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ABSTRACT

This study examines the manner in which primary schools, particularly at the school entry level, negotiate the process of parent-school collaboration in New Zealand. Parents' and professionals' attitudes about what parent roles are appropriate are also studied. The study describes the present range and levels of contact, and the amount of effort expended in the development of home-school relations. Parents and teachers from primary and secondary school in Auckland were interviewed concerning their beliefs about: (1) parent role; (2) involvement in discussions and decisions concerning curriculum, pedagogy, rules, and discipline; (3) the nature and importance of home-school contact; and (4) school visits and the procedure for parent-teacher contact. The data suggest that elementary classroom teachers have an open door policy. More elementary teachers perceive contact as direct than teachers at any other level of schooling. Nearly all the parents of elementary school children see direct contact with the classroom teacher as the norm. However, parents do not seem to be regarded by professionals as anything close to equal partners. Parents are not considered by others or themselves to be alternate teachers. Yet the importance of the home in literacy learning is widely acknowledged. Teachers are considered experts, and this contrasts with parents who are seen as having little to offer to discussions of curriculum or pedagogy. Appended are 19 references. (GLR)

Bridging the gap: Practices of collaboration between home and the junior school.

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INTRODUCTION

The importance of parent involvement in schools, as a component of effective schooling has been variously noted (e.g. Fullan, 1985; Hawley & Rosenholtz, 1983; Purkey & Smith, 1983). Reviewing two decades of research, Epstein (1987) concludes "the evidence is clear that parental encouragement, activities, and interest at home and participation in schools and classrooms affect children's achievements, attitudes and aspirations, even after student ability and family socio-economic status are taken into account" (p.120). When parents encourage and support their school activities, children are advantaged; the level of contact between the home and school is positively correlated with academic achievement (Dornbusch & Ritter, 1988; Iveson, 1981).

Getting parents involved in school activities is important for several reasons. One is that it may enhance home support for learning activities in that the school may more readily find ways to help parents work with their children at home (Epstein, 1991). In a recent review of the antecedents of illiteracy, Fox (1990) concludes that schools cannot teach children to read and write without a lot of teaching and learning at home. Results from a study by Tizard and colleagues (Tizard, Blatchford, Burke, Farquar & Plewis, 1988) suggest that the only factor significantly related to children's progress in reading and writing over a three year period at infant school was contact with, and knowledge of, the school.

Another reason for getting parents involved is to try to bridge the gap between the child's home culture and the culture of the school. Discontinuity is a factor that places the young child at risk of illiteracy (Brophy, 1990).

Finally, parent involvement is also important because it affects a teacher's perceptions. Teachers are less willing to help parents engage their children in learning activities at home when they believe parents are not interested in their children's education (Epstein & Dauber, 1989). Also, there may be teacher expectation effects advantageous to the children of high contact parents (Toomey, 1989).

There are a number of parent involvement roles, from passive recipients to coproducers of education. Schools offer differing opportunities for parent involvement. The most common are invitations to come to the school, to attend information sessions, to take part in classroom activities or trips, to fund raise or for informal social activities. The parents more likely to respond to such invitations are those with the time; those with confidence in their own role in their children's education and those culturally less distant from the teacher or school. As parents like this are probably already helping their children achieve, such children are doubly advantaged (Toomey, 1989).

According to Rasinski (1989), the key to any successful parent-school collaboration is giving parents a meaningful role in planning and implementing school programmes. However, emphasising the need for parent involvement by requiring participation in organisation structures which may be foreign to many parents (Malcolm, 1983, cited in Toomey, 1989) may simply widen the inequalities (McLeod, 1989).

This paper will examine how primary schools, particularly at the school entry level, are negotiating this process of parent-school collaboration. It will look at the roles for parents that professionals seem willing to countenance and, conversely, what parents see as appropriate. It will describe the present range and levels of contact; how open primary schools are to information flow and how much effort is being expended in developing home-school relations.

METHOD

Sample: The sample of Year one (J1) teachers and parents, whose data provide the bulk of this paper, were part of a larger study involving 20 primary and 18 secondary state schools in Auckland. The schools were randomly selected in proportion to numbers in the four city areas of greater Auckland. Seven primary schools declined to participate and were replaced with the closest school from the same geographical area.

In the larger study, 38 principals, 101 teachers (one Year 1 and one Year 6 teacher from each primary and two Year 8 and two Ye. . from each secondary school), 38 Board of Trustee chairpersons and 231 parents were interviewed. The school levels were chosen deliberately as times of likely maximum contact between the school and parents.

Principals nominated the teachers and if there was more than one at any level, then the most experienced was approached. The parent sample was gained by each teacher nominating three parents of children they taught. These parents were to be from different categories, namely, one parent with whom they had "good" relationships, one parent with whom they had little or no contact and one parent with whom they had "difficult" relationships. So, the majority of the sample were in some way problematic. The teachers were free to interpret the categories, given the brief that the larger study concerned the nature of collaboration between schools and their communities. Not surprisingly, the parents whom teachers described as "no contact" and even some of those described as problematic proved extremely difficult to contact. The actual sample of Year 1 teachers was 19 and interviews were finally obtained with 49 parents (an 86% success rate).

Interviews: The interviews covered discrete areas of school practice selected as exemplars likely to be sensitive to variations in styles of collaboration. These areas concerned beliefs about parent role; about involvement in discussions and decision making concerning curriculum, pedagogy and rules and discipline; about the nature and importance of home-school contact; about visits to the school and the procedure for parent-teacher contact as well as more specific questions about the last contact and about reading (Year 1) or homework for older children. (The data concerning sending books home to read is to be published in a forthcoming paper: McNaughton, Parr, Timperley & Robinson, in press)

The majority of questions were posed in an open-ended fashion and interviewers both coded responses and recorded verbatim where necessary. Other questions provided options or asked for ratings and numerical judgements.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION OF THESE RESULTS

The larger study has yielded a wealth of data. The data reported in this paper deal largely with contact between the school and parents/major caregivers of Year 1 children in the first term of the year. However, at times, comparisons are drawn with other stages of schooling to set these data in perspective.

Role of parents

What is the most effective way for parents to be involved in their child's schooling? The vast majority of all groups in the wider study saw the parent's role as one of support to the child or school. Parent's comments included "be there for the child", "take an interest" etc. Only four principals, three teachers and two parents, both, significantly, Year 1 parents, saw parents in a teaching role.

A series of questions was asked regarding the relative position of Board, parent and professional input to both discussion and decision making in three areas, namely, curriculum, pedagogy and rules and discipline. Teachers of Year 1 children believed that parents should be involved in discussions in the area of rules and discipline (84% thought this) and curriculum (68%). But only 21 per cent were willing to allow parents to paricipate in discussions about how things are taught. This is significant in view of the research which demonstrates that ethnic minority children progress better when the processes of instruction are changed in subtle ways which make them more culturally congruent for the learners (Au & Mason, 1981; Tharp, 1988).

It is interesting to note that secondary teachers were a more like-minded group than primary teachers. Our data on discussion and decision making yielded quite different patterns of responses for Year 1 and Year 6 teachers. Generally, the Year 1 teachers were the more reticent about involving parents, especially in decision making. Over half of them either thought that the parents should have no say at all or that the professionals should make the decision with regard to curriculum. This rose to 89 per cent when it came to decisions about how things are taught. Only in the area of rules and discipline were over half the Year 1 teachers willing to countenance parents, or rather their representatives (on the

Board of Trustees) having an equal say in decision making. To Year 1 teachers, decisions in areas of curriculum and pedagogy are the province of professionals. In the latter, they do not even see input in the form of discussion as appropriate. This unwillingness to yield parents meaningful roles, together with the view of the parent as support, not alternate teacher, implies that a vast educational resource is untapped.

This is not to imply that parents uniformly favoured participation. They did not see their involvement in discussions or decisions about pedagogy as any more appropriate than the teachers did, but most parents favoured their participating in both discussions and decisions about curriculum and rules and discipline.

The aggregation of responses for all primary schools or for all teachers suggests a consistency of response not necessarily evident when individual schools are analysed. Obviously the small sample sizes from each school are an impediment to generalising about between and within group differences in a single school. The limited data show that in several schools there was an apparent lack of agreement between principal, Board of Trustee chairperson, teachers and parents as to parent roles. In two schools the professionals (principal and teachers) considered that decision making should be shared. In one of these schools parents endorsed this but the chair of the Board of Trustees thought that either the professionals or the Board should make all decisions. In the other school the parents did not share the professional's belief that they, or the Board, should be involved in decision making. In yet another school it was the principal who was at odds with the other interviewee groups in wanting decision making by professionals, while another principal wanted to share decision making but the parents and teachers wanted the staff to make the decisions.

If these inconsistent responses accurately represent the views of the groups involved, it would suggest that schools are likely to experience considerable difficulties in the resolution of contentious issues. If there is little agreement about who should make the decision, it is possible that the content could lead to controversy!

Opportunities for contact

There was certainly the potential to establish the flow of information, as a first step in helping parents find ways to work with their children at home and in reducing the gap between home and school. There were many functions for parents organised in primary schools, on average 11.5 per school in the first term. Almost all primary parents said that they felt very welcome at the school and Year 1 parents were no exception. Nearly all said they regularly received school to home communication in the form of a newsletter and felt that they had been invited to the school. Most (92%) had availed themselves of the opportunity to visit the school by attending at least one function there. (Recall that the sampling method employed asked teachers to nominate a parent with whom they had no contact. This was inordinately difficult for most Year 1 teachers!) More Year 1 parents were in evidence at functions than any other group. (The comparable figures for attendance at at least one function were 77% for Year 6 parents and 69% for secondary parents). This held for the majority of the varied types of functions held.

Both teachers and parents of Year 1 expressed a preference for a certain type of contact opportunity. Teachers thought informal contact, both impromptu and arranged, to be the best. Parents, too, preferred this type of contact. As well as providing the bulk of attenders at school functions, Year 1 parents also held the strongest views about what they did not like going to. A quarter of them reported that they did not like PTA (or similiar), fundraising or special group meetings.

Teachers were asked as to the frequency of parent help in the classroom and about what the parents did when there. As would be expected, the Year 1 teachers reported the lowest number of instances of no parent help at all in the classroom. However, four classes were in this category but, unfortunately, we do not have the reasons for this. The majority of Year 1 classes (11 out of 19) had one or several parents every day or some days. These helpers either worked with children solely, or both worked with children and helped to prepare materials. The extent to which these helpers were the same few parents is unknown although on the basis of other research, the number could be relatively small. Epstein (1987) reports that 70 per cent of parents in her study had never helped in the classroom or on trips and such like.

The main reasons given by Year 1 parents for attending functions or activities were to show an interest in, and support for, the child; to offer help or give support, and to find out about the school or child.

A specific contact occasion: Information flow

Parents and teachers were asked a series of questions about the last parent-teacher contact. These questions were designed to probe the direction of information flow, the relative influence of the participants and the reasons for contact. The major purposes of contact between Year 1 parents and teachers were to build a relationship for student support (31%); for the teacher to obtain information (26%) and for the parent to obtain information (23%). Unusually, as the literature would suggest that information commonly flows from teacher to parent, the Year 1 teachers more often reported that they found out something they did not know before, than did parents.

According to Tangri and Leitch (1982), a contact is of limited value if there is only information exchange, so participants were asked about requests for changes and about action taken. As both parent and teacher were asked about the same situation, it is interesting to compare perceptions. Only a small percentage of Year 1 parents (15%) felt that they asked for some form of change and the teachers agreed that requests were at about this level. Most teachers reported that they complied with requests but not all parents agreed.

About 40 per cent of Year 1 teachers felt that they had asked parents to make changes, particularly in relation to child management. However, parents recalled only about half this number of requests. Almost all parents felt that they had complied with teacher requests but teachers considered this compliance rate to be closer to 70 per cent.

Parents were generally more satisfied with the contact than teachers. With regard to the effectiveness of this contact for assisting understanding of the student, only about half of the Year 1 teachers felt that the contact was very effective and 20 per cent rated the contact as very ineffective. The average rating for perceived effectiveness given by Year 1 teachers was lower than that given by teachers at other

levels. It may be that parents of older children, who more often reported asking for changes to be made, had more concrete suggestions and plans of action to offer, rather than simply offering information.

Principals were asked about the educational benefit of parent teacher contacts they arranged. Similarly, parents and teachers were asked to outline the main purpose of their contact. The data suggest a difference in perception. Principals and teachers appear to value contact as a way of finding out about the child, yet parents rarely mentioned that their purpose was to give information. Parents of primary children stated that their main purpose for most contacts was to support either the child or the school. The third most frequently cited reason was to receive information. Although primary teachers said that the main purpose for contact was to receive information about the child, they also mentioned giving parents information and building a relationship for child support.

A consideration of the influence process, as described by teachers and parents with reference to their last contact, suggests that the flow of information is as the professionals perceive it. In other words, they gain more from the contact than the parent. It may be helpful to parents to have the professional's purpose stated more explicitly and for parents, in turn, to be given an opportunity to articulate their aims for any given contact.

Even given problems of selective or defective memory, or the fairly unlikely chance that teacher and parent were talking aboout different contact occasions, it seems that within the face to face contact situation, there is the likelihood of misperception and misinterpretation.

How to make contact

Further discrepancy is apparent in the answers to questions about the procedures to follow when making contact. Principals were asked the steps both parents and teachers should follow in contacting one another, while teachers and parents were similarly asked how they should go about contacting the other. There was considerable discrepancy between the procedures outlined by the principal, on the one hand, and the Year 1 teacher on the other. The procedures described by the teachers of later years were quite

similar to those of their principals. Forty-two percent of Year 1 teachers saw direct contact with parents as the norm, while 52 per cent acknowledged that contact was mediated in some way, usually only if the matter were serious or the communication written. Only one teacher considered that all contact was mediated. However, the comparable figures given by principals for teachers contacting parents were 35 per cent for direct contact, 35 per cent for some mediation and 30 per cent for all contact mediated. The implication is that Year 1 staff are more open to direct contact than the principal.

It is of interest to note that the great majority (82%) of Year 1 parents considered that they should make direct contact with their child's teacher. A few contacted the office, but this may have been to arrange an out of hours time, as only three parents saw the route as being through senior teachers or the principal. Fifty five percent of principals saw direct contact of parents with teachers as the norm, with 25 per cent wanting some mediation and 20 per cent wanting all contact mediated.

When reported data are considered for individual schools, there was a greater discrepancy between the understanding of the procedures by principals and teachers, especially if the perceived policy, on the principal's part was one of mediation of contact. Given that principals and teachers often disagreed on what the school policy was, how would parents know what they are supposed to do? If parents are uncertain about their role and status, such inconsistencies do not help the development of home-school relations. The fact that 65 per cent of primary principals considered it desirable that contact be mediated in some way and gave clear rationales for this, like "If there is potential conflict, it is better to deal with it officially" and "Young teachers might do something that is not very wise" seems to reflect a view of parents as a party to be negotiated with and protected from, rather than a resource to be tapped.

Problems with contact

Principals, teachers and chairpersons of the Board of Trustees were asked about the main problems they had encountered in developing effective home-school relationships. The coding scheme reflected the degree of responsibility or blame the respondents attributed to the school or the parents. The majority of Board chairs attributed the main problem to parent apathy, while primary principals and teachers

were more circumspect and responded across all categories. Teachers of Year 1 mentioned practical problems for them such as logistics, time etc (4), while recognising that these also existed for parents (2). Six teachers mentioned attitude problems on the part of the parent, while a further five talked of communication problems like language and cultural differences.

Effort and benefit: Home school relations

While the importance of good home-school relationships was universally acknowledged, and while there were a variety of opportunities for parents to visit the school, and they did come, the rating of the amount of effort put into establishing good relationships did not necessarily square with these data. On a scale where "1" indicated a lot of effort, "3" moderate effort and "5" little effort, the average rating of effort from primary principals was 1.5, from teachers 1.8 and parents rating of the school's efforts was 1.9. Although these figures are complementary, Table 1 shows that they are lower than the ratings for the importance of good home-school relations. The table also shows that the perceived level of benefit from this effort was lower again.

Table 1: Ratings of importance of, effort directed to and benefit from establishing good home-school relations: Primary schools

	principal	teacher	parent
importance	1.1	1.1	1.2
effort	1.5	1.8	1.9
benefit	2.0	2.1	n.a.

CONCLUSION

The data appear to present many contradictions. Junior classroom teachers seem to have an open door policy. More perceive contact as direct than at any other level of schooling, and nearly all of their parents see direct contact with the classroom teacher as the norm. Their open door policy is taken

advantage of. The classrooms of Year 1 teachers receive more parent help and many more of their parents visit the school and come to more of the functions that the school organises than parents at any other level.

But, ironically, parents do not seem to be regarded by the professionals as anything remotely bordering on equal partners. Parents are not seen as alternate teachers, but then nor do they view themselves as such. Yet the importance of the home in literacy learning is widely acknowledged (Fox, 1990). Teachers are seen as, and see themselves as experts, and this contrasts with parents who are seen as having little to offer to discussions of curriculum or matters of pedagogy. The latter is particularly disturbing in view of the cultural composition of our schools. Where minority groups are underachieving, pedagogy, classroom practice, should be a major area for parent input. It is particularly important in the transition to school year to ensure that, as far as possible, classroom culture melds with that of the home on pedagogically important and effective variables. Parental collaboration would seem a logical first step.

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