

Council of Catholic School Parents

Great Teaching, Inspired Learning

November 2012

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Background

Support from the Current Reform Agenda

The current national reform agenda involves a more coordinated and institutionalised approach to parent engagement with schooling than we have seen previously. The current agenda includes a greater focus on transparency and accountability to parents and the community *and* parent and community engagement with learning – and makes working in partnership with parents a core aspect of schooling.

The Melbourne Declaration states that:

Partnerships between students, parents, carers and families, the broader community, business, schools and other education and training providers bring mutual benefits and maximise student engagement and achievement.

Partnerships engender support for the development and wellbeing of young people and their families and can provide opportunities for young Australians to connect with their communities, participate in civic life and develop a sense of responsible citizenship. **In particular, the development of partnerships between schools and Indigenous communities, based on cross-cultural respect, is the main way of achieving highly effective schooling for Indigenous students.**

In 2008, the National Family School Partnership Framework, approved by all Australian States and Territories, was published and distributed to schools. The framework provides an agreed national approach to guide schools and families to build effective partnerships to support student learning. The Framework is premised on the research which demonstrates effective schools have high levels of parental and community involvement and that this involvement is strongly related to improved student learning, attendance and behaviour.

The Framework identifies seven key dimensions to working with parents and carers:

1. Recognising the role of families
2. Connecting home and school learning
3. Communicating effectively
4. Participating in a wide variety of ways
5. Consultative decision-making
6. Collaborating beyond the school
7. Building community and identity

We believe these seven dimensions are instructive for practicing and pre-service teachers in terms of identifying the key skills and dispositions that teachers will need to work in partnership with parents, families and communities.

In light of the current educational reform agenda and in particular the Melbourne Declaration on the Educational Goals for Young Australians it is imperative that parent, family and community engagement is made explicit in quality teaching programs and standards and teacher education programs.

The National Teacher Standards

References to the family backgrounds and experiences of children and parent engagement are evident across the new standards, namely in 1.3, 1.5, 2.4, 3.7, 5.5 7.3.

The NSW Teacher Standards

Recognition of diverse backgrounds and needs of students, effective communication strategies, safe and supportive environments and connection with the wider community are incorporated in the standards across Elements 2, 4, 5 and 7.

However, we believe they are vulnerable to being watered down or neglected in teacher training programs.

Inspired learning

What knowledge and skills will our children need to thrive in the 21st century?

Students beginning school in 2013 will be entering the workforce after formal education sometime between 2025 and 2040. Given the exponential rate of change that we have experienced over the past twenty to thirty years it is almost impossible to predict the environment or the skills that today's students will need to thrive in the second half of the 21st century. The students that enter our schools in 2013 who go on to become teachers themselves may well be teaching at the end of the 21st century so it is vital to nurture in them and all students the creativity and resilience that will see them through their education and working life in the 21st century.

With the inexorable spread of globalisation, individuals who are innovative, collaborative, open to the world and resilient to change will adapt and flourish in an uncertain future. They will require knowledge of the world around them: how it works politically, geographically, scientifically and socially.

Within such an outward focused education the social and emotional wellbeing of students will be paramount so that teachers and schools will need to connect children to their communities and foster in them skills to build healthy relationships with others. The ability to work collaboratively, resolve conflict and manage adversity are the necessary skills that schools working closely with families will engender in students to prepare them for their social and working lives. This gains importance particularly, in the secondary years of schooling when students' mental health issues can predominate their school life, yet parents traditionally disengage from school in these years.

What makes a teacher inspiring?

An inspiring teacher is someone who is demonstrably engaged in their subject and pedagogy itself, someone who is passionate about the transfer of knowledge and is excited when they see enquiry and critical response in their students because they themselves are lifelong learners who have not lost their own infatuation with the world.

What should students expect from their teachers?

A 'fair go' is what all students and families hope for and expect from their teachers. This is the fundamental principle which forms the basis of a positive learning experience for the student. 'School' gathers students from all backgrounds, ability and needs levels, predispositions and experience, into one reservoir with specific norms. Such norms need to be expanded to allow for such variables as special needs, Aboriginality, disadvantage, non-English backgrounds and others so that students will experience connection to their wider community through their school which research shows is one of the fundamental building blocks of wellbeing for students and teachers alike.

"There is clear evidence that teachers' understanding of their local communities, including families and the wider community, relates to the efficacy of their teaching and their sense of satisfaction in their work" (Freebody & Freebody 2010).

Students should expect teachers to model good relationships. This means that teachers will treat students with respect even when the students themselves fail to behave in such a manner for it is only in modeling such appropriate behavior that students will be transformed. This needs to be mirrored at the school, primarily in its culture and the relationships that are modeled between staff and staff, staff and students, staff and families, and then embedded in the policy and procedures for pastoral care; discipline; complaints; welfare etc.

What should parents expect from their child's teacher?

Parents are the first educators of their child and thus most significant in their child's development and success at school.

A mother's highest qualification level and the early years home learning environment (including how often parents read to their child, teach the alphabet, play with numbers, sing songs, nursery rhymes etc) are still the strongest predictors of academic, social and behavioural outcomes at age 10 and 11, in line with findings at younger ages (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons et al 2008).

Parents know their child's strengths and weaknesses and should expect teachers to work with them to nurture each child's individual abilities. This necessitates open and regular two-way communication channels regarding the student's progress and disposition; regular communication about subject content and expectations; and a warm and welcoming invitation to school events and activities. Sometimes, the teacher is required to go even further in an attempt to engage 'hard to reach' parents which requires creativity and genuine commitment to working with parents to uncover new ways of reaching out.

How can teachers, parents and students work together to raise expectations for student outcomes?

The evidence is clear that when teachers and families work together to convey high expectations, support the child's learning and meet the needs of the individual child then the result is better learning for the student, a more fulfilling experience of school and increased social capital all round.

Professor John Hattie in his study published in 2009 identified parental aspirations and expectations as having the strongest relationship with student achievement and even though they begin their child's education with high hopes and aspirations, parents' hopes are often degraded as their child progresses through school. The 'language' of educators is one of the barriers that excludes parents from continuing to participate in their child's education and retain their high hopes for their achievement: parents can feel shut out from the school environment both physically and figuratively. Therefore it is important to meaningfully engage parents in their child's learning at school.

Engagement implies that parents are "an essential part of the learning process, an extended part of the pedagogic process" and should be combined with other efforts to enhance the academic achievement of children. (Harris and Goodall: 2007, p67).

This requires a deliberate campaign to educate parents in the life and language of the school and to seek to reach parents through various means, whether it is in person or through print media or social media. Quality schools are schools which

- provide parents with information and professional advice they require to enhance and support their child's learning.
- facilitate opportunities for parents to undertake training and share their experience of strategies for supporting their child's learning.
- encourage and support parent engagement in children's learning activities.
- report regularly to parents in a readily understood language and format that provides interpretive comments about their child's progress in academic and non-academic areas and against school and statewide standards, where available.
- develop a sense of responsibility and ownership with parents for student learning, underpinned by common understandings of educational goals.
- recognise that co-ordination of programs across teachers and over time is an important element of the relationship between parents and the schools their children attend.

What are the clear messages from Australian and international research about how to support the best teaching and learning practices in our schools?

In terms of improving outcomes for students, there is an increasing body of evidence to support the importance of engaging families in their child's learning and involving parents in the life of the school. Research Report by Professor Alma Harris and Dr Janet Goodall, found that the research evidence is:

“When schools, families and community work together to support learning, children tend to do better in school, stay in school longer and like school more. [P]arental engagement is widely understood to be vital for the achievement of students.” (Harris A., Andrew-Power K., & Goodall, J. 2009).

Initial Teacher Education

Despite the importance of school-family relations to the work of beginning teachers, there is consensus in the international research literature that “Teacher preparation institutions often fall short of providing future teachers with opportunities to practice navigating social interactions with parents and care-givers” (Dotger, et al, 2008: 337; see also Epstein, 2005; Epstein & Sanders, 2006; Ferrara & Ferrara, 2005)

Have we got the right entry requirements for initial teacher education to get the best and brightest into teaching? Should there be an additional or stronger assessment process of applicants to ensure they possess the personal as well as academic qualities necessary for teaching?

Well-prepared beginning teachers have been found to be more effective than uncertified teachers. Darling Hammond (2000b) reported that ‘quality teachers’ were characterised as having full certification and a major in the field in which they teach though it is also recognised that a disposition towards self-awareness and reflective practice are important attributes that will contribute to the candidate being a better teacher. (Zammit et al. 2007).

What could we do to improve the practical Of teaching component of initial teacher education? For instance, should there be a special role in a school for a highly skilled teacher to supervise the practicum? How can universities and schools work together to improve the value of the practicum?

There are a number of issues around practicum undertaken by pre-service teachers throughout their four-year course.

Firstly, the current situation of almost half of students completing less than 80 days practicum over the four-year course seems to be insufficient to prepare them for their classroom experience. This is supported in the 2008 survey of New Educators Survey conducted by the Australian Education Union, where it was reported that

- Half (50.9%) had participated in **70-80 days practicum** on average throughout their pre- service education. For each year of the 4 year course, at least half the students had undertaken some practicum. The highest proportion, 71.4%, completed practicum in their 4th year.
- Yet **39.7%** said they were only “Satisfactorily” **supported by their university throughout their practicum**, (and 22.5% rated the support received as being either ‘poor’ or ‘very poor’).

While the duration of practicum is meager, it appears from the above statistics that the support that students receive during the practicum is also unsatisfactory. This point harks back to our previous point under Inspired learning regarding relationships in schools between staff/staff, staff/students, and staff/parents. If the duration of practicum increased to say a whole term in fourth year, then perhaps the student teacher could be welcomed into the school environment, mentored through their experience by leading school and university staff and simultaneously introduced to interactions with parents in a gradual and gentle fashion. They may even be assigned a parent mentor as well as a professional mentor. Similarly, when teachers in practice are approached by parents when there is conflict, there must be

clear policies and procedures at the school for handling such situations which stipulate that teachers should be supported by their executive staff or other staff in dealings and meetings with parents. This would avoid teachers feeling isolated and victimised when having to deal with difficult situations on their own.

Do we have the right balance of requirements for preparing great teachers? For instance, should there be more emphasis on content discipline studies, on classroom management and/or on the time spent in schools for the practicum placement?

In July 2010, the three peak parent associations in NSW received a grant-in-aid from the NSW Minister for Education to develop as part of a parent/carer engagement strategy teacher professional development and pre-service teacher training modules. This work has been outsourced to a Sydney-based university with an academic advisory panel made up of teacher educators from most of the NSW teacher education faculties. An early task of the project was to map parent engagement in existing teacher education programs in NSW – the preliminary feedback is that it is inconsistent and nominal at best (see also Mullins: 2002; AEU: 2008; Harris et al: 2004). It is often a lecture in the final semester of study which is insufficient for preparing new teachers for what is arguably one of the most important aspects of their future roles.

This is supported in the 2008 survey of New Educators Survey conducted by the Australian Education Union where it was reported that:

- New educators (**86.5%**) **did not think their training adequately prepared** them for dealing with difficult parents and colleagues and
- **69.5%** felt their training did not provide an adequate grounding to teach particular groups of students, such as students with disabilities, students from non-English speaking backgrounds and students from dysfunctional backgrounds.

A recent project in NSW funded by Commonwealth through the National Partnership for Teacher Quality and the Council of Catholic School Parents is aimed at building “in-service” teacher capacity in the area of parent engagement. The work of the Council of Catholic School Parents with principals in schools and system authorities has also highlighted that beginning teachers feel their pre-service training has not prepared them adequately to work with parents in a variety of ways and contexts. The **Partners4Learning** project aims to address these gaps as well as addressing the broader reform agenda by providing teachers with a portal to access research syntheses, lists of activities, downloadable resources and case studies and professional learning across each of the key National Family School Partnership Framework dimensions. See: www.partners4learning.edu.au

While Partners4Learning is an important project it is no substitute for solid pre-service training in this area which is both timely and necessary.

Recommendations for teacher education programs

In our view, teacher education programs seeking to effectively address parent engagement need to:

- Be based on an ecological model of the child development
- Be evidence based
- Reflect the National Family School Partnership Framework dimensions
- Address parent engagement at different stages of schooling – early childhood, primary and secondary
- Address the particular issues around engaging families from non-English speaking backgrounds, families at risk, families of children with disabilities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents, carers and community members
- Provide opportunities to explore/ experience parent engagement in a professional context.

Ideally, at a minimum, a course should be offered in first year and then embedded in other courses throughout the program of study.

How can we build stronger partnerships between schools and teacher education institutions that support both the academic rigour and practical skills in teacher preparation?

The links between teacher education institutions and schools should be stronger for the purpose of informing each other in current theory and practice. Teacher education institutions will benefit from extending their teaching base to include input from school personnel and other providers like the **Council of Catholic School Parents** to assist with providing information and instruction (for example in the realm of parent engagement) that is up to date and rich in real life experience. A program of exchange and invitation will encourage personal relationships and links between teacher education institutions, schools and other agencies.

Entry into the Profession

What support do new teachers need when they arrive in our schools? For instance, do they need support in building relationships with other school staff and with parents?

Research shows that there are benefits for teachers working with colleagues within and outside their schools, which is important for moral support, sharing of workloads, increasing confidence and adopting innovation. (Hargreaves, 2000). Schools which have a culture of collaboration among executives and staff, staff and students, staff and parents will enhance the development and professional growth of the beginning teacher and influence them to remain in the profession for a longer period of time.

What models of professional learning are most suited to early career teachers? Should professional learning for new teachers be the same or different from that available to more experienced teachers?

In the early stages of teaching, professional learning which involves feedback from colleagues, collaboration with other teaching staff and classroom observation are all effective ways of swiftly improving the confidence and capabilities of the new teacher. Once again, this requires that the climate of the school that the new teacher enters is one of collaboration thus encouraging the new teacher to seek and accept input from other staff.

How can we strengthen induction and early career mentoring support for beginning teachers in schools? For instance, should they be attached to a teacher mentor?

Mentoring and coaching are the most effective ways to induct new teachers when the spirit is one of collaboration as mentioned above. Mentors need to be recognised in their schools as someone who is accomplished in their subject matter and whose attitude and demeanour support the school vision.

How should we best address performance issues with new teachers?

When there are performance issues with new teachers it may be more a case of the new teacher not having been properly inducted into the professional code and conduct of the school, a step which must not be skipped since it is a critical stage of their engagement. If infringements do occur at the outset then the wise and caring counsel of the mentor should be able to assist them to modify their behaviour. It is critical that they are assisted to see that the nature of their response to such intervention is pivotal and may even assist the way that they subsequently intervene when a student is non-compliant or underperforms.

Should there be targeted, 're-entry' short courses that provide expert updating on recent curriculum and teaching practices and requirements for teachers who are returning after a long period of time away from teaching?

Parents' expectations of school and teachers have changed significantly over the past couple of decades and no doubt will continue to do so. For teachers who have been out of the classroom for a while they would benefit from a refresher course on the generational differences, conflict resolution and parents expectations today, all of which can be delivered in NSW Institute accredited courses by the Council of Catholic School Parents.

Develop and Maintain Professional Practice

How do we support schools to build a culture of performance and development for all teachers?
For instance, how do we make every school an environment where teachers observe each other's teaching practice and collaborate on how to improve student learning?

For this to happen, schools, schools staff and especially staff rooms need to be places that are open, transparent and non-threatening. Where there is a closed culture in a school, it is an impediment to collaboration and development of staff, particularly new teachers. The culture of the school is led by the principal and executive and therefore their attitude and approach to dealing with staff and parents will set the tone at the school. Due to increased accountability and expectations, principals and teachers are under a lot of pressure today to not 'mess up'. If good relationships are set up from the outset, then when problems arise it will be easier and less painful to restore the equilibrium. This needs to be supported in the school policies and procedures for pastoral care, discipline and complaints which should have restorative principles as their foundation.

How can we make sure that teacher professional learning has the greatest impact on student learning outcomes?

Professional development which provides ongoing opportunities for teachers to engage in content, active follow-up, collaboration and feedback (Meiers & Ingvarson 2005) has shown significant effect on teacher learning and student outcomes (Zammit et al. 2007).

What other preconditions or qualifications should we require of those aspiring to be principals?

By the time a teacher reaches the level of principal, their responsibility becomes more about relationship management than subject content proficiency. Therefore skills in areas such as conflict resolution, team building and cohesion, and personnel development should be sought at this level. While these attributes are not necessarily learned through direct instruction, they can be enhanced through shared experiential learning. (Zammit et al. 2007) and so principals should be required to be part of professional networks and learning communities.

Recognise and Share Outstanding Practice

In NSW and nationally, there are professional standards for teachers which cover the relevant areas upon which teachers need to focus to be a good teacher, become a better teacher and finally lead other teachers in their practice. The standards cover the range of skills required for good teaching and learning including student diversity, effective communication, right relationships in safe environments and engagement with parents and the broader community. These are areas which cannot be overlooked or given scant attention in the face of funding cuts since they are central to children and families having a positive and fruitful association with their schools. In the overall assessment and accreditation of teachers these elements need to attract similar professional development and remediation to the core elements of teaching and learning. In particular, as teachers progress through the levels at their school, their need to perform well in these areas is even greater since they influence the culture and climate of the whole school.

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