.4%)</td>
<td>10 (58.8%)</td>
<td>2 (11.8%)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Research Topics</td>
<td>8 (47.1%)</td>
<td>8 (47.1%)</td>
<td>1 (5.8%)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Managing time</td>
<td>6 (35.3%)</td>
<td>9 (52.9%)</td>
<td>2 (11.8%)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 11: Parent Responses Concerning the Way their Ideas Have Changed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating</th>
<th>SA</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ideas have changed concerning:</td>
<td>Learning</td>
<td>5 (29.4%)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>4 (23.5%)</td>
<td>6 (35.3%)</td>
<td>7 (41.2%)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>3 (17.6%)</td>
<td>7 (41.2%)</td>
<td>7 (41.2%)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Study habits</td>
<td>5 (29.4%)</td>
<td>9 (52.9%)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>5 (29.4%)</td>
<td>10 (58.8%)</td>
<td>2 (11.8%)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Research Writing</td>
<td>8 (47.1%)</td>
<td>7 (41.2%)</td>
<td>2 (11.7%)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
When parents were interviewed they also indicated that they had gained new knowledge. Ruth indicated that specific knowledge had been gained:

"I've learnt about notetaking, homework skills, research, how class works so that I know what to expect of my children in the classroom and can talk to them about it." (Ruth)

Similarly, Trish felt that new knowledge had been gained:

"I've gained new knowledge!! Lots of it. I know my way round the library. I've been taught about school timetabling taught about study skills and I have been taught acceptance of their school and teachers." (Trish)

Parents have grown personally as a consequence of the program.

One of the other obvious outcomes of the program was that parents felt that they had grown personally as a result of EPISLL. In response to the written evaluation parents indicated that their ideas had changed as a result of the program (see Table 12). The majority of parents indicated that they now had greater confidence working with their children (65%), that they felt more able to work in the school (76%) and that they felt more comfortable approaching the school with questions about their children's education (70%).

Table 12: Parent Perceptions of their Increased Confidence in Specific Areas

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating</th>
<th>SA</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parents gained confidence:</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working with children</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>(29.4%)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>(35.3%)</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>(41.2%)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>(35.3%)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>(23.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>(29.4%)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>(41.2%)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>(29.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>(29.4%)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 13: Parent Perceptions of Personal Growth

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating</th>
<th>SA</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EPISLL has made them feel more positive about themselves</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>(23.5%)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>(58.8%)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
EPISLL has made them keen to know more about literacy

|            | (29.4%) | 10 (58.8%) | 2 (11.8%) | - |

EPISLL has made them keen to do further study

|            | (29.4%) | 6 (35.3%) | 4 (23.5%) | 2 (11.8%) | - |

When asked in the evaluation had the program made them feel more positive about themselves, 81% said it had (see Table 13). This picture of increased confidence and self-worth was also reflected in the interviews with parents and staff. Narelle commented:

"I have a lot more respect for teenagers than I did. I have a lot more understanding of the need to study. I understand the different modes of study - lot more time to really listen - I'm used as a sounding board at school. I have more confidence, can now talk in public.

If the program keeps going, you are going to have a lot more mature age students. It has created a thirst for knowledge and it doesn't just stop at school. I'm branching out. Things that I was curious about before I am going out to find out about. If I can't get the information in the library, I will go to the people who have it. Its done the same for my children. They are not just saying 'Oh the teacher said or someone said', they are going behind the scenes. My youngest fellow picks up the newspaper, the girl is reading older books."  (Narelle)

Trish commented on the way the program had changed her perspective on many things, including herself:

"Made me look at a lot of things that I would not have looked at, actually I thought I would affect them, instead they are affecting me. I think its been a bit of both. Its given me more confidence, getting used to talking to people, yes it has given me more confidence, more point of view on other people and as far as reading and writing there, they make mistakes too. They can read and write, but they make mistakes.

Well I think its good education for parents as well as kids because it opens up a lot of things parents don't know about. A lot of stuff in this EPISLL program I wouldn't have dreamed of if I had had to do it on my own. I liked the first lesson so I came back. The rest of the class accepted me. It was no big deal as far as they were concerned. Even when I told them I was going to literacy classes to learn to read and write. This made me feel good and gave me confidence too."  (Trish)

The growth in personal confidence was also translated into a desire to have further education, with the majority of parents
indicating that they wanted to pursue further study (64%). As one parent commented when asked if EPISLL had affected her personally:

"I'd say it has! Well I've gone into secondary education myself. I'm in year 11. I want to be a Primary Teacher". (Narelle)

Since the program has ended 2 parents have enrolled at Shalvey High School to complete the HSC and 2 are pursuing TAFE studies. Another is to enrol in teaching at university next year. The STLD and CLO described the impact on parents in the following way:

"Its really amazed me the way it has developed the confidence within the parents and how suddenly we have this rash, probably the wrong word, so many of them now are reconsidering returning to education. We have some very bright women and they said they weren't encouraged to go on and could obviously see that something was missing out of their lives and are planning to go ahead now, which is really good. This must have an effect on their children. This extra confidence. Even the brightest parents have often been intimidated coming to the school and speaking to teachers." (STLD)

"They own the project. They see that their kids are getting benefits so they want more parents to do the program, so that more kids will benefit, because their kids interact with the other kids. The other things is we have had a number of parents come back as mature age students and more and more thinking about it. In an era where people left school because they were disenchanted and disenfranchised with the whole system, this is a real turn around. At the end of the program they are saying, 'There is really something in this learning isn't there? I think I'd like to go back into it. I don't know whether I would go.' Some of them seem to think, 'Well, I don't know if I want to go that far, but I would like to be as educated as my kids are'. That's a recognition that they do feel unempowered to be able to help their kids, definitely in the later years. Many parents traditionally have given over their power to the school and have opted out because of a belief that they don't know enough." (CLO)

The Maths Head Teacher at the school described the impact of EPISLL on parents in this way:

"EPISLL has had many impacts. I suppose you know about the parents who are enrolled. That's one of the big spin offs that's involved. Its quite exciting. I'm directly affected by that
because I am teaching one of the parents. To see how enthusiastic she is and how great that's been for her personally. So that's been a spin off we didn't expect - parents getting so excited about re-enrolling. An unexpected outcome. Some members of staff have polarised in some way. People are very very happy to see parents come back in, some aren't. Its been good for the kids too. I teach a lot of the kids whose parents have been up here and you just see that extra bit of confidence coming through. Its funny the way some of the kids don't like having their parents around. But once they get over the initial step they see it as being beneficial. You can just see the parents know who to approach if there is a problem. They know what is going on as far as homework and work they are doing in class and expectations. A lot of parents don't understanding what is required and these parents are becoming a really close knit group - a collegial network. Its helped us in the classroom too, we can talk about their parents and about the whole school; home education, a two way process. Good for teachers, parents and children." (Head Teacher, Maths)

It is obvious that EPISLL has had a significant impact on the parents that have been involved in the program. This has included their growth in knowledge, but has also been reflected in their growth in confidence and self esteem.

Impact of EPISLL on the School

As well as having a significant impact on individual parents, EPISLL had an impact on the school. While it is difficult to quantify the effect that EPISLL has had on the school, the staff are overwhelmingly supportive of its impact. One of the most significant effects seems to have been the development of a greater sense of partnership between the home and school. The Leading Teacher expressed this effect in the following way:

"EPISLL has helped to develop that partnership with the community. It allowed better communication between community and the teaching staff and senior executive of the school. It allowed a focus in the school that has been school wide rather than just faculty based, which has truly meant more involvement of the community.

It's probably embellished our curriculum a little in that we are thinking more clearly and getting better feedback from the parents as to what they believe children should be learning. Pretty good evaluators are parents. I think that has always been
a fear of teachers - having a parent sitting in the class may be a difficult thing. Well OK, from an evaluation point of view, probably yes, we're aware that adults are a little more mature than children and that they're rather better equipped to make decisions about quality and I think that's been happening and I think that's good. So it's given us an external evaluation of how we are running. Its informal, we haven't requested it, and no one has been so brash as to be abusive in inappropriate ways, we have gained from that. Publicity has been positive and that's an important things for a school such as this in Western Suburbs of Sydney. That's been good. It has developed our links with UWS and Professor Trevor Cairney, its assisted in links with our feeder schools, its led on to things that were unexpected."

(Leading Teacher)

Other staff members expressed similar views in relation to increased community involvement. For example, the Head Teacher Mathematics offered the following observation:

"I think there's been a big impact for the school in terms of community involvement. I think its another avenue where parents can get involved in the school process instead of just covering textbooks and fete days. It gives them real empowerment, gives them skills really to run the school. We have always been big on using the parents in the school, educating the parents, big on getting them involved in computer education, in the P & C and School Council, but we needed to train them up for that and this has been great for that. So it really has been beneficial in that area. Its exposed more parents to the modern school, what we can offer. We started off very small here about 20 people in the program, which dwindled down to about 7 really committed and now this group is about 10-12. I mean that wouldn't have happened, you wouldn't have had that inflow. You might have got one or two parents who were interested. After primary school the interest tends to peter out. But the word is spreading now and of course, we'd like 50-100 but in areas like this we have to go slowly. Its the value that's come out. The enthusiasm, the way they have grown as people as well. They have a purpose now. Sometimes, I think we have over empowered them. That's not such a bad thing." (Head Teacher Maths)

Another comment made by a number of staff members is that EPISLL has had an effect on staff. The Support Teacher Learning Difficulties made the following comment:

"In the beginning there was a bit of suspicion because we have lots of programs. People have come and trialed them. I think there was that feeling of 'Here we go again', but there's none of
that now. Everyone that I have spoken to is very positive about it now. When Lynne actually asked for people to go into the classroom there was no hesitation. Having parents there in the classroom watching what they were doing, I think teachers were quite welcoming and enjoyed the experience. I would think two years ago they would have been quite threatened by this. They are quite happy to carry it on next year." (STLD)

Similarly the Leading Teacher indicated that the effect on staff, after an initial degree of scepticism, has been positive:

"There has been an impact on staff. In the initial stages, there was a feeling of well, what's it all about, what impact is this going to have on teachers in classrooms. Most teachers, I think, are comfortable having parents with them in the school. But that's a new concept for many, so its taken time. I think that's one of the impacts, there's a comfort between teachers and parents, that's enhanced the relationship. I think we were wrong in one of our concerns at the beginning. It was that when kids are at high school because they are adolescents they are not going to really want their parents there, because its not cool. We haven't seen that to be the case at all and that's encouraging. I must admit personally I wondered what effect that would have. Its been very good." (Leading Teacher)

It appears that EPISLL has had a significant and diverse effect on the school, the comments of the Support Teacher Learning Difficulties probably summarises many of the issues raised, and at the same time underlines the importance that programs like EPISLL have:

I don't know whether I'll be answering this correctly but actually I've been thinking about this for the last few days because we have been thinking about our School Certificate results across core subjects. I've been here for about 10 years and I look back across those 10 years and there has been a lot of money and quite a lot of different programs trialed here and we have our little gains, then we fall back again. We haven't made any significant impact on the literacy levels of the kids. We are kind of staying the same and I've been trying to find out what is it we have been doing wrong, because we have been trying hard. When I went to the first session of this group of EPISLL parents something really hit home to me when the parents were talking about the reasons why they left school early and their attitudes to school and the big thing that came across was that they left school early because their parents hadn't given them any support. Their attitudes to school were probably fairly negative and for the same reasons too. I am Year 9 adviser here at school and I was thinking about the students in my year who have been the successful ones and they're the ones who have that
real strong family support. The students who came here in Year 7 who had the potential to be very successful but who are dropping off are from the group don't have that same sort of strong family support families that highly value the school and what it can do for their kids. This to me, has made me realise how important a program that involves parents like this, really is. Its not going to solve the problem, its only beginning to solve the problem, but until we can get the parents in and somehow turn around attitudes we are going to lose a lot of those children on the way.

The unfortunate thing about what we are doing about EPISLL is that there are a lot of people that we haven't got hold of. But the word is spreading and each time there seems to be more people coming. I think we are going to get more and more parents involved as we go along because the parents themselves are getting so much out of it. Through doing this they are acknowledging that their feelings about school and feelings about teachers change, or their understanding I suppose, and that's got to have benefits for their children.

A lot of parents will quite happily go into primary schools and work with their kids but they are quite intimidated by High School. I think this is breaking down those barriers. Unfortunately, we can't make it compulsory, but I really think if we are going to make any significant gains with our kids we are going to have to work through the parents as well as working with the kids." (STLD)

Impact of EPISLL on Students

While one of the expected outcomes of the EPISLL program was an effect on student literacy and study skills, this was not a major focus of the evaluation. There were two main reasons for not making this a focus. First, it was judged that it was unrealistic to expect a dramatic impact on individual students in the short term. Second, the program was designed for parents, hence the indirect effect on students is difficult to observe. Nevertheless, data from teachers and parents indicate that they have observed a number of positive impacts on students. For example, when the Leading Teacher was asked about the effects of the program on students he responded in the following way:

"I think that's a longer term focus and I don't know that we can say yes the children have just changed dramatically. I think there has been more of a comfort having their parents in the school. There's been more emphasis on its a normal thing to see parents and adults in the school. It certainly has a very
positive effect in the Year 11 classes where we have had parents who have gone through EPISLL such as Narelle, and then have come into the classroom as a student. That has been very good. We were wondering how that would be. But I don't know that I would be prepared to say that in the short term we've seen the students in the school change dramatically. I'm not in a position to know what they are like at home, so honestly I don't know. I suspect that the relationships are better, that there's a better understanding and that parents are better skilled to guide their children through what I think, is a very difficult stage in their life - adolescence." (Leading Teacher)

Similarly, the comments of parents suggest that there have been many positive benefits. Certainly, the program has provided students with access to new skills. As Narelle commented, she was able to show her daughter how to do things she had not been able to do before:

"Well I think a lot has to do with communication and I've been able to help get my daughter on the right track as regards borrowing from the Library for specific projects, research area and I've been able to, not do it for her, but tell her where to look. She can operate the machines in the library and look it up on the FICHE. So I was able to explain to her how and where to look it up in the index." (Narelle)

Ruth also indicated that this had been the case for her daughter. In fact, it appears that her daughter also recognised the value of the program as she actually asked for the notes week by week to gain new insights into study skills:

"My daughter has asked if I could get extra notes, sometimes she has asked for certain weeks, because they show her things she wouldn't normally be expected to know, for example, how something should be laid out. Children don't get told those things properly." (Ruth)

Some parents have even observed changes in their children's confidence and literacy ability. Narelle commented:

"I used another child in the TTALL program. My own daughter for EPISLL and her reading and writing has definitely improved. She's quite brilliant at English. She is really good at reading - its not only reading, it is also comprehension - 'cause its no good reading if you can't understand the words. That has improved." (Narelle)

An interesting comment from one parent was that children had
benefited from their gains in knowledge and confidence. Ruth expressed it this way:

"For the children the main benefits are that when they ask me how, I can now tell them how. I don't get stuck in the middle or not know what to do. Also they are not wasting time, because they don't have to run back to the teacher the next day. They've got more time to finish their work." (Ruth)

In the long term it seems inevitable that students will make gains in literacy and school learning as a result of their parents involvement in the EPISLL program. Of course, this would require longer term evaluation to determine the effects. Nevertheless, the obvious benefits that have accrued for parents and the school and the observations of parents concerning their children’s progress, would suggest that EPISLL has the potential to make a significant difference to students’ literacy and learning.

6. CONCLUSION

While the ultimate impact of the EPISLL program requires long term evaluation on multiple sites, the initial evaluation that has been conducted suggests that it has had a significant impact on parents, teachers and students. We believe that the outcomes as originally defined have been achieved.

Significantly, the project has lead to the production of a comprehensive program that is readily transportable to other schools. The program is now being implemented at 30 sites.

It is important to stress that while EPISLL was attempting to provide practical strategies for parents it was not developed simply as an "add-on to what teachers do" (Kruger & Mahon, 1990). It was an attempt both to offer parents new insights into literacy and learning, and to develop new partnerships with them.

In a sense EPISLL provided a basis to build community networks in which parents and teachers provide mutual support for the learning of children. This sense of community is important. Indeed the success of programs like EPISLL has probably been due as much to the development of community support networks as it has been due to the quality of the program.

There are many ways to involve parents, but so often these initiatives do not go far enough (Cairney & Munsie, 1992a). There is little point providing for parent involvement if it is
simply tokenistic. Strategies like EPISLL must be used within the context of a total commitment to parent participation. Parents will not participate if they perceive that their involvement is not genuinely wanted. The following comment shows why one of the parents in a parent literacy program (Cairney & Munsie, 1992), stayed away from school for many years:

“Because my eldest is nearly 25, there was none of this sort of thing when he went to school. The schools weren’t open to schools except on Education Day, and maybe sports’ day. You weren’t encouraged to interfere. You couldn’t go up and ask the teacher what was wrong, or how could you help or something, you were virtually told - you know - more or less, that we’re the teacher, you’re only the mother (Lynne).”

As educators we regularly acknowledge that parents have a vital role to play in their children’s literacy education. We believe that our work has provided an important insight into how one type of parent involvement program can provide a valuable framework for developing a partnership with parents. It is through involvement initiatives of this type that the barriers that exist between schools and communities will be broken down so that schools can move beyond tokenistic attempts to involve parents in their children’s education.

7. BIBLIOGRAPHY


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Appendix 1: Content of the Effective Partners in Secondary Literacy Learning program

Topic 1 - The Student

Session 1 - Building Positive Relationships

The session is designed to:

* discuss the important role parents play with their children;
* show the importance of developing positive relationships with children;
* assist participants to be aware of the importance of high self esteem to encourage learning;
* make participants aware that we need to set realistic goals for children’s achievements;
* demonstrate to participants how to support children as they set short and long term goals for effective learning.

Session 2 - The Effective Student

This session is designed to:

* assist participants to be aware of the importance of high self esteem to encourage learning;
* make participants aware that we need to set realistic goals for children’s achievements;
* discuss the important role parents can play in supporting children to plan their future directions.

Guest Speaker: Career’s Adviser.

Topic 2 - The Student as a Learner

Session 1 - How do People Learn?

The session is designed to:

* discuss the important role parents have as partners in their child’s learning;
* acknowledge that children learn at different rates and in different ways and that students coming to high school have differing abilities, knowledge and social skills;
* show how parents can support and contribute to a child’s learning.

Session 2 - Classroom observation

This session is designed to offer opportunities for participants to gain insights into the varied ways students respond to different learning situations.

Activity: Participants observe students working in the classrooms.
Session 3 - Reading - What’s it all about?

This session is designed to:

* provide participants with an understanding of the reading process;
* demonstrate to participants how to support their children as they read;
* give participants an understanding of ideas to encourage children to read in the content areas.

Session 4 - The Writing Process

This session is designed to:

* provide participants with an understanding of the writing process;
* demonstrate to participants how to support their children as they write;
* give participants an understanding of the expectations of different writing purposes in the key learning areas;
* make the participants aware that we write for many purposes, but in spite of the different purposes, our writing has one major function, to compose meaning, usually, for others to read.

Topic 3: The Student and Study

Session 1 - Homework and Study Techniques

This session is designed to:

* make the participants aware of the importance of effective time management, good study habits, and organisation of work schedules;
* demonstrate how students can organise and prepare summary notes from text book reading.
* demonstrate to participants how to support students as they study.

Session 2 - Information Skills

This session is designed to introduce activities which will assist participants to support and encourage students to develop as researchers. The session will introduce experiences which will assist students to research a topic. These experiences include:
- Brainstorming.
- Categorising information.
- Finding suitable resources.

Venue for this session should be the library.

Session 3 - Research Skills

This session is designed to:

* introduce experiences and activities which will assist participants to support and encourage students to complete personal research;
* provide participants with background knowledge and understanding of how the library functions;

* increase participants understanding of skills and how these can be demonstrated for their children.

Venue for this session should be the library.

Optional Topic - The Student as a Utiliser of Resources

Some schools might wish to conduct a slightly more extended program by exploring the issue of using and finding a variety of community resources. The following two sessions are not essential but provide further useful content.

Session 1 - Where do I Go When My Child Has A Problem?

This session is designed to:

* introduce participants to the school’s Student Welfare Policy;
* provide participants with conflict resolution strategies;
* discuss with participants with knowledge about community support agencies.

Guest Speakers might include: Teacher in charge of Student Welfare.

School Counsellor.
Regional Student Welfare Consultant.
Community Liaison Officer.

Recognised welfare support teams from the community.
Session 2 - Introduction to micro computers

This session is designed to:

* introduce participants to the functions of micro computers in the school;
* provide participants with hands on experience using the micro computers.

Guest Speaker: Computer co-ordinator for the school

Venue: The computer room.

AARE 1993 (T.H. Cairney)