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**Symposium HAY05562: Changing Schools, Changing Times: the first year
Paper 2: Listening to parents and students**
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Abstract
Apart from some notable exceptions, educational research that investigates schooling, and in particular school reform, has excluded the voices of parents and students. The resources required to communicate with parents are beyond the scope and schedules of many research projects. And, perhaps more significantly, parents and students are frequently perceived as consumers of education rather than co-producers, and therefore unlikely to be included in research. This paper describes the attempts being made in the *Changing Schools, Changing Times* project to include those infrequently heard voices of both parents and students. We argue that their voices contribute invaluable perspectives vital to understanding the processes of teaching, learning, and change in any school, and particularly in schools serving marginalised communities. The approaches adopted for communicating with parents and students, as well as some insights from our initial conversations will be described.

Introduction
As we listened to teachers and school leaders working in adverse conditions in high schools situated in low socioeconomic locations, hearing stories of their challenging circumstances, a growing awareness of the need to know students' and parents' perceptions of the situation became clear. We wondered how students perceived learning at school and how the parents understood their involvement at the school. "What could students, who confront, resist, and affirm both the problems and reforms that characterize their schools, offer to the traditionally adult dominated conversation about school change?" (Silva & Rubin 2003, p.1) After touching on international and Australian work that relates to the changing perceptions of parents and students contributions to school reform partnerships we describe the differing ways that students and parents have been involved in school change. The significance of parent and student inclusion is raised before the utilised approaches are described. Some of the difficulties with the approach and some early patterns from the pilot focus groups are shared.

Not listening to students and parents
Writers have expressed concerns about the appropriateness of including children in research in terms of their perceived levels of vulnerability and capability (Mahon, Glendinning, Clarke, & Craig, 1996). In addition, reform efforts in America, U.K. and Australia have been underpinned with adult assumptions of children as incompetent, in need of protection and in need of being controlled (Cook-Sather, 2002; Keddie, 2000; James & Prout, 1997; Hood, Kelly, & Mayall, 1996). These perceptions and assumptions have maintained "students' exclusion from policymaking and practice-shaping conversations" (Cook-Sather, 2002 p.4). In the process children's experiences, interests and knowledge have often been marginalised within the research enterprise (Hood et al., 1996). Wyn (1995) links the marginalisation of young people's participation – and the deferral of roles of value to an uncertain future - to ways in which we regard their citizenship. "Young people are seen as 'non-adults' a group who are in deficit. They are citizens of the future, rather than citizens of the present" (Wyn, 1995, p. 5, cited in Holdsworth, 2003). We concur with Cook-Sather that the perspectives of those most affected and least consulted about schooling practices need to be included and the assumption that adults know better than children what they will need for their future needs to be challenged (Cook-Sather, 2002).

Both parents and students are still commonly seen as consumers of education rather than co-producers, and therefore as less important than teachers. Parents are more likely to be objects of research, than active participants in it. In debates on school effectiveness and improvement, Hanafin and Lynch (2002, p.36) argue, "the voices of parents of educationally disadvantaged pupils are unheard". The reason for this, they suggest, is that for many years these parents have been perceived by educators, decision-makers and even academics as unable to contribute to discussions.

Listening to students and parents
The increased focus of students and their conditions of work in schools perhaps arises from two sources. The first, being the cognitive shift within education and psychology that has focused attention on the autonomy and distinctiveness of children and the second being the rise in an increased focus on students due to international concern with children's rights.

In the 1960's the quality of the teachers themselves and their commitment to change counted and as a result teacher development alongside curriculum development became the focus of educational change. Partly in response to the growing accountability movement and realisation that improving the professionalism of teachers had ramifications on the organisational structure of the school the loci of change shifted towards the development of the institutions (MacDonald, 1991). Schools became the centre of action and schooling discourse focused on empowering students at this time (Rudduck & Flutter 2003). In all of this change students were rarely consulted, yet the lives of students today have changed enormously. Many young people today handle complex peer and family relationships balancing several responsibilities and dealing with competing loyalties (Rudduck, Demetriou, & with David Pedder and the Network project team, 2003).

The historical changes within children rights movement offers some in addition, some explanation for the transition from students as objects to students as collaborators. The first formal Declaration of the Rights of the Child sought to support those children alienated from families and homes following World War I, while the second Declaration in 1959 focused on initiatives outside of school (Rudduck & Flutter 2003, p.76). In the UK in the early 1970s the National Union of School Students produced a policy statement, and this together with the work of Stenhouse (1983 cited in Rudduck & Flutter 2003) called for changes to school organisation rather than curriculum, increases in student responsibility, impartial and respectful treatment of students as people, the explicit communication of the school's aims and purposes, along with published rules being made available to students (Rudduck & Flutter 2003, p.77). Part of the effect of this literature has been to shake some of our taken for granted notions about young people – their assumed vulnerability and innocence, the arbitrary degree to which we mark the transition for childhood to adulthood, the cultural and historical variability in what makes a 'child' or 'young person'.

In addition to research *about* the inclusion of students in school reform, there has also been an increase in research on school reform that *itself* includes students, and reports on this process. Jones and Yonezawa (2002) describe their student inquiry groups as "cultural wedges" (p.247) in school reform, and explain:

> We had spent so much time talking to teachers and administrators about what needed to change that it made sense to ask students for insights about their school, classrooms and learning experiences. […] we believed that students' voices could initiate a different discourse with teachers about the needed changes. (p.247)

Inspired by a similar sense that students' voices have been absent from the debate on school reform, Comfort et al. explain how large scale student conferences (including over 300 students) were used to listen to students' ideas about how high schools should be reformed. Other examples of research attempts to listen to students include individual and focus group

interviews (Smyth & Hattam 2001; Trent & Slade, 2001); using students as researchers (Lee, 1999) and written essays by students about their schools (Pritchard et al., 2005).

A further type of research includes students as a way of measuring the extent to which school reform has taken place. Wilson and Dickson Corbett (2001, p.1) argue that:

> If substantial reforms to improve what and how much students learn occur in schools, then students' descriptions of their classroom experiences should reflect those changes. Reform, in other words, should become noticeable in what students say about school.

Although student inclusion and student voice is interpreted in various ways, the examples above indicate that while the inclusion of students in educational research is still an exception rather than the rule, the practice and methodology of including students is becoming a field of inquiry in its own right. This is not the case with including parents in educational research. There is an abundance of literature (both practical and scholarly) about inclusion of parents in schooling and school reform itself, often referred to as home-school partnerships (eg. Keyes, 2005; Lareau, 1987; NSW DET 2003, Toomey, 1996).

Inclusion of parents in research about school reform, however, is far less common, and literature reflecting on parents' role in such research is even more rare. Two main exceptions to the inclusion of parents in Australian research stand out. The classic project by Connell et al. (1982) involved interviews with students, their teachers, and their parents. The comparison of the views of each of these parties contributed much to the richness and impact of this landmark project. More recently, Crump & Connell (2003) adopted a similar approach of interviewing teachers, students and parents, this time in relation to the Year 11 subject choices of students. Again, the views of parents and students enriched and complicated the views provided by teachers.

In the UK, Vincent & Martin (2000) have explored using parents' forums for what they call "deliberative democracy" (p. 256-460), while Hanafin & Lynch (2002) formed focus groups deliberately aimed at including parents who do not usually participate in school-based meetings. A US example is the work by Calabrese Barton et al. (2004) on parental engagement in a poor urban school.

The significance of student and parent voices
Significantly, there is a large and vigorous discussion in the school reform literature about the need for student involvement in the process (Cook-Sather, 2002; Wasley, Hampel, & Clark, 1997; Wasley, 1991;). Cook-Sather calls for students to be recognised as having "the authority to participate in the critique and reform of education" (2002, p.3). She bases her discussion of authority on Heilbrun's definition, (1988 cited in Cook-Sather, p.3): "the ability to take one's place in whatever discourse is essential to action and the right to have one's part matter". Whilst educational research has not traditionally sought to hear student voices, a growing wave of research has been detailing the significance of "students voice" in schooling practices (See for example; (Cook-Sather, 2002; Fielding, 2001; Oldfather, 1995; Rudduck & Flutter, 2000; Silva & Rubin, 2003).

Both students and parents are key stakeholders in education – it makes sense to include the voices that education is intended to benefit, in research on education reform. Active participation is a democratic right and a founding requirement for the development of "peaceful, tolerant and productive communities" (Holdsworth 2003 p.3). Collaboration generates routine ways to explore, investigate and affect instruction, making it a productive strategy for developing an "organisational culture that makes self correction a norm not a war" (Sarason cited in Uhl & Perez-Selles, 1995).
Benefits of giving both students and parents an active part in education research may include providing the impetus for different discourses about school reform with teachers (Jones &

Yonezawa, 2002), empowering people who usually have little power in schools (Gore, 1992; Hanafin & Lynch, 2002), assisting students and parents to develop a language to talk about schooling (Rudduck & Flutter, 2000), enriching our understanding of schools and school reform (Connell et al., 1982; Crump & Connell, 2003), and measuring effects of school reform (Wilson and Dickson Corbett, 2001).

Significance to our project
As outlined by our colleagues Ken Johnston and Deb Hayes, our project works with specific schools, namely those serving disadvantaged communities. We argue that listening to parents and students is of particular importance in these circumstances, beyond the general benefits outlined above. Families with higher socio-economic status (SES) and education tend to be more actively involved in their children's education, and their children achieve more (eg. Lareau, 1987). A recurring theme is that low SES or poor parents are less involved in their children's education – often for reasons more to do with the school than with the family.

Parents cannot be treated as a homogenous group, and parent involvement in schools is complex. Lareau (1987, p. 73) argues that schools have standardised views in relation to the "proper role of parents in schooling", that match better with middle class or proximal parents than with working class or peripheral parents (Hanafin and Lynch, 2002). Hanafin and Lynch (2002) query the assumption that parent involvement is always 'a good thing', because of the risk that supposedly general parent forums are dominated by proximal parents who thus manage to further advantage their own children (also see Toomey, 1996, p.61).

Our schools are all located in areas faced with social, economic and educational disadvantage. The democratic right of parents and students to have a say in educational research becomes even more crucial among families who are all too often used to not being listened to.

This does not mean that we have all the answers to how to include these parents and students. As researchers, we face the same challenges that others working in these schools deal with. Even Hanafin and Lynch (2002) found that even though their study aimed "to give voice to parents on the periphery" (p.38) the (21 out of 222) parents who took part after a note was sent home with students were described by teachers as the most interested in the school, in other words, relatively within the school the more proximal parents. Lareau (1987) suggests cultural capital as a powerful explanation for these difficulties, while Toomey (1996) points to a sense of mistrust of the school by some parents.

In order to cope with such circumstances, our approach is not set in stone, but changing according to 'what works' for particular people in particular schools.

Our approaches
We elected to speak with the parents and students in the classes we observed. We believed this would assist in the building of a congruent picture and would also build on the emerging rapport established with the students through observing their lessons.

Initial contact with all parents of students in our Year 7 classes was through notes home: a letter with information about participation in the project with a consent form, asking for consent for participation in focus group interviews by the Year 7 student and/or the parent. Notes home from school have a reputation for disappearing, so it was not surprising that only a few forms came back, and most of those only with consent for the student, not the parent.

At the same time, Kristal Morris, the Aboriginal research assistant on the project, was making direct phone contact with the parents of Aboriginal students in Year 7 with the support of the schools. This was more successful, as it meant she was able to answer parent questions, gain parent input regarding the best time and place to hold a group interview, and establish personal contact.

With the goal of establishing personal contact and following consultation with the project reference group as well as the schools, we began the process of directly phoning all the parents of students in our year 7 classes at the beginning of term 4. To date we have made phone calls during school hours at three of the schools, and have talked with about 50 parents. All these parents gave permission for us to invite their child to participate in a student focus group. So far, we have held 7 focus group interviews with between 5-8 students each, in three of the schools.

Although this phase of the research has only just begun, there are indications that it is successful in drawing in at least some parents who could be considered peripheral (Hanafin and Lynch, 2002). Several of the parents we talked with on the phone and in the focus group had only had minimal contact with the school and one parent was contacted through the telephone interpreter service. On the other hand one parent was very much 'proximal' in Hanafin and Lynch's (2002) terms. She was actively involved in the primary school and had carried this into the high school, being one of the few parents who participated in the informal P & C.

Parents at two of the schools mentioned they were pleased with the way the school kept in contact via post, not only with notes about absences or late assignments but also with congratulations on academic achievements and invitations to attend award ceremonies.

Almost all the parents explicitly expressed gladness at having the opportunity to talk about how their son or daughter was doing, all gave permission to be phoned again next year, and just over 20 agreed to take part in a focus group interview if the timing suited. During term 4 the first parent focus groups were held in two of the schools, with three parents each.

Below, we present initial findings from listening to the students in the focus groups, and to parents both on the phone and in the focus groups.

Student focus groups
At three of the four high schools we met with students in focus groups in May/ June and again in October /November. On some occasions these were carried out at lunch and one group commenced at recess and continued through to the following period. Where possible we tried to procure a comfortable and relaxed setting for the focus groups. An array of bright paper, pens, pencils and markers were provided for the students' use.

After choosing pseudonyms, students were asked to draw pictures that represented themselves as learners in high school. This task provided students time to gather their thoughts as they drew, and to recall some of their high school experiences. We explained that the drawings were not being marked but rather that only they would need to see their drawing. (stick figures were fine!) With 6-9 students in the group this task facilitated space for individual and pluralistic voices and made good use of the short time.

The students were generally quick to settle quietly into this task. Students talked about their drawings and shared some of the practices that helped them to learn as well as what got in the way of their learning. Their words provide very early individual and shared stories of learning at their high schools. In the three schools the students spoke enthusiastically - and quickly. Frequently it seemed that all the students were talking at once and not infrequently we had to stop them to ask for one person to speak so that we could hear what each of them had to say.

Learning: facilitated
The transcripts revealed a broad range of descriptions of the variety of positive of learning experiences. Students spoke highly of a level of autonomy when deciding on research topics or when being provided some latitude for group work or work with colleagues, and when

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provided with time on computers – as several students had no internet use at home. They included stories of teachers who listened to the students, cared about the students, included quizzes, practical work, puzzles, jokes in their lessons, were consistent with discipline, did not punish the class for a couple of students misdemeanours, and teachers who made lessons interesting, found different ways of explaining themselves, provided structured time for the students to talk to develop confidence with certain skills. For example,

> My picture's about in English, public speaking. Like how, Miss teaches how to like get up and not be shy and speak in front of the class. ... like she gives us topics and then we have to write on it for say two minutes and then like we have to get up and each time we get up we like get more confident. [A5-1/49,51]

Sometimes when the students' words alone did not convey the excitement and interest in learning, the speed of their voices did. On occasion they spoke so quickly it was hard to decipher what was being said.

> - yeah …
> - [the teacher] … is teaching us about music – it's calm - laid back
> - Instead of taking stuff out on the drums you relax and
> - Laid back
> - Calm   [D5-1/96-98]

> Yeah cause it is fun to do work and it's fun to learn. Like in English, we watch [names a video]… then we read a story in a book and then we compare them and stuff like that. [C5-1/30]

Student spoke of the relevance of some learning to their own lives;

> In industrial arts, … we get to learn, it's almost like life skills because sometimes, some point in your life you're going to have to fix something or use a particular tool. And … we get to make our own projects which is obviously fun. [A5-1/108]

Learning: the struggle
The students spoke of the effort of hearing and being heard in noisy classrooms in relation to working as the following comments suggest;

> I drew like us in a … classroom and everyone has got like their book except like a few people and they are yelling and making noise and the teachers is going crazy and like everyone is yelling and we are not calm. [D5-1/12]

> …What is it like learning in that classroom? [D5-1/13] Hard, and we don't get much learning done. [D5-1/14]

> Everyone talks and I get distracted and talk as well. [C5-1/19]

They described events that appeared to squeeze learning time. These events involved both peers misbehaving and disrupting as well as teachers spending time sorting behaviour.

> Yeah it was a bit hard to do your work cause teachers were busy doing other things like sorting out problems with other students. [C5-1/45]

Students spoke of incomplete or inadequate explanations, which reportedly made it more difficult to learn.

> When we say we don't understand they just repeat the words that we don't
> understand … explaining the exact same thing again about six times [A5-1/141-
> 143]

In all of the meetings with students I was impressed with how capably they articulated their
situations without mentioning names, without taking digs at one another, and how they
displayed courage when disagreeing with each other. These aptitudes gave rise to a diversity
rather than a consensus of opinions in most areas.

Listening to parents
From our initial conversations with parents, by phone and in the group interviews, three
learning related issues received much attention: streaming, homework, and students getting
help when they need it.

Streaming
Two of the schools have selected 'top' students into one separate Year 7 class, with all other
classes pretty much mixed.   Not all the parents of students in these top classes commented on
their child's placement, but the ones who did were all very happy, as the following field notes
from one of the phone conversations show:

> Doing well, she is relieved he is in [top class]. He is the oldest child. She had
> been concerned re. reputation of school, glad he has peers who want to work &
> not so many disruptions. [C11-1]

During the focus group conversation, this mother explained the process of placing students in
the top class to the other two mothers, and further expressed her relief that her son was in this
class: "There's only 18 in the class, out of the whole of Year 7, and they're hand picked. So I
am glad he is in there" [C11-2]. It soon became clear, however, that the other two mums saw
their child as hard-working and capable, and yet their child was not in the top class. One of
them:

> I think it's good, I believe it's good for them kids that really want to do it, but I
> don't agree that them kids […] You only have four classes, and then all the
> naughty kids are in the other three classes that is not fair on the kids that really
> want to learn, and that is how I felt for my son. [C1-2]

After some discussion, the three mothers suggest that rather than having one top class, it
would be better to have one class with all the 'naughty kids'. The parents saw this not only as
a way of allowing the other kids to get on with learning nut also as a way of helping these
naughty students, by providing their class with more teachers and extra resources.

Homework
Some of the purposes of homework according to the NSW DET (2000) policy are to
strengthen home-school links and reaffirm the role of parents as partners in education. For
many parents, homework is a major source of information about the work their child is
engaged with at school.

It is not surprising that many parents commented on homework in the phone conversations,
however, they did not agree with each other. Some parents thought there was not much
homework, some that the amount was fine even though their child complained, and others
that there was too much homework pressure or more help is needed. For example:

> She doesn't get enough homework, but understand that school is disadvantaged
> and many children don't get help at home. [C8-1]

> There is a lot of homework (too many assignments). [D16-1]

Parents in one focus group agreed that the amount of homework had been overwhelming at the start of the year, but that it had eased off later. However, one parent suggested it was more a matter of the Primary School preparing the students rather than the High School giving too much homework:

> He doesn't get so much homework, but assignments. Assignment, after assignment after assignment. And I just think Year 6 doesn't prepare them for it […] I think he'd only done may be one in Year 6, I'm not even sure he'd done one in Year 6. [C1-2]

As Forster (1999) points out, homework is a natural but also a problematic bridge between school and home. In the two focus groups, two suggestions were made in relation to assignments, to improve the functioning of this bridge. Parents wanted the teachers to take time to go through assignments after they had been marked:

> The teacher marked it wrong, and I told him take it back, he never takes it back, that frustrates me. Take it back and tell her, with everything that he has got a cross next to it, we want the answer. Because, unless you know it, like that just goes in the cupboard now, and no way, he is none the wiser as to what the right answer was. [C1-2]

Parents also thought it would be useful if the school provided parents with more information about assignments, so that parents could help their child with time management, and getting assignments in on time.

> There's no way that a parent can easily cross reference their children, and say 'well I know that you should have had this done' or 'I know that this is coming up, why haven't you done it'. I quite often get 'oh dad I have a project due tomorrow', and I ask 'how long have you had it?', 'oh, three weeks'.[…] It comes back to the kids, the kids should do it, they should tell us, but there should also be something from the school, saying 'this term we are going to try to achieve, there is going to be three projects for science, there's going to be this or that'. That way you can go 'don't you have a project due?'. [D24-2]

A schedule of assignments at the start of each term was suggested, so that parents could help their children with time management.

Students needing help
A few parents commented that more help was needed, both with homework and in class, when their child did not immediately grasp a concept. Parents pointed to their own limitations in being able to help, especially with homework, and indicated therefore their child relied on support from the teacher to understand the work.

> He often asks father for help with homework but dad doesn't know. Father tells him to ask teacher but he won't because he thinks teacher will think he is stupid or won't care. [D7-1]

Two specific suggestions were made by parents in the focus interview. First, that teachers should ensure students feel comfortable to ask for help in or after class. They accepted that this was not easy, and suggested that boys especially did not like to be seen by their peers to need help. Second, an elaborate scheme of allocated times for help with different subjects for different years was proposed. This parent had clearly thought this out in some detail, but was suggesting it to the researcher rather than directly to the school.

Discussion

As we make sense of our initial contacts with students and parents, and prepare for the next year in the research project, we acknowledge there are some issue we will need to address.

Firstly, while we have a sense that not all students and parents spoken with so far are 'proximal'. We need to make more effort to encourage participation from peripheral students and parents. For example, students whose parents consented, but who themselves declined to take part in the focus group seem to be predominantly from Pacific Islander, Non-English Speaking and Indigenous backgrounds. We will be working with the schools and with Kristal Morris, the Aboriginal Research Assistant, on appropriate ways to make these students feel welcome to contribute. With parents, further use of the Telephone Interpreter Service, and making phone calls and holding focus group in the early evening will hopefully broaden the participation.

Secondly, even these early conversations indicate to us tremendous potential for contributions by students and parents to the school, rather then merely to the research. We will establish appropriate ways of acting as a conduit for these contributions through feedback to the school in the next year of the project, and develop ways of keeping parents and students informed of how we use their contributions. Ideally, we would like to help build connections between parents and the school, and students and the school, that ensure these contributions can be made long after the project has been completed. How that might be done remains a conundrum.

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