

PARENTS AND TEACHERS:

COLLABORATIVE RESEARCHERS

JULIE C. HINDE McLEOD

Department of Curriculum and Teaching Studies
Faculty of Education
The University of Newcastle

ABSTRACT

Despite the rhetoric of politicians, educators and organised parent bodies advocating the establishment of partnerships between parents and teachers, the reality of the school and classroom reveals that such partnerships have been difficult to achieve and have often remained essentially tokenistic and hierarchical.

This paper examines different pictures of parent / teacher partnerships and establishes that, where reality most closely approximates rhetoric, there is an acknowledgement of parents' knowledge as an essential supplement to teachers' knowledge in enabling children's construction of meaning. In these contexts successful partnerships between parents and teachers are collaborative, mutually empowering and responsive to contextualised need.

A collaborative action research model is developed which aims to facilitate the development of further successful parent / teacher partnerships. This model is implemented through the Oral Language for Literacy and Learning Project and is evaluated in both the macro-context of the Project and the micro-context of the classroom using participant observation, questionnaires and interviews.

The model is shown to have the potential to create and support partnerships between parents and teachers that are collaborative, empowering and responsive to context. The model acts as a catalyst for change in different contexts - the home,

the classroom, the school, and the community. It is seen to benefit each member of the education triangle - parent, teacher and child.

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Demographic, economic and cultural changes of the emerging post-industrial period have fundamentally altered the possible shapes of parent/school partnerships (Heath and McLaughlin 1987). Different schools and different teachers have reacted to change in very different ways. Pictures of relationships between parents and teachers reveal few commonalities. Some pictures reveal a seemingly unbridgeable gap between the rhetoric of parent participation and its reality. In other pictures, rhetoric and reality come closer as parents and teachers participate as collaborators rather than combatants.

PARENT PARTICIPATION: THE RHETORIC AND THE REALITY

Advocacy of parental participation in children's schooling has political, educational and parental support as a means of effecting links between school and community, and between parent, teacher and child.

Politically motivated advocacy arises from beliefs that parental involvement acts as a measure of a school's economic accountability to its community. By encouraging parental participation the school exposes itself to public scrutiny. "It is expected to be fully accountable to society and to give value for money" (Report of the Committee of Review of NSW Schools, 1989). Parent organisations believe that as the 'owners' of their schools, parents have "the right and duty to be involved in seeing what schools do with their tax money, just as children have the right to the decent that their parents pay schools to provide". (Harrison 1992)

Empirical evidence provides a foundation for an educational-outcome based advocacy of parent involvement. Where parents do play a role in their child's education, research indicates higher academic achievement (Allen 1990, Carrick 1989, Epstein 1989, Comer 1988, Henderson 1987, Levin 1987, Plowden 1967), students' greater sense of well-being (Cochran 1987), positive student attitudes and behaviour (Becher 1984, in Greenwood and Hickman 1991). This has been particularly evident in programs conducted in disadvantaged schools where parents have been involved in children's literacy learning (Cairney 1993, Pearce 1990, Toomey 1987, Tizard et al 1982). This support is not only in terms of individual children's achievement but becomes, politically and economically, an academic performance indicator for the school in terms of the community's measure of its effectiveness.

Organised parent groups also advocate greater participation as a means to achieve their perceived rights and responsibilities. "There are two basic rights which parents want. They are the right to be informed and the right to participate and have influence in the decision making that goes on in schools" (Harrison , 1991)

PICTURES OF PARTICIPATION

Traditional ways of involving parents - "assisting, suggesting, implementing and following pre-existing policies and directives which have been put into place by others" (Johnson 1993) are seen to provide few opportunities either to fulfil parents' wants or to realise political or educational goals.

The most effective way of encouraging participation is seen to be through establishing partnerships between parents and schools where parents are viewed as equal partners in a relationship based upon reciprocity. Educators argue that schools must move beyond involvement and give due recognition to the role parents play as co-educators of their children (Cairney & Munsie 1992, Potter 1989). Politicians would appear to support this argument through legislation and documentation - "to ensure a supportive learning environment for students, schools must enter into a positive and co-operative partnership with parents ... so that the school's program takes account of the nature of the community and the expectations of the parents". (The Primary Purpose 1988, page 28)

However, despite this organised advocacy and official legislation and policy, for parents and teachers in different

schools few opportunities have existed to create partnerships or for parents to participate in their children's education.

Ultimately, the reality of parent participation is that true opportunities for parents to play a "direct and effective role in the decision making processes which affect their children" (Johnson 1993) arise not as a consequence of rhetoric or even as an outcome of legislation or school policy, but as a consequence of individual teachers' beliefs about their role and the role of parents.

The pictures some parents paint of their roles and responsibilities in primary schools indicate a reality that is cruelly removed from the rhetoric:

HEATHER

Heather is a parent of three children. She and her family moved from the country to a rural city to give her children better opportunities. She describes her experiences at the previous school:

My kids were at a school where it was very much the thing that the teachers were the important ones and the parents were only allowed to go in to do the canteen and the gardening and the things the teachers didn't want to have anything to do with. You always had that thing - 'I'm a teacher'. I never had anything to do with the school except when the parents had to be there.

Opportunities for parental partnerships do not exist at this school. Parental involvement is restricted by a demarcation of roles and responsibilities based on assumed status which effectively isolates each of the members of the educational triad - parents, teacher and child. "A weakness in any one of these strands decreases the efficiency of the others while inhibiting the development of the child." (Fitzgerald and Pettit 1978, p.8)

This demarcation becomes self-defeating, serving to isolate teachers from their community and in doing so, denying them the respect they attempted to claim by depriving parents of their own status within the community:

I didn't respect those teachers because those teachers were saying that their job was to teach and we can't go in

because we're only mere parents.

TERRIE

Terrie also has three children but unlike Heather, Terrie saw better opportunities for her family in a smaller country town and moved there from the State capital. Like many parents in early primary classrooms, Terrie works, from the teacher's direction, with small groups of children for reading

They tell me what they want of me and I just go and do it. We just have a group and the kids have their book and we each take turns in reading a page and I pick up what words they've missed.

Although there is a stronger linkage between the elements in the education triangle in this school and teachers appear to value parents' help, Terrie's involvement is still removed from the rhetoric of participation. There is little opportunity for her to participate in decision making or to accept any real responsibility in the school.

The demarcation may be less conspicuous than in Heather's experience but its covert nature makes it no less effective. Here the demarcation is on the basis of knowledge rather than status. The potential role of the parent is limited by the epistemological beliefs and pedagogical practices of the teacher. Control of the child's learning experiences rests solely with the teacher - the parent acts as an intermediary in the situation. Terrie's perception of her role indicates, not an acknowledgement of her own power but a replication of the teacher's:

...in charge. Keeping them in line. Making sure they're set to task and that's the task they're to do.

Other reports of attempts to involve parents in schools reinforce the gap between the rhetoric of participation and the reality of the classroom. Potter (1989) reports that "often where there are parent involvement programs in the classroom, they are shallow, ineffectual, confusing, and frustrating to both parents and teachers". Dillon (1989) argues that the rhetoric of 'collaboration' is one-way. Instead of educators collaborating with parents as equal partners, they are trying to educate or train parents, trying to enlist them in the educators' enterprise. Cairney and Munsie (1992) have found that 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 teachers can do for families. This view is often evidenced by parents filling

a variety of unpaid teacher aide or custodial roles." The experiences of both Heather and Terrie well illustrate this viewpoint.

DELEGATION AND PARTICIPATION

Heath and McLaughlin (1987) argue that the rhetoric of parent participation and collaborative partnership is unlikely to be realised because it is built on "unreviewed and outdated assumptions about the role of families and the role of schools" - a product, Seeley (1989) argues, of a long established reliance on the delegation model in public education. Under this model schools have adopted the role of the societally delegated custodians of children's education and to the family is delegated the responsibility for the physical nurturance of the child. The model has become institutionalised in the roles, relationships and mind-sets not only of school staffs but of parents, students and citizens (Seeley 1989).

Much of the thinking and practice in the field of home/school relations is characterised by a number of unchallenged assumptions about professional knowledge and authority (Atkin, Bastiani, & Goode 1988).

At the heart of the delegation model is an assumption of teacher expertise derived from theoretical knowledge.

In Terrie's picture the teacher's expertise derives from her 'technical' knowledge of the skills of literacy and her acquired pedagogical strategies.

For the teachers in Heather's picture this assumed expertise became the basis for their status in the community: "...the teachers were the important ones". Inherent in these assumptions of teacher expertise is a complementary assumption of parental deficit: "...we're only mere parents".

HIERARCHIES OF PARTICIPATION

Together the assumptions of expertise and deficit establish a hierarchical relationship between school and home. Within this hierarchy, authority derives from assumed teacher expertise and generates status and consequent power. The pictures of

participation painted by Heather and Terrie support other research which indicates that even where parents and teachers have become involved, the relationships have remained tokenistic and hierarchical (Newport 1992) and there has been little disturbance to existing power structures (Allen 1990, Johnson 1981). .

The maintenance of this home/school hierarchy with its delegated power base is, in part, a consequence of a political reticence to match rhetoric with opportunities or structures which facilitate its realisation. MacLeod (1989) argues that "governments have tended to see home/school matters in terms of policy and legislation rather than ... the development of good practice.

As well, the hierarchy is perpetuated by school initiated strategies designed to provide opportunities for parent

participation reflecting ideas from typologies (Epstein 1989, Dwyer 1988) and from models (Baskwill 1989, Rasinski and Fredericks 1989, Pettit 1980, Wood 1974 in Potter 1989) which are themselves essentially hierarchical and which define parent participation solely from the perspective of the school. Criteria of appropriate parental beliefs, attitudes and behaviours are created. The part each parent can play in the school is determined by their ability to display the 'competencies' that the school demands:

There's a box into which the parents who come fit - they're nice, they're clean, they speak nicely and they're reasonably well educated ... and their culture basically matches the culture of the school.
Leonie, classroom teacher

DIFFERENT PICTURES: BRINGING REALITY TO RHETORIC

Although the pictures of participation painted by Heather and Terrie indicate that in many schools there is little marrying of the rhetoric of politicians, educators or parents with the reality of the classroom, other pictures of participation more closely link rhetoric with reality - parents and teachers do work positively and co-operatively together as co-educators, the context of the community is an important factor in the planning of the classroom and there is a mutual acknowledgement of the contribution of the home and the school in the child's learning.

In these classrooms the culture is one of enterprise rather than dependence (Cutting 1990). They are classrooms that are social sites (Giroux 1984) where knowledge is socially constructed and reconstructed by individuals and groups for their particular time, place and culture (Cornbleth 1990) through the negotiation of meaning in environments created to provide opportunities for individual development (Bruner 1983, Vygotsky 1978). Here teachers' perceptions of their roles are defined by their own beliefs about learners:

A primary school is about attitudes and people, not about facts.

You're teaching kids how to want to learn. Leonie,
teacher

These are classrooms where "the learners themselves are the focus, where the focus is on learning - where parents and teachers work together to help their children's learning" (Cutting 1990). In these classrooms the parents' role is critical - expectations of enterprise demand parents' collaboration in their children's learning.

ANNETTE

For Annette, a teacher at a suburban Catholic primary school, having parents in the classroom is essential. While Annette maintains overall responsibility for the management of the class she respects parental enterprise and recognises that such enterprise would be lost by the imposition of her own

pedagogical knowledge and strategies.

They've got experiences with children and sometimes I think "Gosh that's a great idea. Parents give you so many ideas too but if I'm just enforcing all the time - "Well this is how I do it" - I'm going to miss out on all that.

While Annette describes herself as a "co-worker" with the parents in the classroom, there remains a demarcation of their roles. In this classroom, however, demarcation is on the basis not of expertise and deficit, but of accountability and opportunity:

I walk through the door and my role is a teacher whereas their role

is as a facilitator or as an educator. They don't take the role as teacher. They're facilitators because they don't have the worries of management, time, control, programming ...

For Annette the accountability structures of the school force her to functionally separate roles that are essentially mutually supportive. Her 'need' for parents is her resolution of this pedagogical conflict.

LEONIE

Leonie is a teacher at the government primary school in a large country town. Like Annette, she 'needs' parents - but Leonie's need is different. For Leonie, the context of the school is the vehicle through which she enacts her role and it is the family which contextualises her role:

I've always seen the family as being my employer ...
they're the people
I'm accountable to - the child and the child's family.
Knowing the family
is an essential component of being able to educate the
child.

Educating the child is, for Leonie, encompassed in the belief that "the raising of children is a societal issue, one in which ... all have responsibilities "(Freedman 1987, page 81). Leonie's role can only be achieved through sharing those responsibilities with the parent.

Education is not a job I can do by myself. I need them. I can run a classroom...that's not the problem. It's their parenting I want because there's not enough of me to go around. I want them to come in and care for kids ...in ways that I maybe don't because I'm a different person from them because I have different values from them, as they do from each other.

ACKNOWLEDGING PARENTS' KNOWLEDGE

Annette and Leonie are two teachers who, for different reasons, see parents as essential in their classrooms - not as

helpers, but as collaborators, consultants and co-educators. While Annette's need for parents derives from pedagogical necessity and Leonie's need derives from her beliefs about her

role, both acknowledge that parents have knowledge that they must have if they are to successfully address the needs of the children in their class.

...the way they plan things or the way they explain things or how they interact - it is great. I think "I hadn't really thought of attacking itthat way"...It's what they bring in. I think a lot of it's knowledge of their own children...They've got so much experience.

Annette

... they perceive a need. Sometimes it is facts - 'neighbourhood knowledge'. But often times it's not. More often it's 'gut' knowledge - it's a kid they don't know at all , they just pick up that there's 'need vibes' coming fromthat kid.

Leonie

In other contexts educators have, like Annette and Leonie, acknowledged the worth of parents' knowledge. Edwards and Redfern (1988) found that parents offer a considerable pool of expertise across the curriculum ... They can also offer a perspective on the child which is beyond the reach of teachers (page 163). Bastiani (1987) argues that parents have important knowledge and experience, which are crucially important to a child. Their experience is both dynamic and continuous. Parents are an essential resource and also have unique opportunities as educators - a powerful combination (Atkin et al 1988, page 13).

For Annette and Leonie there is no conflict between the teacher's knowledge and the parent's knowledge - rather they perceive parent knowledge as supplementing teacher knowledge. Acknowledging, and needing, parents' knowledge implies for these teachers a recognition that their own knowledge is not all that is needed to meet the needs of the children in their class.

... I certainly don't have all the answers and I will grab anybody whosebrain can help me ... Parents give me the ability to cope

Leonie

In the delegation model, teachers' status and consequent power derives from their expertise. They have been 'trained' to know content and to know theories - of pedagogy, of psychology, sociology, and philosophy. But where learning, rather than being merely the acquisition of a body of unchanging knowledge is perceived as the construction by the learner of meaning from experience (Brown et al 1987), decontextualised content and generic theory are inadequate to address the needs of the

individual child in each unique educational context.

Schwab (1969) argues that "such theories are not ... adequate by themselves to tell us what to do with human beings or how to do it. Theory must be ... massively supplemented, as well as mediated, by knowledge of some other kind derived from another source" (page 14). Listening to parents ... provides access to knowledge and understanding that cannot be gained in any other way and which is of immense practical value (Atkin et al,

1988). The interaction between ideas and action, which generates an interplay between theory and practice is essential to the teaching and learning process (Brown et al 1987).

TEACHERS' AND PARENTS' WAYS OF KNOWING

This does not invalidate theory as a foundation for the practices of the classroom. Rather it recognises that theoretical knowledge is only one form of knowledge. But where knowledge is constructed rather than consumed, where content is mediated by experience, and where learning is the negotiation of meaning, contextually relevant supplementation of the theoretic is essential. Negotiation, to be more than tokenistic demands a mutual awareness of context. It is parents who can provide the knowledge of the context of the child "neighbourhood knowledge" - the contextually specific supplement to the technical, generic, theoretical knowledge of the teacher.

Negotiation of meaning depends upon language. Parents' communicative knowledge supports classroom negotiation of meaning and understanding by providing access to the child's context of situation within the home's context of culture (Hasan 1985) and the text the child creates as its way of creating meaning within this situation in this context.

Annette acknowledges parents' communicative knowledge when she identifies the opportunities they provide for children's individual construction of meaning through language because of their multiple language perspectives:

They interpret things differently to me ... when you've got lots of adults you've got lots of stories and lots of skills ... lots of different language resources instead of just the one.

Parents also recognise the value of their communicative knowledge. Debbie, a parent from Annette's class, by

accessing children's language codes provides a link between one aspect of the child's home and school cultures:

Just the adult listening is really valuable ... a parent can often get more from the child ... I think it's which way teachers look at it really - whether it's academically. I don't know whether they're into the slang that kids use ... whether they're all up to date with that.

But parents know more. There is the 'gut knowledge' that Leonie identified - 'critical' knowledge (Habermas 1972 op cit) of children and of learners:

... they can often come up with another way that I hadn't thought about because they don't learn the way I learn but they probably learn the way their kids learn and they can often come up with another idea.

and knowledge of relationships, developed from practical experience as members of the community:

The kids get someone else to trust, someone else to talk to. Another adult that they can relate to, that they see in a trust situation. They get to relate to adults in another kind of context ... Building those sort of relationships is really important.

Recognising parents as a source of important knowledge does not trivialise the special knowledge of the teacher. Nor does it imply that teachers may not also possess these same kinds of factual, communicative and critical knowledge. Rather it validates different sources of knowledge, giving credibility not only to the established theoretical forms of knowledge which have become 'school knowledge' and 'school culture' but also to the 'practical' - the forms of knowledge which derive from experiences of the specific and which temper the theory so to identify the disparities between real and theoretic, to modify theory in its application and to devise ways of taking account of the many aspects of the real thing which the theory does not take into account (Schwab 1969, page 12).

By acknowledging parents' knowledge the potential arises to unify children's contexts - to provide mutual access for homes and schools to each other's culture. The opportunity is provided to access more, and possibly different, knowledge - to tap into a greater resource pool:

Without parents we can do a certain amount, we can do a great job, but with them we can do an even better job. That's why we need them. They can give as much to these kids as we can.
Mandy, School Principal

Acknowledging parents' knowledge necessitates a shift in the balance of power in the classroom. In the delegation model, power and respect derives from teacher expertise - a function of theoretical knowledge. In classrooms where parents' practical knowledge is valued as an essential supplement to the theoretic, power derives from mutual respect of each other's expertise and from mutual recognition of the opportunities each offers for the child's construction of meaning. Parents who see they are valued, are needed, have a new voice in the school and in the lives of their children:

For parents, it's their self-esteem. In the school they're valued - those people have been ignored so often ... Now school is friendly, school is not the enemy.
It's valuable. It can be a good thing.

Leonie

PROGRAMS FOR SUCCESSFUL PARTICIPATION

The experiences of Annette and Leonie remain special and isolated instances of collaboration between parents and teachers. They are not typical even of other classes within their own schools. The collaboration between each teacher and the parents she sees as co-workers depends on her individual initiative prompted by her own beliefs about teaching and learning.

However, there are more deliberated, structured and broad-based programs which have moved towards realising parents' perceived

rights and addressing educational and political rhetoric - Cairney and Munsie's "Talk To A Literacy Learner" (TTALL) Program (1992), Cornell University's Cooperative Communication between Home and School Program (Cochran and Dean 1991), Comer's School Development Model (1988), Levin's Accelerated Schools Model (1987)

These successful programs have all been empowering, collaborative and responsive to context, characterised by "equal, mutually supportive partnerships where parents can be seen, valued, respected and held as responsible as school staff for the educational success of all children" (Williams and

Chavkin 1989) - the same characteristics that were evidenced in the self-initiated programs of Annette and Leonie and which have as their cardinal nexus the acknowledgement of parents' knowledge as an essential supplement to teachers' knowledge in enabling children's construction of meaning.

COLLABORATION AND RESEARCH

The pictures of participation first presented by Heather and Terrie indicate, however, that individual initiative, either from a teacher or a specific program, offers little opportunity for movement away from the hierarchical involvement or participation structures of the delegation model.

There is a need for a model for parent and teacher collaboration which acts on the principles of mutual support and respect, which acknowledges and values all ways of knowing and which enables the child, as its focus, to construct meaning from content through experience.

Such a model must provide a structure for specific interactions at the micro-context - the individual classroom and the specific program, and also at the macro-context - an ideological foundation for collaboration which validates supplementation and negates delegation.

A model that has, as its structural foundation, a picture of parents and teachers as collaborative classroom researchers provides the opportunity for the practical to supplement the theoretic and for the child to be the focus of the research. If the model is to accommodate the dialectical relationship between theory and practice and the specific needs of the concrete case, then its ideological framework must be guided by both the theoretic and the practical and it must focus on the specific rather than the generic. The catalyst for the research must arise as a consequence of its context of situation (Hasan 1985) and its direction must be controlled by contextualised need.

Research as collaboration (Harste 1993) provides a dynamic and mutually empowering perspective for the model, but there is still a need for a "participative structure" (Brown et al 1987) which will provide a mechanism to interpret "action and reaction at the level of the concrete case" (Schwab 1969).

Such a structure must enable some definition of the direction of the research while at the same time accommodating the essential dimensions of collaboration. Inquiry into the specific must be the focus of the structure and it must provide

a record of change, both in practice and in the researcher's individual construction of theory.

Using an action research framework as a "participative structure" for collaboration, provides the mechanism for interpreting action and reaction through reflection. As well, because action research is defined by its context, it inherently addresses the concrete case.

For parents as researchers, a collaborative action research model not only acknowledges their knowledge, it acknowledges also their inherent research skills and balances these with the skills of the teacher. Parents observational skills have been widely recognised. Newson and Newson (1976) argued that the pattern of "observation - diagnosis - intervention" is already a feature of the curriculum of the home.

Each of the 'moments' of the action research process reinforces the dynamic relationship between the collaborative researchers. At each moment the initiative may change but throughout the cycle mutual need creates a balance of authority.

RECONSTRUCTIVE

CONSTRUCTIVE

DISCOURSE

4 REFLECT

1 PLAN

among participants

PRACTICE

3 OBSERVE

2 ACT

in the social context

(Carr and Kemmis 1990, page 186)

A collaborative action research model necessitates new roles for both parents and teachers - as observers, as critical reflectors, as developers of theory and as implementors of practices. This model presents also new opportunities for each researcher to undertake each role, and from this new understandings of the rights and responsibilities of the role.

IMPLEMENTING THE MODEL

There is a need for an implementation of the model in a way that addresses the micro-context - the specific concrete case, from the perspective of the macro-context - the ideological framework which encompasses contextualised meaning and acknowledgement of multiple 'ways of knowing'. In this way the model can be evaluated for its potential at the specific and the generic. This implementation ideally needs an initiating "project" which will serve as a vehicle for the first "action step in the self-reflective framework of the first spiral ... embodying particular practices of collaborative self-reflection, employing particular understandings of the process of self-reflection ... and establishing a particular form of social situation for the purposes of self-reflection" (Carr and Kemmis 1990, page 185).

THE ORAL LANGUAGE FOR LITERACY AND LEARNING PROJECT

As part of a national effort to address the educational needs of disadvantaged children, funding was obtained for a project which was to provide the opportunity to develop and implement a model for parent / teacher collaboration where parents and teachers could become co-researchers.

The conditions of funding outlined that the project must involve the school community and must address the language and literacy development of young children in the early primary years (Kindergarten - Year 3). This funding supported the Oral Language for Literacy and Learning Project (OLLL). However, the very nature of the funding produced disadvantages as well as advantages in the development of the project. While Williams and Chavkin (1989) identified parent and teacher 'ownership' as an essential factor in successful collaborative programs, here ownership of the project ultimately lay with the funding body. This not only had implications for participants' expected loyalty to the project, but for their authority and status within the project.

The successful programs identified by Williams and Chavkin and the mutually supportive partnerships that occur in classrooms like those of Annette and Leonie develop within a micro-context where situationally specific need is the catalyst for collaboration. In these situations authority and status derive from joint 'ownership' and loyalty derives from need. The OLLL Project necessitated that a pervading macro-context be created where ownership of the project by the funding body validated the imposition of generic needs. Participants' loyalty to the project would depend on their ability to perceive their specific within the project's generic. Authority

and status for the participants would depend on their recontextualisation of their classroom roles within the macro-context of the project.

Williams and Chavkin also identified as an essential element of successful collaborative programs "evaluation that enabled ongoing analysis and redirection" (page 18). This is the evaluation which is the essence of action research where planning and action, based upon observation and reflection are moments in a dynamic, evolving spiral which has as its focus the individual learner whose needs were its initial stimulus.

Within the OLLL Project, however, the nature of the project's ownership necessitated that evaluation be in terms of accountability to the funding body. The proposed product outcome of this seeding project was the publication and distribution of a package of workshop modules for presentation to groups of parents and teachers. This 'short-term' product orientation is ideologically divorced from the 'long-term' evolutionary process orientation of action research - a potentially inherent incompatibility between the micro-context of the participants and the macro-context of the project. There is an innate difference between the terminal 'expense - effect' accountability at the macro-context and the continual contributory evaluation at the micro-context which reflects the difference between evolving and "arrested" action research in which the initial cycle does not develop into a participatory and collaborative process of deepening

reflection, more controlled and critical practice, and the establishment of more educationally defensible situations and institutions (Carr and Kemmis 1986, page 185).

And so, while funding provided opportunities it also provided an operational framework which was not always consistent with the ideological foundation for collaborative research.

THE PARTICIPANTS IN THE PROJECT

The OLLL Project brought together parents and teachers from fifteen different schools from different education systems - nine Catholic Diocesan schools and six State schools. For many teachers and parents, participation in the project became their first opportunity to discover similarities and differences between systems and schools. The seventy-eight participants were never identified by role (parent or teacher) or by system or school. Within the project, they knew each other by first name only.

The schools that were represented were invited to participate on the basis of their history of parental involvement, but individual teacher and parent participation was not always their autonomous decision, at times evidence of the hierarchical decision making structure and selective involvement of the delegation model.

Despite this, many teachers and parents did become involved in the project for altruistic or personal reasons. Parents most frequent reason for joining was to help other children; others joined for themselves and their own children. Teachers most frequently cited their own professional development as their reason for joining; others specifically joined to assist with tertiary studies; others from an inherent interest in the area of oral language.

THE AIMS OF THE PROJECT

The development of the Oral Language for Literacy and Learning Project emanated from three primary concerns:

- * to foster collaborative co-learning between parents and teachers
- * to facilitate action research within the classroom
- * to develop effective practices to support oral language development

Project Aims, 1992

While the first two remain critical and inherent elements of the collaborative research model, the third provides the vehicle for the model's implementation.

This focus on children's development and use of oral language is a particularly appropriate vehicle through which to implement the model. Like action research, oral language demands collaboration - through joint construction of meaning and contextual specificity - because it is 'of the moment',

functionally created within the immediate social context.

This focus is on an area of knowledge that is universal. It is 'owned' neither by the home nor by the school but is recognised by both for its critical role in education as the essential tool that enables the child to make meaning and to

learn in every social context.

The parent has the potential to bring to the new triadic relationship, within the context of the school, specific knowledge of the 'concrete case' - of the child's unique experience of language learning; of the strategies that have been effective in the child's language development; of the language functions demanded by the child's social contexts. By acknowledging and accessing parents' specific knowledge of the child as a supplement to her own generic theoretic knowledge, the teacher has the greatest opportunity to accommodate the needs of the child as a learner and as a language user within the new social context of the school.

The teacher's knowledge may also be seen to serve as a supplement to the parent's by providing opportunities for the child to use different registers of language to make meaning in the new social context of the school where talk-oriented rather than action-oriented registers more frequently occur (Halliday 1985).

This mutual dependency of home and school in the development of both oral and written language well serves the interdependent foci of the OLLL Project. Where both home and school 'own', and are responsible for, the child's language development there must be mutual acknowledgement of each other's knowledge and role in this development.

Because each child's context is unique and language development dynamic there is an inherent need for parents and teachers to perceive themselves as co-learners and co-researchers. The collaborative action research model provides the opportunity to address this need.

STRUCTURING THE PROJECT

There was a need to develop a structure for the project which could accommodate the ideological inconsistencies of the funding body's framework for accountability and the diverse nature of the participants, while at the same time establishing a way in which the aims of the project could be achieved.

The structure needed also to accommodate the new roles for parents and teachers inherent in the collaborative action research model - as observers, as critical reflectors, as developers of theory, and as implementors of practices - as well as providing equal opportunities for each researcher to undertake each role, so that each may develop new

understandings of the rights and responsibilities of all roles.

The model developed by Jaggar (1985 in Jaggar & Smith-Burke 1985) has, as its heart, observation:

KNOWLEDGE_____	Watch-listen _____	TEACHING
of children and	OBSERVATION	Create learning environments
language_____	Reflect	Interact with children

By using this model to provide a structure for the project, parents' innate research ability - their established "mechanism of investigation" - is identified and exploited. A position of authority is established for parents which is derived from their experientially acquired knowledge.

Using the Jaggar model as a structural framework it was possible to attempt to address both the macro-contextual demands of the funding body and the micro-contextual needs of the participants.

At the macro-level the model was used as a temporal framework for the development of the 'package'. Each of the five workshop days was contextualised within the moments of the model. The focus on observation immediately orientated the project within an action research framework. During Days 1 and 2, the emphasis on the links between observation and knowledge from the Jaggar model, embraces the reconstructive moments of the action research model (Carr and Kemmis 1990) where observation of practice and discursive reflection enables retrospective understanding to guide the prospective action which becomes the emphasis of Days 3 and 4. Here the Jaggar model links observation (influenced by reflective knowledge) with contextualised practice through the action research model's constructive moments where planning and action occur.

Within each workshop day, each of the three sessions followed a project-initiated structure, TAP - Theory Activity Practice, which defined an organisational framework for each component within the 'package'. This structure was an attempt to encourage participants to bring together theory and practice through their own action and reflection. In this way each participant has equal access to the roles of theoretician, practitioner and critical reflector and all knowledge, derived from the theoretic or the practical, has equal validation.

Collaborative groups were created to provide an environment which would optimise opportunities for co-learning through

collaborative construction of knowledge. As well, this form of social organisation has an empowering potential. "When we build co-operative partnerships and share the journey with others, we become part of a supportive team where ownership and responsibility are shared and we are all empowered" (Dalton 1988).

Within the project, the collaborative groups were structured so that participants interacted with different parents, teachers and schools. In addition to these intra-sessional groups, collaboratively structured reflective groups came together at the end of each day to share new learning with different participants - often through a specific reflective task.

At the micro level the Jaggar model enabled parents and teachers to become involved in action research in the classroom, where the model became an holistic framework through which to focus on individual children who had

previously been identified as having 'problems' with oral language. Participants were encouraged to make individual 'journeys' through the model while as a group focusing on moments within the model.

To facilitate the recontextualisation of learning between the macro- and micro-contexts, structures were incorporated which enabled participants not only to develop specific skills of action research, but also to continue their development in the roles of theoretician, practitioner and critical reflector.

A series of fieldwork tasks were developed which attempted to directly translate the workshop focus into the classroom through participants' own research. While these tasks maintained the project's focus on moments within the Jaggar model, at the same time they provided a catalyst for participants' individual and continuing journeys through the action research spiral.

A series of readings were included in the 'package' to encourage participants to develop a wider perspective of 'knowing'; to provide a framework - key ideas, concepts and generalisations - to use as a guide in observing, interpreting and assessing children's language. Because many participants had limited experience or confidence with 'academic writing' these readings were recorded. For those participants who travelled together to the project's venue, their journey became an interactive learning experience as they listened to, critiqued and utilised other people's theories in their

movement towards their own theorising from experience.

The third structure that was developed to recontextualise the macro-context within the micro-context, was a Learning Log that was purposefully designed to provide each participant with a personal reflective vehicle. This log was envisaged as an instrument that intentionally focused participants' reflection upon their own development in their role as observers, as critical reflectors, as developers of theory, and as implementors of practices within their experience as collaborative action researchers.

Essentially the three structures - fieldwork tasks, readings, learning logs - were interdependent and mutually supportive of the project's aims. They provided a vehicle for the translation from the macro-context of the project to the micro-context of the classroom, of the collaborative co-learning between parents and teachers, the initiation of action research within the classroom and the effort to develop effective practices to support oral language development that were effected through the project framework.

NEW ROLES FOR PARENTS AND TEACHERS

With the Jaggar (1985) model as a framework and the structures of the project - fieldwork tasks, readings, learning log - as a vehicle, participants were expected to adopt roles as classroom researchers, theoreticians and practitioners in both macro- and micro-contexts and to reflect upon their learning in these roles.

During each workshop day, participant observation and 'chat'

were able to provide some evaluative function for the project but the number of participants inhibited the degree to which they could serve a truly determining function. As well, access to participants in their school micro-contexts was restricted by time and geography.

To find out more about the group, to help participants reflect upon their own learning and their newly developing roles, and to enable them to indicate their perceived needs for future planning of the project a reflective questionnaire was constructed which would serve also as a measure of accountability to the funding body.

The design of the questionnaire was important. It needed to be 'user friendly' and it had to maintain the equal status which

the project had attempted to establish between participants. It had also to accommodate a variety of literacy competencies. From observation during the workshops it had become apparent that not all participants were confident with more complex written language.

The questionnaire indicated that both parents and teachers perceived the project to be of value for them, and both groups, in varying degrees and in different ways, saw themselves developing in the different roles of collaborative action research.

More teachers than parents felt unable to adopt a role developing theory and were prepared to delegate to 'experts'. These teachers, although (or because) they had been trained in other people's theories, saw their role solely as practitioners. This entrenched dichotomisation of roles remained despite operating within the project's framework which attempted to create overt links between theory and practice through observation. Generally, it was the parents, with no prior definition of roles, who were most prepared to accommodate the expectations of the roles within the project. For most parents it seemed opportunity, rather than definitions or expectations of roles would limit their development as action researchers.

Participants overt identification of their needs as researchers indicated that the aims of the project were being realised. But it was essential, if this was to continue, that participants saw that the project itself was guided by the principles of action research, rather than merely advocating them - that their needs guided the direction of the project just as the child's needs guided the direction of their own research. It was essential for the credibility of the project that the macro-context be responsive to the micro-context.

This was achieved by structuring the final two workshop days to address needs overtly identified in the evaluation instrument - sharing research, opportunities for critical reflection, an extended time frame - and covertly identified through participant observation - cultural assumptions of children's language use. These workshop days more closely addressed participants' own development as researchers by focussing on the implications of their research for their beliefs and practices.

At the end of the project evaluation needed to consider the

impact of the project on the participants - the influence of

the macro-contextual model on the development of the individual within the micro-context, but it needed also to consider the structures of the package - to look within the macro-context.

The same conditions that determined the structure of the first evaluative instrument shaped the structure of the second - large numbers of participants with very different levels of literacy confidence, access to their micro-context prohibited by time and distance, a delicately balanced equity between parents and teachers.

But the limitations of the first instrument were compounded by a danger that a 'terminal' evaluative instrument may encourage participants to perceive their research only as a macro-contextual performance indicator of the effectiveness of the project and to have a diminished perception of the integral evolutionary role of evaluation for their own micro-contextual research needs. There was a danger that a terminal 'expense-effect' instrument would encourage participants to perceive action research as "arrested" and finite rather than as the evolving spiral that had been fostered within the project.

A reflective questionnaire was developed to accommodate the structures of the project. Like the previous questionnaire, it differentiated between participants on only one dimension, but unlike that instrument, it employed a semantic differential scale to categorise the evaluative dimensions (Wadsworth 1991). This was designed to accommodate the diverse literacy competencies of the group but opportunities were also provided for participants' comments on each dimension. While the use of this scale enabled some quantification of participants' responses, it was their reflections that were most insightful in evaluating their development as collaborative learners and action researchers.

The evaluations and more specifically the comments - both written and 'chat' - indicated that the impact of the project had reached beyond the immediate and intended focus and this had implications for addressing different needs in different contexts.

More positive self image, for both parents and teachers, may be attributable in part to their developing perception of themselves as competent learners who have succeeded in their new roles as action researchers:

As a school drop-out I have found it rewarding to myself,
that I can dosomething to help myself and especially
to help others. Before cominghere I would never have spoken

out to others. I always kept to myself. I felt I was not up to the standard of others. Heather, a parent

As well the collaboration and respect that was nurtured, within the project between parents and teachers, helped establish equity and mutual acknowledgement of knowledge and purpose:

I did not once feel that I, as a parent, was inadequate in a room halffull of teachers. Terrie, a parent

The interaction between parents and teachers was an

important andworthwhile element. The friendship that has developed with parents hasbeen great. The collaborative group process has been enriching.

Margaret, a teacher

Evaluation solely within the macro-context was limiting. There was a need to move beyond this environment to see the real impact of the project and the effectiveness of the collaborative action research model. Each participant's construction of meaning from the project developed as a function of their own experience in their own social context and the relationships that developed only did so as a consequence of the opportunities presented within each micro-context. Although the evaluative mechanisms of the project were able to focus on its structures and their response to individual needs, they remained isolated from these micro-contexts and were not able to generate pictures of individual participants or of the different relationships that had developed in response to different contextualised needs.

PICTURES OF CHANGE

The pictures of participation first painted by Heather and Terrie showed that in some schools the gap between the rhetoric and the reality of participation was wide and seemingly unbridgeable. At the same time those painted by Annette and Leonie showed that there were classrooms where reality approximated rhetoric. These were classrooms where the knowledge of parents was acknowledged and respected and seen to be an essential supplement to teachers' knowledge in enabling children's construction of meaning.

The collaborative action research model, embodied through the OLLL Project, attempted to create, in other classrooms and optimally throughout other schools, pictures of participation where there was the same potential for mutual empowerment, the

same need for collaboration and the same responsiveness to context that was part of the classrooms of Annette and Leonie.

THE POTENTIAL OF THE MODEL

Pictures of change emerged. But change permeated all pictures and even though each picture showed a different reality, each now came closer to realising the rhetoric of participation countenanced by educators, politicians and parents.

There is a need to consider how the potential of the model to create and support relationships which are collaborative, empowering and responsive to context is able to be realised. Looking at the effect of the model on each element of the educational triangle in the pictures of change can give insight into the realisation of this potential.

These pictures show that the model does have an empowering potential that is realisable not only for parents like Heather who developed an image of her own and teachers' worth:

I look at things differently from how I looked at them before.

I used to think
teachers were people who got a lot of money and really didn't

do a great deal.

Now I still think they're getting paid a lot of money and they still get a lot of holidays but they work damned hard as well. It's not just a matter of teaching, there's all the little things that come into it as well. I have a different type of respect for teachers.

but also for teachers like Margaret who developed professional autonomy in allowing her classroom practice to reflect her beliefs about learning:

I've reassessed my ideas of appropriate classroom behaviour.
You just can't
treat all children like puppets...because they all have
different needs

This empowering potential reached the children as well - the children in Margaret's class who now use talk to create and negotiate their own meaning from their experience; the children at home whose parents listen more to what they have to say and value more what they hear; and the children who now feel that school is for them because their parents have overcome their

own, long-nurtured fears.

These pictures of change show also that the model has the potential to foster collaboration, not only in relationships like those between Debbie and Annette and between Andy and Leonie where parents already played a needed and valued role; but also in relationships where opportunities for parents had been limited by the school, so that parents like Heather saw no participatory role for themselves or in relationships where the teacher's practices limited the role parents like Terrie could play.

Each picture shows that action research as the "participative structure" (Brown et al 1987) of the model enables it to respond to its context of situation (Hasan 1985, in Halliday & Hasan 1985) and to be directed by contextualised need "at the level of the concrete case" (Schwab 1969). This was seen at an individual level, when parents and teachers acted upon their observations and collaborative reflections to implement specific programs which successfully addressed the language needs of their individual focus children. It was also seen, at the level of the classroom, when Annette, reflecting upon her own practice, developed a new method of evaluation based upon observation, which better addressed the needs of her class. It was again seen, at the school level and then beyond, when Mandy and Margaret initiated their own project to address the observed needs of many of the children in the beginning classes at their school.

These pictures of change reveal how the model has the potential to empower, to foster collaboration and to respond to needs. The collaborative action research model provides a framework and a participative structure for specific interactions at the micro-context - "the level of the concrete case", and at the macro-context - an ideological foundation for collaboration which validates supplementation and negates delegation. The pictures of change reveal that the potential of the model is greatest where beliefs and practices already reflect, to some

degree, the foundational ideology. In the classrooms and schools where there was the greatest realisation of the model's potential, the pictures were of contexts which had in some way already begun to embrace the principles of mutual support and respect, which acknowledged and valued all ways of knowing and which already had the child as their focus.

Here there was a marrying of micro- and macro- contexts. The macro-contextual ideology had already created a receptive

environment for the micro-contextual structure of the model. The potential of the model was best realised where those involved had already begun, however hesitatingly, the journey from involvement, through participation and towards collaboration.

From one journey into collaborative action research, come opportunities for others also to journey. There are now many who can become 'critical friends' - parents who can reach other parents, teachers who can reach other teachers, but most importantly parents and teachers who as partners can together reach other potential partners and ultimately create better schools for children.

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