CONFERENCE: NZARE/AARE: Conference 2003

DATE: 29 November – 3 December 2003

VENUE: Hyatt Hotel & University of Auckland NZ

Title: Parent Partnerships in Primary School: An Emerging Model

Authors: Janelle Young & Dr Elizabeth Warren

Affiliation: Australian Catholic University
School of Education
McAuley Campus
1100 Nudgee Road
BANYO, Queensland
AUSTRALIA 4014

Contact: Janelle Young
Telephone: (07) 3623 7160 Fax: 3623 7247
email: j.young@mcauley.acu.edu.au

Paper Number: YOU 03459
This study reports the development of parent partnerships in primary schools from the perspective of principals, school administrators, teachers and parents. Data relating to the formation of partnerships in schools were gathered using focus group interviews in two schools that perceived a successful partnership had been forged. Information relating to beliefs, practices and challenges provided the data source from which a model for developing collaborative partnerships in schools emerged. Each school faced particular contextual challenges and results showed distinct, common stages of development for building partnerships. Leadership by the principal was crucial and sharing a vision and beliefs about partnerships with staff and parents fundamental. Each school developed a vision, devised a school plan for the future, used enabling structures and protocols and built relationships through collaborative actions. In the long-term, communities developed a shared vision based on common beliefs and values and a collaborative partnership evolved.

Parent involvement in schools has been shown to have a positive effect on educational learning outcomes for children (Cairney, 2000b; Feuerstein, 2000; Riley, 2002). In recent times educational policies in western nations reflect these findings and schools are being encouraged to develop and maintain collaborative partnerships with parents (Education Queensland, 2000; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000; International Reading Association, 2002). Despite almost universal acceptance of the need for parents and school personnel to develop shared goals and work together, barriers exist, and few schools have developed and maintained successful partnerships (Ashton & Cairney, 2001; Cullingford & Morrison, 1999; Pena, 2000). In addition, not all parents view parental involvement in schools positively and many may not be inclined to comply with the proposed new policies (Lareau & Wesley, 1996).

Parents become involved in schools in many different ways and to different degrees, but the main reason is to improve learning outcomes for their children. Further reasons why parents become involved in schools include ‘improving school programs and school climate, providing family services and support, increasing parent skills and leadership, connecting families with others and helping teachers with their work’ (Epstein, Sanders, Simon, Clark Salinas, Rodriguez Jansorn & Van Vorhis, 2002, p. 7). Despite these goals for involvement, different contributing roles of parents and teachers may challenge the formation of collaborative partnerships (Todd & Higgins, 1998). Pragmatic as well as deeper personal, psychological and contextual issues emerge that may affect the development of successful partnerships. Parents may not know how to contribute to the life of the school and often wait for an invitation from schools before volunteering. They may feel undervalued or perceive they have little to offer, particularly if they have a working class or non-mainstream cultural background, are unemployed or lack educational qualifications (Lareau, 1987; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; National PTA, 2000).

Language and discourses within schools impact on the creation and maintainance of hierarchical power structures within schools (Ashton & Cairney, 2001; Gee, 1996). School personnel have control over educational dialogue and jargon and this disadvantages those who are not similarly informed. ‘Partnership rhetoric’ (Ashton & Cairney, 2001, p. 145) is often used, but teachers’ personal beliefs may be quite different. There is also a persistent discourse that schools need to ‘teach parents’ and parents must act ‘like teachers’ at home when assisting a child with school tasks. These practices have been shown to cause unease for parents (Cairney, 2000a; Edwards & Warin, 1999).

Successful partnerships in schools are characterised by ‘a high commitment to learning, principal support for community involvement, a welcoming school climate and two-way communication’ (Epstein, Sanders, Simon, Clark Salinas, Rodriguez Jansorn & Van Vorhis, 2002, p. 34-35). Gains from parental involvement in schools include improved positive behaviour, emotional development and academic achievement, particularly for students of
low-income families (Greenwood & Hickman, 1991; Henderson, 1987). If schools are to forge successful partnerships with parents there is a need for school administrators and staff to understand the 'nature of change within the system, and the roles and culture of the school' (Rosenthal & Sawyers, 1996, p. 195).

THE STUDY

Catholic schools in Queensland, Australia were invited to participate in a study where the principal perceived successful school partnerships were operating. Quantitative and qualitative data were gathered in a larger study, but this paper utilises interview data from two schools of similar size that both catered for middle class families.

METHOD

Focus group interviews of school personnel and parents, most typically in pairs, were completed in each school. In School A five interviews were conducted and these comprised one with the principal and deputy principal, one with a pair of teachers where one was the school librarian and three parent interviews. A total of ten adults participated in the interviews and two were male. In School B five interviews were conducted and these included one with the principal and deputy principal, two with pairs of class teachers, and two with parents. A total of nine adults participated in these interviews, four of which were male. Both schools catered for children from Preschool to Year 7. School A was situated in a large city where 471 children were enrolled. The second, School B, was in large regional area and had 512 children enrolled. Families who sent their children to these schools were socio-economically mixed, with the majority of children coming from middle class backgrounds where parents worked in para-professional and professional occupations.

Interviews

The focus for the interviews included beliefs, practices and challenges relating to partnerships and school communities. This information was sent to all participants prior to the interview in the form of a diagram. Interviewees were asked to use the diagram (Appendix A) during the interview as they talked about issues relating to their particular school partnership. The process of providing a diagram of issues prior to the interview reduced the number of questions having to be posed by the interviewer and allowed each participant the opportunity to address issues and respond individually. This process was adopted to reduce fears that may occur for interviewees. We found interviewees took time to prepare for the interview and talked freely of their beliefs, practices and challenges faced.

Analyses

Interview data were audiotaped and transcribed in order to reduce errors of interpretation and patterns and emerging themes were noted (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Themes were examined closely by clustering aspects of the data and the plausibility of conclusions examined. Finally five major themes emerged from the data and were labeled as follows: vision; sharing vision; structures and protocols; collaborative actions and maintaining the partnership. Results are reported using these themes.
RESULTS

While schools A and B were similar in size and catered for similar types of families, contextual differences were evident at the time of the data collection. Principals of the two schools, one female and one male, had been working in their positions for two and three years respectively. Circumstances of their appointments were very different. One was appointed principal for the first time within the normal promotional transfer system (School A) and the other was appointed to the school following the sudden departure of the previous principal (School B). Contextual circumstances within each school were evident throughout the interviews as one school strove to develop, consolidate and maintain a partnership (School A) and the other (School B) worked to initiate and build a partnership guided by a new principal with a very different leadership style.

From the five emerging themes six key stages of building partnerships emerged. First, in both schools the principal was the ‘driving force’ and proposed an initial vision for the school community. Then a vision was communicated both explicitly and implicitly to both staff and parents. Third, the school community worked together to develop the vision and devise a plan for the future. Fourth, enabling structures and protocols were adopted and these provided a means by which parents felt welcome in the school. Staff and parents then participated in collaborative actions to raise funds, reach goals and socialise together. These actions enabled relationships to be built and participants began to respect each other’s roles. Finally after a period of time a collaborative partnership emerged based on a shared vision underpinned by common beliefs and values.

Data from the two school communities are presented using the emerging model (Figure A) as a framework for comparing and contrasting experiences in the two schools. Contextual challenges faced by each school community also are described.

SHARING A VISION

All interviewees defined collaborative partnerships, discussed their importance and described major influences. In School A, the principal defined collaborative partnerships as ‘sharing vision through education for children in your community – an understanding between parents and school. It is about having an understanding between parents and schools as to what the dreams of education are, both from the parents’ perspectives and from the schools’ perspective and one respecting, I guess, the rights and responsibilities of the other.’ According to this principal, partnerships are driven by three components building school community, developing relationships and making a commitment to children’s education.

Teachers in School A reiterated the sentiments of the principal by defining partnerships as ‘working to the same end and that’s for the good of the child.’ Further comments included ‘to be open – they know they are welcome at anytime and meets the needs of all involved’. Parents from School A described partnerships as ‘working together towards a common goal – they’re not working against each other’ and ‘having respect for decisions made by the school.’

Parents from School A described the partnership in relation to the vision for the future. ‘I think it puts a lot of energy into the community, it gets things done! And I think you achieve a lot more and it drives a more positive frame of mind as opposed to the negative. I think the previous focus was more non-competitive, smaller community feel. And now we are still a community, but we have a more of a growth perspective, about where we go in the future.’
An initial vision for the school and its future was shared explicitly by the principal with all established groups and the wider community. The vision was then developed with further input from parents and staff. A model for School Renewal was devised using the shared vision. One key focus included in the renewal process was the development of a positive environment in the school where all participants showed respect for each other. The principal commented ‘you have a vision for learning, a vision for behaviour and a vision for courtesy and respect.’ Following the development of a shared vision, a Master Plan was devised.

In School B the current principal was appointed following the sudden departure of the previous principal and this caused ‘divided loyalties’ for both staff and parents. The circumstances surrounding the appointment caused a different contextual dimension and the principal needed to respond to that and move the community forward. Collaborative partnerships were described as ‘an open book – we’re clear about what we’re on about and we communicate that.’ A very open welcoming perspective was expressed by the principal.

A hint of reluctance came from teachers who defined partnerships as ‘where teachers, administration and I suppose the parents have common goals.’ Further ideas included ‘the parents at some stage have to be consulted on where we’re headed – shared decision making and the shared wisdom model.’ Some reservations were expressed in that ‘in dictatorships decisions are made really quickly aren’t they?’ One pair of teachers acknowledged that shared decision-making was time-consuming and needed ‘an atmosphere of trust.’ These comments from teachers indicated some reluctance in communicating and connecting with parents to form partnerships.

Parents from School B described partnerships as ‘taking part, where and when opportunities are given.’ Further ideas included ‘working together on a fairly equal footing – involve frequent communication.’ One parent described the environment needed to develop partnerships as ‘that equilibrium – that balance – there’s that certain rapport and trust I suppose, and that has to be there for that to happen.’ Parents indicated they did not want a subservient relationship controlled by school personnel, but one based on trust and equality.

Because of the particular contextual circumstances, the current principal shared a vision for the school in an implicit manner and led by example and personal actions. Both parents and staff described the principal’s style as ‘a very gentle approach ...sets the scene of behaviour for the whole school really.’ Administrators, teachers and parents all spoke of the way the principal learnt the names of all students and could address them all on a first name basis. Additionally, there was a daily presence in the school grounds to speak with students and parents. Again a School Renewal process commenced and the principal described this as a chance to re-focus both staff and parents in order to build relationships and work more closely together to improve learning outcomes for students.

**ENABLING STRUCTURES AND PROTOCOLS**

Parents and staff sighted frequent informative communication as being essential within a collaborative school community. Both schools have a regular newsletter and minutes of the main parent body within the school are made available to all. As well as these sources of information, principals may send surveys home to ensure parents get as many opportunities as possible to provide input on school issues.

In School A the existing structure of the Community Association as the core body and a system of task force groups and sub-committees extending from it, was maintained, following the appointment of the current principal. All groups report monthly to the Community Association to ensure communication remains open. New sub-committees were formed in
order to operationalise the Master Plan. Parents described the current principal ‘futures-oriented’ and new taskforce groups were formed for building projects and information technology development within the school.

An initiative that commenced prior to the appointment of the new principal was the parent liaison process. The new principal accepted the process and extended it. Each class had two or three volunteers and their role was to assist the class teacher by procuring parent volunteers and acting as a ‘conduit’ for parents when issues arose. Parents, staff and the principal all spoke of the success of the process. The principal meets with all parent liaison personnel once a month and reports are shared and issues raised. Parents praised the process as a way to raise an issue and get a response without fear ‘People might have a problem, but they are just scared to come and say anything.’ Thus a protocol was set up whereby parents could raise issues and be heard. This practice suited the leadership of the new principal who related ‘I am a structure person.’

Both teachers and staff at the school spoke of ways the school has addressed language used for communication purposes. Care is taken when using spoken and written language to ensure educational jargon or inappropriate language does not exclude parents. The principal also described listening as an important consideration for effective communication ‘to listen to potential and understand the potential of listening.’

Administration within School A is open to initiatives suggested by parents. One such initiative arose from parents’ concerns about the marketing and sale of school uniforms. An outside school uniform provider was not able to meet design specifications for uniforms and a group of parents approached the principal to discuss the difficulties. The principal approved a survey that was sent to parents to gauge community satisfaction. This process resulted in parents from the school selling all new uniforms as well as providing second-hand uniform sales. Enthusiastic parents willing to work on this issue resulted in the school taking control and selling all uniforms. This new process resulted in further fund-raising for the school and gaining greater satisfaction from the design and materials used in the uniforms. One parent commented ‘if it wasn’t for our new principal that would never have got off the ground, because ... was very supportive. And I suppose at first just being parents, it takes a little while to build up that trust.’ So while a group of parents can be commended for their initiative, enthusiasm and diligence in solving the problem they remained mindful of the opportunity that they perceived was made possible by a responsive principal.

The structure within School B is quite different in that there is a policy-making School Board as well as Parents and Friends Association that has a number of sub-committees and taskforce groups attached. The School Board and its working party initiated a process for devising a School Development Plan. It commenced with an open forum held on a Sunday afternoon. More than 70 parents attended and the initiative proved to be very successful. Students also were included and they provided input through surveys. A plan was drafted and further input sought before the final plan was published. Various sub-committees and working parties were established to work on goals set within the plan. The principal encouraged staff to volunteer to join the sub-committees and this has resulted in the formation of some strong working relationships between staff and parents. Initiatives relating to updating information technology and improving outdoor facilities at the school were sighted as two recent successes.

For staff, the principal placed an emphasis on professional development in curriculum and for parents a revision of school structures and protocols commenced in order to open the channels of communication and invite greater parent participation. The principal holds the perspective that parents have expertise to offer the school ‘...involve them in decision making – there’s a lot of expert help that can come from parents.’
The ‘student record book’ (SRB) is an initiative in years 4-7 that provides opportunities for parents to communicate with teachers and vice versa. A teacher from the lower school indicated that a close relationship between parents and the class teacher ‘alleviates lots of problems’ because the child knows that both are working together. Teachers agreed that the co-operation between parents and teachers had an overall effect on children’s motivation, attitude and behaviour as well as academic achievement.

**COLLABORATIVE ACTIONS AND BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS**

Both schools discussed collaborative actions for fundraising, social purposes and completing tasks associated with the reaching goals within the School Master or Development Plan. In School A and annual fair and craft fair were major fundraising initiatives and it was noted by parents and staff that parents made major contributions towards these events. The craft initiative commenced with a parent who called for volunteers to join a sub-committee. All volunteers were taught various crafts and these parents work together throughout the year to make items for the annual fair. This initiative has proven to be very successful with parents learning from each other, building relationships and working to raise funds to assist the school.

Parents with expertise in the building industry have assisted with applications for grants, designing and supervising a number of projects within the school. Information technology has been upgraded within the school and all staff participated in professional development in relation to its application to curriculum to ensure ongoing use during class time.

School initiatives are shared with parents and they are encouraged to support the school where possible. One recent initiative, the introduction of ‘Program Achieve’ (Bernard, 1995), provided an opportunity to share the goals of the program with parents and encourage them to adopt the same processes at home. The program aims to improve student motivation and school achievement and particular strategies from within the program have been shared with parents. Parent meetings and a written publication have been used to inform parents about this initiative. One teacher commented how the program ‘permeates the day in school.’

Parents discussed the way teachers and administrators from the school support both fundraising and social events. Their attendance was regarded as a sign of acknowledgement for parents who plan such events. Parents described the opportunities to meet socially with teachers as a valuable opportunity ‘yeah, it’s good to see the other side – and see everybody let their hair down.’ Parents who were heavily involved in school events gained a greater understanding of some of the difficulties entailed in planning events, catering for crowds and waiting for surveys to be returned.

Collaborative actions in School B included informing parents about curriculum initiatives in the school, developments in the classrooms such as upgrading information technology resources and many fundraising events.

One teacher described parent expectations in the school to be particularly high, much higher than previously experienced in other schools. Parents have their say about many issues including class discipline. Teachers in this school perceive the parents as a very able interested group who are capable of presenting an opinion. ‘The difference when you are in those sort of meetings is they [parents] articulate quite well.’ Again teachers expressed some reluctance in developing collaborative partnerships with parents. They perceived parents as an informed group capable of expressing an opinion. For some teachers this posed a threat.
Parents assist with organising class-level events such as school camps and social matches between staff and students as well as whole school initiatives. Teachers described a high level of willingness from parents to assist in the classroom in the early years as well as in the middle and upper years. A parent noted ‘there is a willingness to involve parents – willingness to communicate and hear parents I suppose.’ Parents also commented about ways teachers responded openly and willingly in relation to children’s academic progress but one parent expressed

**DEVELOPING COLLABORATIVE PARENT PARTNERSHIPS AND MEETING CHALLENGES**

Both schools have taken time to develop collaborative parent partnerships and several stages of development were found to be common despite personnel, personal leadership style and different contextual circumstances. Evidence that parents and staff in both schools were willing to talk about the partnership is an indication that interviewees believed each school had developed a collaborative parent partnership. Comments relating to the partnership were far more positive than negative indicating a measure of success in each school.

Interviewees were asked to comment on challenges they had experienced and there was a willingness also to discuss these. In School A administrators included some isolated events with parents who take a narrow view from the perspective of their own child and do not include the rights of others. A second instance is where a parent ‘misuses my language’ and so at times the principal needed to set the record straight.

The principal from School A presents as ‘a learner’ one who believes in the ‘creative paradigm.’ An ongoing challenge is that ‘some things have to die in order for other things to grow and change, and to keep a future direction for me is saying to parents, the only constant is change. I’m a seed planter, I guess.’ The principal expresses a pragmatic view while looking towards the future. ‘A solution-oriented future is, you know, every time something goes wrong, there is a solution.’ An administrator described communication and remaining positive and friendly as ongoing challenges particularly when parents are ‘in a hurry.’ One parent also described convincing parents to become involved as ‘an ongoing challenge.’

The principal in School B remained ‘non-judgmental’ after being appointed under difficult circumstances. There was a concentration on healing and mending and re-focusing attention of staff and parents in order to move the school forward and set new goals. Opinions from staff and parents indicated that this process had succeeded and strategies adopted by the current principal had worked. Much energy was now being exerted into reaching goals set within the School Development Plan.

Initially the administration team did not receive all positive feedback in relation to early efforts to move the school forward. Gradually feedback has become more positive. One outside expert brought in to gauge progress being made at the school reminded staff, ‘morale is everyone’s responsibility’. Changing the culture of ways that staff participated in the school has been a slow process, but encouraging staff to join sub-committees with parents has been a huge step forward. The principal noted that ‘teachers are now willing to give their time outside of school hours’.

Teachers acknowledged parents’ rights to have an opinion about issues relating to their child. ‘Well it’s that mutual respect ……like, we as teachers respecting the parents and generally giving them a say.’ Major influences on the partnership were described by a teacher as ‘an openness between everybody – between school, staff in the school, the administration and the parents themselves’.
Teachers described a new challenge as the amount of paperwork being generated by the new expectations for curriculum. ‘There’s been a whole pendulum swing I guess towards creating documents and I can understand the perspective of needing those documents to reflect the school and the culture we are working in – but in my opinion it would have been far more beneficial to have templates.’ These comments may have reflected the new expectation that teachers become more informed about curriculum and take some responsibility for it. Parents expressed some concerns about receiving appropriate information about how their child is achieving academically ‘I don’t always find it easy to find out how my children are going with their schoolwork. I think my son’s probably struggled a little bit at times with different aspects of his school work, and it’s sometimes been fairly late in the year when I have found out.’ All of these challenges indicate that the perfect partnership will never be achieved just ongoing collaboration to meet challenges and solve problems together.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Case studies presented in this paper indicated despite differences in location and leadership style, similar stages for building parent partnerships emerged. These stages involved:

- Having a vision for the school;
- Sharing and developing a vision and devising a school plan with parents, staff and students;
- Establishing structures and protocols;
- Collaborating in action and building relationships;
- Establishing and maintaining a collaborative parent partnership and addressing challenges.

While the stages may be similar perspectives from all involved are not always fully aligned. In School A where the parent liaison process is in place there is a high expectation that parents adhere to protocols in order to solve problems. Parents, teachers and the administration all agreed the process had worked well in their school. By way of contrast the principal in School B had a much more open approach to parents and this openness appeared to cause some unease with teachers who saw the mainly middle class parents as being capable, intelligent and willing to offer opinions in the school.

The principal’s role in the formation and maintenance of parent partnerships in both schools was crucial. In these case studies two contrasting leadership styles were evident as each principal responded to a particular school context and planned ways of including parents in the life of the school. While the leadership styles of the two principals were very different, the vision, beliefs and values held by each principal were similar. Each exuded confidence in their own ability to lead and guide the community in the formation of parent partnerships. Each believed in open communication and worked to establish a positive school climate where parents felt welcome. Internal school structures supported parent participation and if personal circumstances prevented parents from attending meetings or functions, then alternative means of communication were utilised.

Despite utilising ten interviews with school personnel and parents it is acknowledged that this study consists of data from just two case studies where both schools perceived successful parent partnerships were operating and as such the emerging model (Figure A) needs further testing. Second, as qualitative researchers we acknowledge our role is ‘not an objective, authoritative, politically neutral observer standing outside and above the text’ (Lincoln & Denzin, 2000, p. 1047). Our interpretation of meaning is subjective and as such we recognise the ‘radically plural, always open’ (Bruner, 1993, p.1) nature of the data. The analysis of qualitative data is but one interpretation as social events are turned into analyzable data.
(Freebody, 2003). Social life is complex and interconnected and interpretation by researchers remains subjective as ‘livings become findings’ (Freebody, 2003 p. 28).

School communities may draw from the experiences of the two case studies in that the framework (Figure A) that emerged from the data may be used as a guide for those embarking on the development of collaborative parent partnerships in primary schools. While barriers and challenges exist in all school communities, a problem-solving approach, time and a commitment to a vision for a school should lead staff, students and parents towards the formation of successful collaborative parent partnerships and enhance learning outcomes for children.
REFERENCES


Appendix A: Diagram for Parent and School Personnel Interviews

Guidelines for Interview Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Beliefs</th>
<th>Practices</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. What do you think is meant by collaborative parent partnerships in schools?</td>
<td>1. How did the partnership in this school begin?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Why do you think partnerships between parents and schools are important?</td>
<td>2. Who are the main people involved?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. What are the major influences on the building of collaborative parent partnerships in schools?</td>
<td>3. How is the parent/school partnership maintained?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. What elements of school life are impacted upon by the partnership?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. What have been your greatest challenges?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Future Plans

1. What plans do you have for the future?
Figure A: Parent Partnership Model

- Principal’s Vision
- Sharing and Developing a School Vision. Devising a School Plan
- Establishing and Maintaining a Collaborative Partnership
- Collaborative Actions & Building Relationships
- Establishing Structures and Protocols
- Principal’s Vision