

ALL AT SEA
A DISSONANCE MODEL FOR TEACHER INSERVICEf

Julie Arthur and Bob Bingham
McAuley Campus
Australian Catholic University
Brisbane

Paper presented
at the
AARE Conference
Newcastle
Nov.28@Dec 1 1994

ABSTRACT

The involvement of parents in schools has been shown to have significant effects on student achievement. Catholic schools have a defined policy related to the importance of parent teacher partnerships across all levels of schooling. However the practices of parent involvement often fall short of the rhetoric. Trends in research have identified teachers as the key to parental involvement. Therefore a pilot project aimed at improving teacher practices of working with parents as partners was implemented with a cohort of K@12 teachers from Catholic schools in a coastal Australian town. Teachers were involved in twilight seminars, collaborative reflection through collegial groups, and the implementation of action research projects related to parent teacher partnership.

An initial survey of teacher beliefs and practices in relation to communication between parents and teachers was complemented by interviews with participant

teachers and analysis of personal journals. Ongoing research indicates that teachers have concerns about the decline in communication between parents and schools as children progress through schools. Of particular concern at the secondary level was the delay in reporting student achievement to parents. Differences have been identified between the beliefs teachers espoused about the importance of parental involvement and the practices in their schools.

The paper presents a description of the pilot project and the action research process. The researchers report their perceptions of the efficacy of the project and discuss the expected outcomes for teachers, parents and administrators. This paper also reports on preliminary findings related to participant perceptions of the action research process and on teacher understandings of the nature of parent teacher partnerships.

All at Sea: A Dissonance Model for Teacher Inservice. Paper presented at AARE Conference, Newcastle, Nov. 1994.

Julie Arthur and Bob Bingham

Background

Many recent research projects (Schools Council, 1992; Wiltshire & McMeniman, 1994) have reported increased school performance emanating from parental involvement and participation. Other research points to the influence of family endorsement of schools on children's self-esteem, self-discipline, mental health and long-term aspiration (Greenberg, 1989). Developmental gains in children's language, motor skills, concepts and problem solving also have been associated with parental involvement (Swick & McNight, 1989). Whereas the literature reveals the existence of differing perceptions of parents and educators on the nature of parental involvement (Jackson & Stretch, 1976; Power, 1985; Williams, 1991), when it comes to instigating participation, teachers have been identified as the key to actualising positive parental involvement (Swick & McNight, 1989).

Several recent studies (Clark, 1988; Powell, 1989; Pugh, 1988) express concern about the quality of parent@teacher communication in schools and that practices of parent teacher partnerships do not meet current recommendations. The major implication of such practices is the narrow perception of roles offered to parents: a far cry from partnerships. Yet the need for partnership in education within Catholic settings is widely documented and accepted (Code of Canon Law, 1983; Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988; Flannery, 1975). A partnership implies a sharing of information, responsibility, skills, decision making and accountability. When parents are viewed as partners, parental involvement is regarded as a partnership; a working relationship that is characterised by a shared sense of purpose, mutual respect and the willingness to negotiate (Pugh, 1988).

Research findings on the importance of partnership between parents and teachers indicate that teachers and teacher beliefs are key issues allied to parental participation in schools. It may be that teachers are insufficiently prepared and equipped through their preservice training to communicate with parents. Typically teachers with an early childhood focus will have

undertaken studies related to families and home school community relationships whereas secondary teachers have had no formal introduction to the area. The challenge exists to identify professional development opportunities for teachers at all school levels to develop practical strategies for fostering parent teacher communication and subsequent partnerships. However the notion of partnership with parents holds inherent dilemmas for most teachers.

Reflection may provide a process through which teachers identify dilemmas in their practices and the implicit beliefs inherent in these (Grimmett et al, 1990). Reflection is seen by many as a key element in teacher professional development (Gore, 1991; Valli, 1992; Zeichner & Liston, 1987), particularly when it occurs as shared reflection in a social context (Day, 1993). But as a number of writers note, reflection without action is insufficient (Freire, 1973; Kemmis, 1988; Smyth, 1987). An action

research process offers the opportunity to encourage both action and reflection in a climate of collegiality. Such collaboration in professional development appears to have a broader influence (Day, 1993; Smith & Hatton, 1992).

This paper reports on teacher beliefs and dilemmas related to partnerships with parents that were identified during an action research professional development program which involved teachers in collaborative reflection on their practices.

Design of the study

Action research has a fundamental aim to improve practice not just to produce knowledge by developing the practitioner's capacity for discrimination and judgement (Elliott, 1991). This process integrates teaching and teacher development, curriculum development and evaluation, research and philosophical reflection, into a unified conception of reflective educational practice and results in the empowerment of teachers in their workplace (Elliot, 1991).

The key activity is the collaborative reflection by teachers on their practices in curriculum development and implementation.

A pilot project, K@12 Professional Development Program: Parent Teacher Partnerships through Personal Development Education was implemented in six Catholic schools in a provincial, coastal town. Facilitated by personnel from the Australian Catholic University, Brisbane, the professional development program involved teachers from K@12 in three professional development activities: twilight seminars, action research by teachers and collaboration by teachers in action research teams/triads (Arthur, et al, 1994). (Appendix A provides an outline of the program.) As a fully managed action learning model of in@service, the K@12 Professional Development Program aimed to

bond teachers in self supporting networks and provide opportunities for self@identified in@service activities. A further potential outcome was engendering critical changes in the professional culture across the band of teachers K@12.

A critical issue within the project was how teachers could facilitate

partnerships with parents without being overloaded with professional demands. Action research teams/triads were formed with small groups of teachers to provide collaborative support from peers. Where possible these teams/triads operated across traditional primary and secondary boundaries of schooling.

Methodology

The nature of this study required a qualitative research approach, as the focus is participants and their reflections within the context of a complete and unique set of experiences. It is a holistic approach to a natural setting (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To understand the experiences of the teachers, to tell the story of their work together and their perceptions of that work requires an ethnographic mode of inquiry.

Participants

Teachers from six Catholic parish schools three primary and three campuses of the secondary school were invited to volunteer to be involved in the project facilitated by two lecturers from the Australian Catholic University. The first Twilight Seminar was held in May to introduce the project. Of the 33 teachers who initially attended the introductory seminar, 24 expressed a willingness to continue the process with 14 teachers completing the project, seven from primary schools, four from the regional high school 7010, two from the senior secondary school and one from the vocational college. Of the participants, six were male and eight female. The teaching experiences ranged from 2 years to over 20 years experience across diverse settings in Australia and overseas.

Data collection

Data for the study were gathered using various techniques. The findings reported in this paper are based on data from three sources: survey, journals and interviews.

Survey

The Home School Communication Survey (adapted from Owen & Krasnow, 1992) was administered to the 33 teachers who attended the initial meeting about the

K@12 Professional Development

Program: Parent Teacher Partnerships through Personal Development Education, with 28 surveys being returned. The survey was designed to gather data on teacher beliefs and practices related to

partnerships with parents. Particular items focused on issues of communication. There were six sections to the survey, with respondents required to indicate either agreement, importance or comfort with statements in four of the sections. The remaining sections surveyed the frequency of teacher practices of communication.

Journal

Participants were asked to keep a journal throughout the pilot project. They were to record their thoughts about the workshop sessions, triad meetings, individual action plans and implementation, and note any events they believed to be significant. A prepared handout was given to teachers at the initial seminar to indicate ways in which they may reflect. Journals were collected and photocopied three times during the program. At these times, the researchers responded to the journal comments.

Interviews

Interviews were held with the participants with the first interview based on personal statements made in the journals. Further interviews were scheduled, using the transcripts of the first interviews as a starting point for clarification of participants thoughts. The interviews were structured around the participants journal entries and any previous interview comments. There was at least one interview and a follow up interview with individual participants. One group interview was held with members of triads. All the interviews were audio taped and transcribed. The transcriptions were analysed and themes identified through the participants' reflective narratives on their experiences.

Findings and Discussion

The following discussion deals with key findings from the initial survey, interviews and journal entries. The significant issues to arise related to time, shared

beliefs, parent roles, communication and teacher perceptions. Each issue is discussed with reference to survey items, the wording of which appears in bold. (A table of items and results can be found in appendix B). Where applicable data has been included from interviews and appears in italics.

Time: Teachers have enough to do

While the majority of teachers (68%) disagreed with the statement Teachers have enough work to do without having to involve parents (Item 7), there was also some concern held by 32% of respondents. This probably reflects their commitment to parental involvement and explains their presence at the initial seminar activity in their own time. That this was a salient issue for 32% of teacher participants does indicate a personal conflict for teachers in Catholic schools with an espoused

philosophy of parent teacher partnership. It could appear that teachers who have concerns about present workloads will face dilemmas between their belief of the importance of parents and teachers and the reality of their working lives. This was particularly indicated in the reasons for withdrawal from the project. Initially, 24 teachers volunteered to commit to the project. Of these 14 completed the project. Time for work and personal and family life were stated as barriers to involvement in the project by those who withdrew, rather than disagreement with the project's espoused aim of partnerships between parents and teachers.

Shared beliefs: The importance of agreed goals between parents and teachers

Responses to items examining teacher beliefs about direct teacher parent partnerships in curriculum and children's learning generally showed that teachers agreed on the importance of parent@teacher cooperation in these areas. There was significant agreement (100% agreed or agreed strongly) that students learn the most when parents and teachers work together (Item 6). Similarly with the statement students learn the most when parents and teachers have mutually agreed upon goals for their education (Item 2) teacher agreement was rated strongly (92%).

Parent Roles: Helping children at home

Data from the survey revealed that most teachers are clearly confident of parental concern for children's development. However, analysis of qualitative data from interviews and diaries revealed that for some teachers there was little care by parents for their children. This was particularly reported at the secondary level. However, teachers indicated concern with parental effectiveness in directly educational roles. Only 60% of the teachers reported confidence in parents doing a good job in participating in their children's education (Item 16). In particular, nearly half the teachers in this group lacked confidence that parents are doing a good job in helping their children learn academic subjects at home (Item 8). This was reinforced through the interviews with comments like the following: parents leave it to us to do the academic stuff.

This may explain the generally held belief that teachers should be sharing ideas on how to help children with homework at home (Item 53 @ 93% agreement). This is related to teacher beliefs that teachers should help parents learn specific ways to help their child at home (Item 4 @ 81% agreement). Beliefs such as these are indicative of a teacher-as-expert image of teachers and thus have significant implications if teachers wish to work with parents as partners.

Communication: Teachers and parents

Examination of teachers beliefs about the importance of parents sharing

information with them (Items 18@36) revealed that most teachers value information about things that may influence children's behaviours in school and their attitudes towards learning. For example 96% see information about sources of stress on pupils as important (Item 32@ 81% very important, 15% important). There are, of course, areas of family behaviour and attitude that are seen as relatively unimportant or possibly not appropriate because these things do not have the same potential for imposing on school life and may be seen as private matters.

Communication: School and home

Teacher response to Item 3, Information from schools fails to inform parents about school programs and student's progress, reveals that 60% believe that information sharing from school to parents is not effective. This concern is reiterated in subsequent teacher journal entries and interviews. It became the focus for a number of the individual teacher projects when teachers identified the lack of communication between them and parents as the focus of their action research.

Survey responses similarly revealed discrepancies in the frequency of communication. The most common manner of contact is when teachers told parents how their children are doing in school (Item 57 @ 97%) and presumably this encompasses formal reports from the school. When teachers do contact parents they are more inclined to do so by note (40% often @Item 56) rather than contact them personally by phone (28% often Item 55) despite concerns as expressed above that this is not effective. Of the 75% of these teachers who sometimes or often contact parents to tell them something positive about their children over 50% of these are from lower grades where the frequency of general contact is higher. Differences in practices related to year level of school were also found in the frequency of parent initiated contact with teachers. 78% of teachers report that this occurred sometimes or more frequently and 10% reporting this happened almost always. 70% of the teachers reporting frequent visits are from the lower school and this rate drops progressively to 10% in the upper secondary school. This notion that contact diminished over the school life of the child is repeated in the anecdotal comments in interviews and journals and is a concern for these teachers. This is discussed later with reference to teacher perceptions.

Teacher perceptions: Parental Interest

Teachers varyingly equated parent interest with parent response to communication about academic subjects. Various means of communication were used by teachers in their action plans to promote teacher@parent partnerships. These included letters at the junior secondary level, curriculum information sheets in the

primary school, and information about student motivation and academic study at the Senior Secondary College. In all instances, when teachers reported low return rates from parents they gave immediate statements about lack of apparent interest. Numbers were seen as representative of success. Further discussion resulted in consideration of an alternative view that parents are interested but have no pressing need to return the communication. After reflection, there was some acceptance of a difference of interpretation, e.g. The thought crossed my mind that the families that respond are the ones who don't need it.

The need for parents and teachers to have shared goals has been referred to. Of greater significance though is the need for teachers to create shared understandings with parents and to have some form of communication which allows them to know that parents have received and understood the communication and have no immediate concerns. Teachers appear to predicate some of their decisions on what would follow solely on the basis of parental response. "What we do next depends on the response" was a comment from several participants. Many teachers responses can be summed up this way: I thought I'd get phone calls. But many of the students in my PC class are good students. I think that may be part of it. Again there is evidence of emergent beliefs about families which may serve to justify further lack of contact. This an area for further research.

Whilst the beliefs teachers hold about parents are important, of greater significance to their practices are the beliefs they hold of themselves as teachers. Data from interviews revealed that the image some teachers held related to year level and found that this gave rise to dilemmas encountered when their practices did not meet with those of the teacher image. It is the underlying ideology of teachers, their essential beliefs about teaching and the desirable outcomes from it, that determine which of the range of dilemmas inherent in teaching are perceived by them as most problematic (Osborn and Broadfoot, 1992). One teacher repeatedly referred to herself as an infants type of person. Whereas this teacher had significant experience in one grade, she was now working with another grade, giving rise to a dilemma related to frequency of contact: Infants, lots of contact, year 6 hardly any at all.

Conclusion

When teachers implement the curriculum, they are influenced by social processes at two levels, the school and the classroom, with negotiation about what constitutes appropriate curriculum practices being influenced by recurring patterns emanating from the structural features of the society in which the school and classroom is embedded. This is particularly so in the Catholic school with a defined philosophy of education and stated beliefs related to the significance of parental involvement.

This research revealed that the perception that contact with parents can be an accepted happening if the student is academically weak or behaviourally difficult was widespread. The alternative belief, also frequently reported, that contact with parents of the good students is not necessary holds serious implications for teachers in Catholic schools where all parents are perceived to have a right to be partners in the education of their children.

One critical factor in determining practices of parent-teacher partnership may well be teacher beliefs and the ways in which teachers conceptualise parent-teacher partnerships in Catholic Schools, and the degree to which they ascribe to the teachings of the Church in relation to the importance of parents in education. Another critical factor may be the way in which teacher beliefs are challenged by the school context in which the teacher is working, particularly the grade level taught. A third factor involves the relationships that are inherent in the work place of teachers. All of these are interwoven and cannot be considered as separate entities. It is in the interconnectedness of our beliefs, practices and workplaces that gives rise to many of the dilemmas faced by teachers across all school settings.

This research found that a significant issue to arise in relation to home school contact is not necessarily the frequency of contact, but rather the subsequent parental response. It was revealed that teachers hold strong, generalised beliefs about parents and families. Thus when communicating with families, teacher decisions about practices of communication appeared reliant on parent response,

rather than professional judgement. Teacher images of themselves as professionals is an area that requires further research.

If teachers have a defined philosophy of education that encompasses partnership between parents and teachers, they will accept that parents are stakeholders in education and have a right to be involved in education. Thus their practices of involving parents, of having parents participate in educational settings, will reflect this belief. Such practices have been evidenced through the K012 Professional Development Program.

Bibliography

Clark, M. (1988). *Children under Five: Educational Research and Evidence*. (U.K., Gordon & Breach).

Congregation for Catholic Education (1988). *The religious dimension of education in the Catholic school*. Homebush: St Paul.

Day, C. (1993). *Reflection: a necessary but not sufficient condition for professional development*.

British Educational Research Journal, 19(1), pp.83-93.

Elliot, J. (1991). *Action research for educational change*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.

Flannery, A. (Ed.) (1975). *Vatican Council II: The conciliar and post-conciliar documents*.

Freire, P. (1973). *Education for critical consciousness*. New York: Seabury Press.

Gore, J. (1991). Policy and research issues in early childhood curriculum. In J. Gore & R. Killen. *Master of education Early childhood program. Introduction to curriculum planning for early childhood*. Newcastle: University of Newcastle External Studies Centre.

Greenberg, P. (1989). Parents as partners in young children's development and education: A new American fad? Why does it matter? *Young Children*, May, pp.61-74.

Grimmett, P.P., Erickson, G.L., Mackinnon, A.M., & Riecken, T.J. (1990). *Reflective practice in*

teacher education. In R.T. Clift, W.R. Houston & M.C. Pugach (Eds.)
Encouraging
reflective practice in education: An analysis of issues and programs,
(pp. 200-38). New York: Teachers College Press.

Jackson, R.K. & Stretch, H.A. (1976). Perceptions of parents,
teachers and administrators to parental
involvement in early childhood programs. The Alberta Journal Of
Educational Research, XXII
(2), pp. 129-139.

Kemmis, S. (1988). The action research reader. Geelong: Deakin
University Press.

Lincoln, Y.S. & Guba, E.G. (1985). Naturalistic Inquiry. Beverly
Hills: Sage.

Osborn, M., & Broadfoot, P. (1992). A lesson in progress? Primary
classrooms observed in England and France. Oxford Review
of Education. 18(1), 3-15.

Owen, H. & Krasnow, J.H. (1992).
Parent - teacher action research in the league of schools reaching
out. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational
Research Association. San Francisco, April 20-24.

Power, T.J. (1985). Perceptions of competence: How parents and
teachers view each other. Psychology in the Schools, 22, January, pp. 68-78.

Pugh, G. (1988). Parents and professionals as
partners in preschool services: Implications of recent
research. (Paper presented at the 18th National Conference AECA,
Canberra, Sept., 4-8, 1988.

Schon, D.A. (1983). The
reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action. New York:
Basic Books.

Schools Council, NBEET, (1992) A Snapshot

of the Early Years of Schooling, Canberra, Australian
Government Publishing service.

Smith, D. & Hatton, N. (1992). Towards
reflection in teacher education. What counts as evidence?
Paper presented at the Annual Conference, Australian Association for
Research in Education. Geelong: Deakin University.

Smyth, W.J. (1987). A Rationale for

Teachers' Critical Pedagogy: A Handbook. Victoria, Deakin Uni.

Swick, K. J. & McNight, S. (1989).
Characteristics of kindergarten teachers who promote parental involvement. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 4, pp.19-29.

Valli, L. (Ed.) (1992). *Reflective teacher education: Cases and critiques*. New York: State University of New York Press.

Williams, D.L. (1991). Training teachers and administrators for parental involvement: Implications for public choice schools. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 15ff (3/4), pp. 339-352.

Wiltshire, K., McMeniman, M., & Tolhurst, T. (1994). *Report of the review of the Queensland school curriculum, 1994: Shaping the future*. Brisbane: Queensland Government Printer.

Zeichner, K.M. & Liston, D.P. (1987). Teaching student teachers to reflect. *Harvard Educational Review*. 57, 23-48.

Appendix A

Action Research

There were three distinct strands to the K-12 Professional Development Program:

1. Teacher Twilight Seminars
2. Action Research by teachers
3. Action Research Teams

Each of these strands offered challenges to teachers as they engaged in the action research process.

1. Twilight Seminars

Following an initial Twilight Seminar, subsequent seminars focused on action research methodology and the nature of parent-teacher partnerships. In addition to the process development for their identified professional needs, teachers requested and were given

specific input about parent teacher communication. Folios of readings related to the topics of the inservice were supplied to each school cohort.

2. Action Research

Steps in the action research process are as follows:

1. Teachers identify a key issue they wish to address at the classroom level of decision making.
2. An action plan is formulated to address the issue and implemented by the teacher.
3. Teachers reflect on the implementation process and evaluate their plans, making changes where required.
4. Revised plans are implemented.

Action plans in this project have been written in the following areas:

Motivation of Senior Students

Parent Participation in Personal Development

Student Evaluation and Parent Teacher Information

Building Relationships with Parents: Breaking down the barriers

Development of self esteem

3. Action Research Teams/Triads

Action research teams were formed with small groups of teachers. The aim of the teams was to provide collegial support with a timetable of support meetings arranged by the participants. The initial action research session and the subsequent first team meeting were facilitated by the researchers with following meetings alternating between team self facilitation and support from the external facilitator.