

Reimagining Parental Engagement Frameworks to Include Separated Parents and Diverse Family Structures.

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For decades the importance of parental engagement in schooling to promote better learning and wellbeing outcomes in children's education has been recognised. Various education jurisdictions have frameworks for parent and community engagement that promote inclusive information sharing between parents and schools (see Qld Department of Education Parent and Community Engagement Framework). What is absent from such frameworks is the recognition of diverse family structures, including where a child's parents are separated. While research has focused attention on the impacts of separation and divorce on children's learning, there is a dearth of work on separated parents' experiences engaging with schools. To have separated parents' experiences documented in the literature, an exploratory survey was deployed. Survey participants (n=136) provided Likert scale responses about their satisfaction with interactions with the different staff points of contact in their children's schools. Qualitative responses were also sought to explain the levels of satisfaction and give details of experiences. While descriptive statistics are provided about levels of parental satisfaction, the main analytical focus of the survey is the qualitative data.

Parental experience varied in relation to the quantity of time children were in a parent's care and if they were mothers or fathers. Parents with minority care reported more dissatisfaction with their experiences with the schooling systems. Other issues emerging from the qualitative data encompassed schools' poor communication with both parents; schools' lack of empathy; their limited understanding of diverse family structures, lack of awareness of and compliance with court orders and perceived differential treatment of parents depending on their gender. Insight was also gained into factors that promoted satisfaction with separated parents' experiences. These included ease of access and the effectiveness of communication, respect in schools' treatment of parents and, teachers and parents working together to support child's wellbeing and learning.

This initial investigation demonstrated that diverse family structures where parents are separated are not well understood or catered for in many schooling situations. The data show that in many cases, small changes on the part of the school, for instance switching to online newsletters and communications, can make differences in the ease/effectiveness with which separated parents engage with their child's school and schooling. It is recommended that more research is conducted into how to ensure this large and underserved group of separated parents are effectively included in their child's educational journey. A reimagining is needed in the understanding and application of parental engagement frameworks.