Models of Parent Professional Partnership in Special Education:

My name is Barbara Perry. I am the Mother of three children aged between 4 and 12, one of whom has a physical disability and is in a wheelchair. I am a primary school teacher and currently lecture at the University of Otago in the B. Tching programme and inclusive education. Prior to this I worked at the Auckland College of Education in the Centre for Special Education and this is my passion – Inclusive Education/Disability studies.

In this paper there will be a particular focus on Special Education because I believe partnership is even more essential in this area due in part to the increased stress families undergo when they have a member with a disability and limited access if that child should have any mobility issues making it more difficult to get in and out of the school. From the perspective of being a parent myself, of a child with special needs, I believe parents have considerable expertise about their own children that is often ignored or goes unrecognised by educational professionals.
What is Partnership?
Partnership can mean different things to different people. The Concise Oxford dictionary defines partnership as "a person who takes part in an undertaking with another or others, especially in a business or a firm with shared risks and profits."

Paget and Chapman (1992, p.267) found partnerships with parents constituted an "ongoing process of problem-solving. Crucial to their definition of partnership as a process are the following elements:

1. Partners learn to communicate and relate effectively
2. The structure and procedures of the programme overtly promotes partnership."

Davis (1993, p. 285) and Dale (1995, p. 149) believed partnership should be characterised by common aims, mutual respect, negotiation and flexibility.

Rosin believes that partnership is similar to friendship but not the same, there is an agreement of purpose and desired outcomes in partnership but this may not occur in friendship. Because partnerships are dynamic, they change over time and therefore at times there may be equal sharing but at other times one partner may contribute more than the other. This depends on the tasks, circumstances and resources.

Sharing of information needs to be bi-directional, with teachers providing parents with relevant, accurate and up to date information so they can make informed decisions and parents in turn offering their knowledge about their children and family situation so that this information base can be used in decision making. As to the time factor in building partnerships, because partnership is a process as opposed to an event the time taken will vary and depend on the characteristics of those involved. Rosin believed that attitude and self-awareness were key factors in the development of partnership. (Rosin, p. 70)
GENERAL EDUCATION:

Over the past twenty years extensive research has been carried out by the John Hopkins University Centre on School, Family and Community Partnerships (Epstein, 2001). The research has emphasised the potential of parental involvement to have a positive or negative impact and the role educators play in the success of school home partnerships. From the research and findings a model of "Overlapping Spheres of Influence" (2001, p.404) was developed in the early 1980s.

(Diag 1 – Spheres of Overlapping Influence)

The model is drawn as a Venn diagram with three overlapping spheres, which includes internal and external structures which can either be pushed together or pulled apart by three main forces:

• background and practices of families
• background and practices of schools and classrooms
• time

These forces create conditions, space and opportunities for an increase or decrease in shared activities of schools, families and communities.

This theory relates to the ecological perspective regarding social organisation in particular the work of Bronfenbrenner(1979) which examines the ecological context of a child and the fact that children's lives are influenced by a number of systems.
Epstein, (2001, p. 43) outlined a framework of six major types of involvement that fall within the areas of overlap in the spheres of influence model. These six types describe how schools can work with families and communities to assist them to become or remain informed and involved in children's education at home and at school (Appendix 1).

Students are located at the centre of the model and partnership activities are designed to engage, guide, energize and motivate students to produce their own success. The assumption is that if children are cared for and encouraged to work hard in the role of student they are more likely to do their best in learning and remain at school.

Of particular interest was the fact that one study where parents were surveyed found that teachers and principals were rated higher in overall teaching ability and interpersonal skills if they frequently used practices of parental involvement (Epstein, 2001, p. 334-345).

Syracuse City School District who implemented Epstein's model stated that Critical factors needed for partnerships to occur are nurturing respect, sharing knowledge, supporting each partner's role, collaborating on matters of importance and appreciating the contribution each partner makes to student achievement.

A national network of partnership schools has developed based on schools using the "partnerships Schools-CSR model"(1995),(Appendix 1). What the network has found is that partnership not only led to an increase in academic achievement in children but that there were positive spin offs in other areas too. (Epstein, Coates, Salinas, Sanders, Simon, 1997, p. 2) The concept of Action Teams has been developed in schools so that nationally over 400 schools can work together collaboratively and support and learn from one another (Sanders, 1999, p. 1)
NEW ZEALAND:

In New Zealand a considerable amount of research particularly in relation to the positive links between achievement levels of children at school and partnership between home and school with particular emphasis on reading has occurred (Glynn, Berryman & Glynn, 2000; Wylie, Thompson, & Lythe, 1999).

With reference to working with children from diverse backgrounds Wylie (1999) concluded that “parental contact with primary schools has decreased over the past decade, for example parent help has decreased in the classroom by 10% in the 1990-1999 period, found when parents were surveyed about Epstein's six models of involvement (Appendix 1).”

Shivnan (1999) considered the level of empowerment for Maori families in an Early Childhood Centre in Waikato for her Masters Thesis and found that several factors contributed to the families' sense of empowerment:

1. staff valuing the whanau concept
2. a trusting relationship with staff
3. a centre climate where families could feel good about who they were
4. respectful and appropriate incorporation of te reo me ona tikanga in the programme
5. the presence of Maori professionals on the staff
6. the involvement of Maori as influential decision-makers at all levels of the centre.

Shivnan defined empowerment as far more complex than merely enabling parents to have a “voice”. It involved an effective and sustaining partnership that was culturally and contextually specific. (p. 104, 1999)
There have been a number of initiatives in New Zealand designed to strengthen family involvement in order to improve children's achievement. These include:

- Parents as First Teachers (Livingstone, 1998)
- Strengthening Education in Mangere and Otara (Timperley, Robinson, & Bullard, 1999)
- Wellington Project (McKinley, 2000)
- The Whaia Te Iti Kahurangi (Strive for the Ultimate) - Strengthening Education (Ministry of Education, 2001)
- The Hei Awhina Matua Project (Glynn, 1997)
- AIMHI Project (Coxon, Anae, Mara, Wendt-Samu & Finau, 2002)

Special Education:

In linking models of parent professional partnership from general education to special education Joyce Epstein noted that "schools that serve children with special needs still have to organize a comprehensive program for all students and their families.... most organizational structures and processes will be the same". (2003, personal correspondence). She did however believe that there was a common challenge for teachers and schools to solve in order to conduct effective meetings with parents. This sits in type 2 (Communication) of Epsteins framework where she noted “the type 2 challenges that apply to parent-teacher conferences and communications also apply to IEPs, in addition to the specific and technical information about students’ special programmes.”
RELIABLE ALLIANCE:

Based on the premise that: “individual and collective empowerment occurs when families and professionals share equally the factors that constitute their resources in order to make joint decisions.” (Turnbull & Turnbull, p. 58)

In order for a reliable alliance to occur among parents and professionals eight factors must be present:

- **Knowing Yourself** - self-knowledge, the more you know yourself, the more you can understand and appreciate the personalities and behaviours of others.

- **Knowing Families** - families are complex and the challenge is to avoid simplistic generalisations about families and appreciate each one in its own uniqueness. An understanding of the family systems approach (Turnbull, Summers & Brotherson, 1984, p. 60) will enable you to develop a comprehensive and relevant appreciation of family life.

- **Honouring Cultural Diversity** - try to “stand in the shoes” of the families with whom you work to the greatest extent possible. Try to enhance your own cultural self-awareness and cultural competence.

- **Affirm and Build on Family Strengths** - many professionals have tended to focus on family deficits rather than their strengths. One of the key aspects of supporting families is to enhance their own self-efficacy.

- **Promote Family Choices** - increase families opportunities to express their choices and have those choices heard and heeded by professionals such as yourself.

- **Affirm Great Expectations** - great expectations are a key element of motivation.

- **Communicate Positively** - the more accurately and constructively you and families communicate thoughts and feelings the more you will create an empowering context. Communication skills can be learned and these include verbal and non-verbal skills as well as influencing skills.

- **Warranting Trust and Respect** - this is the most important component of reliable alliances. When you have trusting and respectful relationships with families you can ensure that collaboration and empowerment will follow. (Turnbull & Turnbull, p. 58)
Oliver & Barnes (1998, p.228) emphasise the need for parents to be placed in a position of empowerment when dealing with professionals and they believe that evidence of disabled involvement in service delivery is increasing.

In particular it appears to be used when working with families of children who have behavioural difficulties (often considered in our New Zealand school system under the banner of special needs) evidenced by Chadwick (2001, p. 80). Vaughan, Dunlap, Fox, Clarke, Bucy, 1997, stated that: “in response to the need for enhanced ecological validity, several authors have advocated for a partnership approach in which professionals collaborate with families and/or support providers to design and implement behavioural support plans” (p. 186).

Hornby (2001, developed a model which illustrates various aspects of collaborating with parents in order to help children experiencing difficulties at school”

The model consists of two pyramids, one representing a hierarchy or parents needs, the other a hierarchy of parents contributions.

Other models of partnership in Special Education with an emphasis on consultative collaboration have also been devised by Hornby (2002, p.3). These include:

- **Protective Model** - with partners protecting their own turf and resenting interference from one another
- **Expert model** - teachers are seen as the experts and maintain control over decisions
- **Transmission** - teachers train parents to help in the education of children
- **Enrichment model** - parents are recognised as having expertise and can use this to help the school
- **Consumer model** - parents are viewed as consumers of educational practices

**Partnership model** - based on mutual respect and support, joint decision-making and effective two-way communication.
In early intervention in America an Individual Family Support Plan (IFSP) "one component of a process that recognises the family as a focal point of the early intervention system" (Rosin, Whitehead, Tuchman, Jesien, Begun & Irwin, 1995, p. 82).

The process is seen as:
- A promise to families
- A way to build trusting relationships
- A vehicle for empowerment
- A mechanism for interagency collaboration
- A record of the ongoing relationship between the family and the early intervention system
- A guide to programme implementation and evaluation

This is not based on a deficit model of working with families but aims to foster partnership and of particular interest is the fact that there is a 45 day time limit for completing the IFSP which ensures that families have access to the services that they need promptly.

**New Zealand:**

Wills, (1993, p. 247) challenged professionals to begin to share the power they had in educational settings with parents:

> It is time to demand that the professionals, who are the gatekeepers to the resources, attend to and act on the voices of parents and of disabled people.

He went on to say with regard to teachers:

> No one should be expected to strive to keep abreast of developments for all children with special needs, but in the disability field the gap between parents knowledge and professional lack of knowledge is real. Parents soon realise that they are the experts on their own child and many through sheer frustration and often necessity, become experts on their own child’s disability. These situations lead to parents becoming education decision makers for their child and then realising that they know more about policy and practice than many of the professionals making decisions that affect many children.
Ballard (1993, p. 306) believed there were two key ways that professionals could support families in disability research:

Those of us who do not have direct experience of disability may have a role as allies in disability research. In this regard, two key issues are empowerment and support.

Brown and Wills (2000, p.8) later went on to write about SE2000 and its impact on schools and partnership with parents. They believed that "most parents, with their children in the 'mainstream' view 'partnership' as the foundation stone of SE2000."

Fraser (2000, p. 113) outlined a number of obstacles to genuine partnership occurring:

- lip service
- school as a hostile environment
- teacher assumes the role as expert
- the student is not respected
- parents are directed as to what to do
- parents are treated as having a disability
- teachers are not valued
- parents are put in an overload situation
- family are not included
- feelings of parents are not understood

She then went on to highlight what she believes are the qualities evident in an effective teacher:

- values people
- regards others as well intentioned
- regards others as a source of satisfaction
- listens well
- sincerity
- honesty
- knowledgeable
Maori Models of Partnership in Special Education:
Bevan-Brown (1993, 2002, 2003) has been a major contributor and noted that power sharing was an important theme which emerged when interviewing Maori about partnership.

Parahi (1997, p.6) noted the “value of story telling with other Maori parents. By sharing stories and speaking out, we not only empower ourselves but each other and create opportunities for effective change.”

Conclusion:
A number of common themes have recurred over the course of this review. The notion of the importance of empowerment for parents, power sharing in order for this to occur, honest and open channels of communication, trusting and respecting one another as well as the importance of listening have all emerged in a variety of contexts and from a number of different points of view. Sadly though, some parents of children with special needs are becoming tired about the notion of parent professional partnership as they do not believe professionals (in this context educators) are open or willing to change.

Strong evidence in both New Zealand and internationally points to the impact of this critical relationship between home and school and increasingly community.

I believe Fraser (2000, p. 29) understands the importance of partnership and its impact when she wrote:

> Teachers who value partnership work to make it happen. They realise that there is nothing to lose and much to gain by sharing and collaborating. They learn to listen carefully and attend courses that enable them to become more effective communicators. They value the input of parents, whanau and other professionals and seek to keep the focus on the students and their needs and strengths.

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References:


Hornby, G. (2003), personal correspondence.


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