

FORGING PARTNERSHIPS WITH FAMILIES TO PROMOTE CHILDREN'S LEARNING

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INTRODUCTION: In 2002, the Medium Term Strategy Division of the New Zealand Ministry of Education began commissioning iterative best evidence syntheses, a major purpose of which is to provide a sound platform for informing educational development in New Zealand, and in particular to further enhance the achievement of Māori and Pasifika children.

Although many Māori and Pasifika children currently achieve at a level comparable with that of other successful children in New Zealand, nevertheless if the full potential of Māori and Pasifika children as a group is to be realised then additional efforts are required to achieve this.

Iterative best evidence syntheses systematically bring together and evaluate relevant New Zealand and overseas research evidence. The syntheses are intended to indicate which factors have strong positive (or negative) influences on children's achievement. "Achievement" in this context includes both academic and social achievement. The term "iterative" indicates that the syntheses (a) go through a number of drafts as educational researchers with expertise in the particular fields provide formative feedback to the writer(s) to ensure that a high quality report is produced, and (b) will be updated in the future as further evidence comes to hand.

This paper draws upon one of the iterative best evidence syntheses which has been published by the Ministry of Education. This particular synthesis (Biddulph, Biddulph, & Biddulph, 2003) investigated the influences of family and community on early childhood, primary and secondary children's achievement. For example, hearing loss and excessive television-viewing (more than 2-3 hours per night) had a significant negative effect on achievement. These influences seem relatively straight forward¹, but the best evidence indicates that most influences are very complex. For this reason, a deep understanding of the influences can be gained only by reading the original document². However, there is one aspect of the synthesis that is likely to be of immediate interest to early childhood educators, and teachers in primary and secondary schools, and that is the best evidence relating to early childhood centre and school collaboration with families to improve the achievement of the children for whom they are responsible. This partnership dimension is the focus of this paper.

TEACHER AND FAMILY PARTNERSHIPS

WHAT THE BEST EVIDENCE REVEALS

The research evidence is clear that effective centre/school-home partnerships can enhance children's learning. Much of the following is drawn from Biddulph, Biddulph, & Biddulph (2003, pp. 155-156 & 171-172).

The positive impacts of such partnerships (especially those focused on early years) on children's achievement can be substantial, compared to institutionally-based educational interventions alone. The benefits for children and young people can include better health and well-being, greater educational achievement, and increased economic well-being. These benefits can persist into adult life. Considerable benefits for the parents and whanau involved have also been demonstrated, and there is evidence that some programmes, targeted at families identified as likely to benefit most, have generated savings in the long term that exceed the costs of the programmes. Teachers also benefit because partnerships provide opportunities for teachers to improve their knowledge and understanding of their students, particularly their family and community circumstances.

Strong centre-home and school-home links are particularly important for children whose social class, culture and/or ethnicity and cultural heritages are different from those predominant in the practices of the centre or school. The evidence indicates that the parents/caregivers currently least likely to be involved in such links (low socio-economic status (SES), and minority group parents) are those for whom it may be most important. The evidence also indicates that there is a pattern of decreased parental involvement overall in New Zealand children's primary education nationally over the past decade.

The research indicates that the majority of parents care about their children's education, want to support them, and are prepared to work in partnership with others to do so. This includes parents from the lowest income families, and those with the least education. The evidence suggests that increased achievement is possible even in families with little



formal education and/or limited facility in English. Parents (and whanau) across ethnic groups are often able to help their children make significant achievement gains despite experiencing very adverse economic conditions themselves, and despite having minimal power to effect improvements in their own circumstances. However, parents in low SES circumstances are likely to benefit from a more integrated approach in which the basic needs of their families are addressed at the same time as efforts are made to build up their children's social capital.

There are various forms of partnership, but not all are effective. Those which are poorly designed, based on deficit views, and not responsive to the needs of families can be ineffective, and even counterproductive. Programmes which are effective respect parents and children, are socially responsible, and are responsive to families and the social conditions that shape their lives. It is also the case that effective partnerships are time effective because parents/caregivers have a clearer idea of what is likely to benefit their children, and teachers can be spared the need to reteach or take extra measures to motivate children. Constructive partnerships empower those involved by (a) fostering autonomy and self-reliance within families, schools and communities, (b) building on the strong aspirations and motivation that most parents have for their children's development, and (c) adding to (rather than undermining) the values, experiences and competencies of parents and children. The evidence is that teachers can do much to initiate such constructive partnerships.

PARTNERSHIP PRINCIPLES

A set of principles that form the basis of successful partnerships of the kind described in this report has been synthesized from the research studies reviewed by Biddulph, Biddulph, & Biddulph (2003). These principles include:

- Being genuinely non-judgemental about families and their circumstances, and recognising that families are important human resources in the educational process (and avoiding viewing parents as "clients" and children and families as "having deficits"). It is essential that parents and children are shown respect as fellow human beings and that interactions with them reflect this respect. Viewing teachers as professionals and parents as non-professionals is unhelpful. It does not credit parents with the unique and specialist knowledge and understandings they have of their own children (Lindle & Boyd, 1991).
- Working with parents and their children in a climate of equality to identify, understand and build on their experiences and strengths. In some cases, this requires a change of mindset on the part of the facilitators involved so that they perceive parents and their children as "people with promise" rather than "families at risk". It is important to help parents and children to move from where they are at the moment, to where they want to be, usually by taking small steps at first.
- Providing ongoing opportunities for informal, non-threatening contacts between parents and teachers, and parents and other facilitators.
- Providing support, while also recognising parents' competencies, values, beliefs, expectations about learning/teaching/education and their home circumstances. The support should enhance these, not undermine them.
- Realising that parents' initial responses are likely to be determined by their own schooling experiences and cultural backgrounds, and that these will affect their perceptions of what teaching is and what different subjects entail. Such perceptions may be deeply entrenched, and some may serve valid cultural purposes. Programmes should enable them to add alternative ideas and strategies to their repertoire, not undermine their family practices.
- Supporting parents to make changes or develop alternative strategies over time. Considerable commitment is often required on the part of those providing support.
- Encouraging parent-to-parent communication within communities, so that awareness, interest and confidence grow in multiple ways, and sharing of human and material resources is facilitated.
- Implementing new initiatives to support parents and their children on a **small-scale** initially, and in a very **focused** (rather than generalised) way. It is very helpful if such initiatives are informed by ongoing research. A research model which may be useful is one suggested by Kamil in 1989 (cited in Benjamin, 1993, p. 2). In this model all parties engage in,

a cycle of research that begins with an ethnographic examination of the context as a whole, is followed by case studies to focus carefully on a few individuals, continues with experimental research of new approaches, and ends with another ethnographic examination to see how the new procedures work in an entire context.

A sense of what these principles mean in practice may be gained from the following examples, one from the USA and two from New Zealand.

VALUABLE LESSONS FROM THE USA

One of the most concerted efforts to construct a collaborative relationship between school and home has occurred in the USA. Extensive research over a period of approximately 20 years into promoting school, family and community partnerships to enhance children's learning has been carried out by Epstein and her colleagues at John Hopkins University in the USA (Epstein, 2001; Epstein et al., 2002). She has developed an integrated theory of family-school relations based on the view that family and school have overlapping spheres of influence on children's development and learning³, and on her finding that virtually all parents want their children to succeed educationally.

Epstein's research has demonstrated that it is possible for schools to take the initiative in establishing partnership relations with families and their communities, to the academic and social benefit of the children in their joint care. She found, however, that an action team comprising three teachers and three parents (and an administrator), representing children across the age range, is necessary to sustain such a partnership programme over time. A key purpose of such partnerships is to develop family-like school and community settings, and school-like home settings. Based on her ongoing research, Epstein (2001) concluded that, "students' test scores suggest that schools are more effective when families and schools work together with the student on basic skills" (p. 35), although this was more true of reading than mathematics. The evidence suggested that increased achievement is possible even in families with little formal education. What is clear though, is that many parents require guidance on how to help their children at home. Replicating inappropriate teaching approaches which the parents experienced when they were young (which are often all they know) can be unhelpful or worse.

Epstein (2001) stressed that children must be located at the centre of school/home partnership thinking because, ultimately, it is the children who are the key actors in

their education and development and who produce their own successes. It is therefore assumed that,

... if children feel cared for and encouraged to work hard in the role of student, they are more likely to do their best to learn to read, write, calculate, and learn other skills and talents and to remain in school. (Epstein, 2001, p. 404)

To facilitate this, Epstein and her colleagues have found that programmes and services provided by school and community need to be family-friendly, that is, they should take into account the needs and realities of family life, be feasible to conduct, and equitable toward all families (Epstein, 2001). Epstein lists a range of ways in which schools and families may be involved in partnerships (for example, providing parents with ideas about how they can help their children at home) but stresses that partnership programmes take time to develop since "The development of a partnership is a process, not a single event" (Epstein, 2001, p. 420). At the heart of such partnerships is a feeling of caring which involves both trusting and respecting.

The Johns Hopkins University Center on School, Family and Community Partnerships has established a new research and development initiative called the National Network of Partnership Schools. This network ensures an ongoing action research approach to identifying what works in school-home partnerships for specific contexts. The aims of the Center are to provide a research foundation to guide schools, districts, and policymakers to (a) create and support positive, permanent programmes of partnership, (b) disseminate information about what works, and (c) learn from a variety of approaches implemented in diverse schooling environments. The work of the Center may be accessed via their website⁴.

A NEW ZEALAND EXAMPLE

A number of New Zealand initiatives have incorporated the principles listed above. For example, recent projects undertaken by Bishop, Glynn and Berryman (Bishop & Berryman, 2002; Glynn, Berryman, & Glynn, 2000) have involved partnerships with parents. The latter study (Glynn et al., 2000), undertaken in Rotorua, sought to boost the literacy development of low-achieving 7 to 8-year-old Māori children through collaborative home and school strategies. The parents learn and implemented a range of reading and writing strategies, and the results showed that children within each of the three sets of low decile (1–3) schools who participated in the project made positive and substantial reading and writing gains.

These gains were greater than those of children who received literacy teaching only at school.

Another New Zealand research study which has been of interest to teachers over the past two decades was that conducted by Biddulph (1983, 1993; Biddulph & Tuck, 1983) in Christchurch. Biddulph developed a low-cost group workshop programme for parents of a sample of 48 nine and ten-year-old children who were low-progress readers. They were drawn from seven Christchurch primary schools located in a range of SES areas. The programme (which was conducted at the local schools) was designed to enable the parents to help their children at home, and consisted of a series of four 75-minute workshops⁵ (spread over seven weeks) that explored with parents:

- a) basic understandings of the reading process, and how children learn to read,
- b) appropriate strategies to support their children's reading at home,
- c) demonstrations of how to provide constructive support,
- d) guidance and support in accessing suitable reading material from their neighbourhood library, and
- e) opportunities to talk about their experiences.

Biddulph (1983) found that parents were very keen to help their children with their reading (even when their own understanding and reading of English were limited). Compared with a control group, most children made highly significant gains in their reading (sustained over more than 12 months), grew in self-esteem and confidence, and developed positive attitudes towards both reading and being helped with reading at home. Prior to the project, none of the children in the study was reading beyond a level of 8.5 years on the study measures, and many were reading well below this level. At the second follow-up testing (16 months after the programme), 76% of the tutored children had a reading age greater than 9.5 years, whereas only 10% of the non-tutored children had reached this level. In addition, many parents reported that they had developed more supportive and positive relationships with their children, and that they were using the programme strategies to help siblings of the original group of children (and in some cases were also showing other parents/friends how to help their children).

The underlying processes of the programme were of critical importance⁶. These were designed to create both a genuine, collaborative and non-threatening partnership between the parents, their children, and the programme tutor, and also a sense of community among the parents and teachers present at the workshops. The programme has since been implemented in other parts of New Zealand, apparently with similar results. For example, an Invercargill teacher is reported to have found that a group of children from her school, on testing, showed 2 years progress after 8 weeks involvement in the programme (Lancaster, 1985). The programme has been successfully extended to other schools, including Kura Kaupapa Māori, and also to secondary level, where parents and adult volunteers have helped low progress readers make better sense of the text materials they encounter.

FINAL COMMENT

In my experience as a teacher, it is extremely useful if extra informed assistance can be found to help students with their learning. The use of peers offers possibilities, but parents or caregivers can be a wonderful resource, provided they are helped in very respectful ways that are consistent with the principles outlined above to develop specific strategies for specific tasks – such as helping children with their reading/literacy development, or helping them learn their times tables (for example, by finding the patterns formed by the numbers).

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NOTES

1. Although hearing loss and excessive television viewing may seem straightforward in terms of being barriers to learning, the factors that result in hearing loss and excessive television are more complex.
2. The best evidence syntheses are available online from the Ministry of Education: www.minedu.govt.nz/goto/bestvidence/synthesis
3. Epstein (2001, p. 22) points out that this theory contrasts with
 - a 'separate responsibilities' theory in which schools and families operate independently
 - a 'shared responsibilities' theory which emphasises the complementary roles played by schools and families
 - a 'sequential responsibilities' theory which emphasises the critical stages of parents' and teachers' contributions to children's development.
4. The John Hopkins Centre website is: <http://www.csos.jhu.edu/p2000>
5. These workshops were also attended by a few teachers from the schools who were interested in becoming programme facilitators so that they could conduct the programme with other parents. Teachers who wish to enquire about updated copies of the parent-programme resources are welcome to contact: Jeanne.Biddulph@paradise.net.nz
6. For example, it built on the parents' strengths (such as their desire to help their children), it collaborated in meeting their transport and childcare needs, it sought their views, it used humour, it used personal contact, it reassured parents who were anxious about their own literacy levels, and it sought and addressed their concerns.