

“It all comes down to the leadership”: the role of the school principal in fostering parent-school engagement

Abstract

Parent-school engagement is widely understood to be an important factor in children’s school experience and educational outcomes. However, there is considerable variation in the ways that schools manage their relationships with parents, as well as variation in what parents themselves view as important for engagement with their children’s schooling. In a qualitative study conducted with parents in urban, outer metropolitan, regional and rural areas of the Australian state of New South Wales, we found that parents considered the attitudes, communication and leadership practices of school principals to play a crucial role in fostering and maintaining relationships between parents and schools. These findings suggest that despite policy rhetorics positioning schools and parents as ‘partners’ in the educational equation, parents are more likely to be engaged with schools where the principal is perceived as welcoming and supportive of their involvement, and less likely to be engaged where the principal is perceived as inaccessible, dismissive, or disinterested in supporting their involvement.

Keywords

parent-school engagement, school leadership, principals, partnership

Background: parent-school engagement, school leadership, and the policy context

Parent-school engagement has come to the attention of policy makers and educators alike as an important dimension of children’s school experience and learning outcomes, and “[i]t is widely recognised that if pupils are to maximise their potential from schooling they will need the full support of their parents” (Desforges, 2003: 7). Parent engagement takes many forms, however, and its articulation in policy statements tends to focus on the shared responsibilities of parents in the education of their children. Influential work conducted by Joyce Epstein in the USA (Epstein, 1987, 1995, 2001) has identified six types of parental involvement, “parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community” shown to “help parents and community partners become engaged in productive ways.” (Epstein & Sanders, 2006: 87). In the Australian context, Graham Daniel (2005) has observed that three terms—parent involvement, parent participation, and family-school partnerships—tend to be used in the research

literature and policy documents in reference to the types of activities associated with parental engagement with schooling. Here, we use the term ‘parent engagement’ as an umbrella term that encompasses the broad range of activities described above. Whilst acknowledging distinctions between specific forms of engagement—whether at home, in classrooms and playgrounds, or in decision making roles such as parent representative bodies or participation in advocacy groups—we find the term ‘engagement’ useful as a signifier of a range of orientations, attitudes and activities through which parental interest in and engagement with their children’s education may be expressed.

In this paper we consider the views of Australian parents who participated in focus group interviews about their experiences of parent-school engagement¹. In 22 focus groups with parents of children in independent, Catholic and public sector primary and secondary schools in the Australian state of New South Wales (NSW), there was a consistent view among parents that the role of the school principal is key to the success or otherwise of parent-school relations. In this paper, we analyse interview excerpts and consider their implications, arguing that for many parents, whether or not they feel un/welcome within the school community is significantly shaped by the ways in which the school principal exercises inclusive leadership with and on behalf of parents.

Our study takes place in the context of recent policy moves towards increased school autonomy within a national agenda of top-down school reform, that has focused a great deal of policy and scholarly attention on school principals and the central role of effective leadership in school improvement (Clarke, 2006; Drysdale and Gurr, 2011; Leithwood and Riehl, 2005; Wildy and Clarke, 2008). Principals are being held to account in an unprecedented way (Watterson and Caldwell, 2010), and enduring ‘the stress of working in a 'fishbowl' under the critical eye of parents

and the media' (Watson, 2009: 11). The significant changes in the roles of principals have been part of a broader policy shift towards the devolution of responsibility and accountability to schools, in an increasingly privatized and competitive schooling environment (Blackmore, 2004; Connell, 2010; Cranston et al., 2003). In Australia as elsewhere, developing leadership capacity in order to improve the quality, flexibility and competitiveness of schools has been the over-arching goal of recent strategic initiatives across the public system (Watterson and Caldwell, 2010) and has prompted inquiry into the adequacy of current processes in the areas of principal recruitment and selection, training and development (Clarke, 2006; Cranston, 2007; Gronn and Rawlings-Sanaei, 2003; Scott, 2003; Su, Gamage and Mininberg, 2003). In Australia, the National Professional Standard for Principals (AITSL, 2011) has been recently instituted with the aim of standardising and clarifying the role of the principal within a rapidly changing, competitive and challenging public schooling context.

Increasingly, managerialist models of school leadership resembling that of a CEO in the private sector (Cranston, 2007; Gronn, 2003; Thomson, 2001), place demands on principals to manage the complexities and contradictions of reform agendas that may be antithetical to the more collaborative orientations of educators – and of policy prescriptions - in the area of school-family partnerships (Blackmore, 2004; Connell, 2010; Victory, 2011). Critical scholarship points to the 'democratic deficit' (Kimber and Erich, 2011) where a performance focus that imposes market relationships on public schools produces an emphasis on standards, outcomes and results, while undermining the professionalism and moral accountability of teachers and school leaders (Ball, 1998, 2009; Blackmore, 2004; Connell, 2010). For principals, this has been seen to produce a demand for forms of technical, rational management away from more welfare, justice and professional orientations

(Kimber and Erich, 2011). Similarly, as Blackmore et al. (2006) point out, choice based schooling has led to a greater emphasis on image management, with principals assuming a greater responsibility in representing the identity of the school in an attempt to manage community and media perceptions of the ‘successful’ or ‘failing’ school (Blackmore and Thorpe, 2003; Blackmore and Thomson 2004; Thomson, 2004; Thomson, Blackmore, Sachs and Tragenza, 2003).

For schools in challenging circumstances, the focus on school improvement has led to an emphasis on individualised, transformational leadership in which the role of the principal has been seen as central to the successful, flexible, learning organization (Bush, 2011; Giles, 2006; Leithwood, Patten, and Jantzi, 2010). In some ways this trend has represented a return to the ‘heroic leader’ of traditional schooling (Blackmore and Thomson, 2004). As ‘change leaders’, principals are seen to have a repertoire of skills and identities (Thomson, 2004) between which they can switch flexibly to meet changing circumstances. Thus in addition to the traditional pedagogically oriented approach to school leadership (MacNeill, Cavenagh and Silcox, 2003), the 21st century principal is required to be a skilled risk manager, entrepreneur, and change manager with an internal as well as outward-looking focus and an increased capacity for strategic engagement with multiple external agents (Barrett-Baxendale and Burton, 2009; Hoyle and Wallace, 2005). Blackmore also points out the huge emotional labour involved in leadership as a ‘social practice dependent on relationships that are both fraught and fulfilling’ (2010: 642). This requires principals to undertake emotional management work of themselves and of others’ within the psychic economies of schools that demand high levels of emotional literacy or intelligence (Blackmore, 2010; Warareba and Clarke, 2011).

These policy shifts have been accompanied by policies promoting greater parent participation in

schools, both in supporting their children's learning, and as participants in aspects of school policy and management (Daniel, 2005; Henderson and Mapp, 2002). Over the last two decades in Australia and abroad, parent engagement has been increasingly enshrined in policy, where schools that are inclusive and responsive to clientele are seen as more effective in harnessing the resources of all stakeholders for the purposes of capacity-building and maximizing efficiency and efficacy (DEEWR, 2008). The *"Family School Partnerships Framework - A Guide for Schools and Families"* commissioned by the Australian Government Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR, 2008) for example, emphasizes the need for strong, collaborative family-school partnerships engaging parents in a 'sharing of power, responsibility and ownership', 'responsive dialogue', 'shared aims and goals' and 'a commitment to joint action' (DEEWR, 2008: 15).

Research, however, continues to highlight areas of dissonance between policy rhetoric and actual levels of parity, dialogue and trust within partnerships, as is particularly seen in the case of marginalised populations (Auerbach, 1995a, 1995b; Crozier, 2001; Harris, 2002; Ranson, 2011; Thomson, 2003; Vincent and Martin, 2002). Forms and levels of parent involvement, parent attitudes towards their roles, and the power relationships between parents and schools have always been shown to be diverse and complex, shaped by the interactions of a large range of family and school factors in each local school context (Clarke and Wildy, 2004; Connell, 2004). Research in the UK, for example, has identified changes in the ways that parents view their role, with parents increasingly viewing themselves as primarily responsible for their children's education (see Peters, Seeds, Goldstein and Coleman, 2007; Goodall and Vorhaus, 2011). Within a more highly stratified and competitive schooling system, research also points to the very different ways that parents marginalized by minority backgrounds or socioeconomic status may be positioned by comparison

with more ‘entitled-minded’ white middle-class parents (Landeros, 2010; Ranson, Martin & Vincent, 2004). Such differences notwithstanding, many parents have responded to their position as consumers and ‘key stakeholders’ (Delhi, 2005) in the educational equation, by taking up more active roles in the exercise of ‘choice’ and ‘voice’ (Vincent & Martin, 2002; Vincent & Tomlinson, 1997), by holding teachers to account (Delhi, 2005), and by advocating at school on behalf of their children (Troman, 2000).

Such forms of engagement highlight the point that “ it is in the specifics of their encounters that parents, teachers and...students become the subjects of power, status and responsibility.” (Maclure & Walker, 2000: 21) Despite the emphasis on greater accountability and transparency of schools having shifted the focus of attention toward technical, rational forms of performative management (Ball, 1998; Blackmore, 2004; Connell, 2010), parents’ relationships with schools tend nonetheless to lie in the messy, ambiguous and complex areas of school management that demand fresh and broader understandings and approaches to school leadership and training (Day, 2004). Given their role as key stakeholders in schooling, and the increasing effect they have on the working lives of teachers and principals (Landeros, 2010), it is important to consider the ways in which parents themselves view school leadership as a factor in the relationships between parents and schools. In the following sections, then, we aim to provide some insight into the ‘tricky footwork’ (McFarlane, 2008) of parent-school relations from the perspective of geographically and culturally diverse groups of parents, with a view to better understanding the ways that parents themselves understand the role of principals in fostering engagement.

Notes about the study

This qualitative study conducted in 2011 was concerned with the range of ways in which parents of children in independent, Catholic and public sector schools in the Australian state of NSW engage with their children's schooling. Following approval from the [University] Human Research Ethics Committeeⁱⁱ, participants were initially recruited via notices about the study circulated in newsletters and websites of the NSW Parents' Council, the NSW & ACT Council of Catholic Schools Parents, and the NSW Federation of Parents' and Citizens' Association. Interested parents were provided with information letters and consent forms, and interview locations negotiated with a member of the research team. A total of twenty-two focus group interviews (with groups ranging in size between 3 and 26 participants) were subsequently conducted in urban, suburban, outer metropolitan and regional centres in NSW, with a total of 174 participants. Focus group interviews were audio-recorded using digital voice recorders and professionally transcribed, with recorded interviews supplemented by hand-written field notes. In the two largest focus groups (n = 25, 26), physical limitations of the space in which interviews were conducted were such that recordings were not feasible. In this case, hand-written field notes were recorded by the researcher and a scribe, and with participants also invited to write down any additional comments, which were then given to the research team at the conclusion of the interview, transcribed, and incorporated into the corpus of data.

The study explored parents' experiences of engaging directly and indirectly with schools, their levels and types of involvement, and the factors that impact upon their engagement over time and in a range of circumstances. While the semi-structured nature of the focus group interviews allowed for additional topics, issues and concerns to be introduced by participants, the focus group interviews were organized around the following themes:

- 1) The ways in which parents of children in NSW schools currently experience their relationships with their child's school, and what they see as key issues for ongoing success in managing and maintaining those relationships;
- 2) Factors that impact upon the relationships between parents, and families and their child's school, and what schools or teachers can do to encourage, enhance and sustain parent engagement; and
- 3) What parents consider necessary for teacher professional development and pre-service teacher education programs in order to build capacity in preparing and supporting teachers for effectively managing and maintaining their relationships with parents, carers and families.

These initial themes pertain primarily to parents' involvement with schools and their relationships with teachers. However, while initial themes were generated for guiding the interviews, we nonetheless understand qualitative interviews as involving the 'negotiation of meanings' (Tate 1998: 13) with participants, rather than imposing a preconceived framework of ideas, meanings and interpretations. Therefore, other themes emerged during interviews as participants responded to and raised questions, queried one another's responses, and generated insights about their own and others' experiences. Some of these additional themes included: the importance, from parents' perspectives, of school leadership in fostering a climate that is welcoming, inclusive and supportive of parent engagement; forms of parent engagement that are often less visible, hence often unacknowledged, within schooling contexts; parents' awareness of and involvement in their children's classroom environment, learning activities and school-based relationships; parents' involvement in formally structured committees, such as P&C groups, fundraising, and so on; perceived barriers to parent engagement in a broad range of forms; intersections between school and family life, and the ways that both parents and children form views about self, learning and future in dialogue with schooling experiences, processes and practices.

The qualitative approach taken in the study is useful for generating a rich amount of data about the ways that subjects make sense of their world, narrate their experience and ascribe it meanings (Ezzy 2002). We acknowledge that limitations of such a study include the potential for disaffected individuals or groups to treat focus group interviews as an opportunity to voice complaints, as well as the potential for groups with shared experiences to express similar views, to feel compelled to assent to dominant views within the group, or to co-construct meanings in ways that give undue emphasis to negative, biased or politicized versions of events. Concerns such as these were mitigated in the first instance by attending carefully to developing interview questions that invited participants to comment on positive, as well as difficult experiences, and that asked for examples of their engagement with schools that had been particularly successful. When difficult experiences were discussed, care was taken in interviews to ask parents about what they might have done or would in future do differently; about what, in their view, educators could have done differently, and to invite reflection on factors that make a difference in resolving conflicts effectively. In addition, we found that while some parent participants in focus groups were well known to each other, with one or more of their children having attended one or more schools together, the groups were seldom homogenous, and overall there was a tendency for different schools, schooling sectors, experiences and points of view to be represented within the focus groups. Further, some participants held formalized roles as parent representatives within their respective schooling sectors, were leaders of well-established advocacy groups, or were themselves teachers, principals or education bureaucrats. These participants were therefore able to comment on a range of relevant issues from the perspective of both personal and professional experience, providing a further counter-balance to the potential limitations described above.

‘It comes from the top’: vision, accessibility and communication

Despite the recent support for shared, or ‘distributed’, leadership (Harris 2011; Murphy, Smylie and Mayrowitz, 2009), parents in our study confirmed the persistence of a top-down view of the single-handed leader as ‘the literal face of authority’ (Thomson, 2002: 53). The principal was seen across all focus groups as responsible for setting the ‘tone’ or what Thomson (2002) has called the ‘thisness’ of the school through a combination of formal management techniques, personal values and personality attributes. As one parent suggested, the coherence of a school within the broader community was facilitated by a shared “vision” communicated from the top:

The other real thing that I think that works, is to have a vision for the school, and a vision that comes from the principal, and it goes through all of the teachers, so all of the teachers are sharing that same vision, so you’re all working towards the same thing. And then that vision is then shared with the kids and the carers, so that as a community, or as a school, you’re all on the same page. (Sue, Sydney Northern Suburbs focus group, May 2011)ⁱⁱⁱ

Particularly within primary schools, parents attributed the quality of the school culture to the principal’s attitude towards parent involvement in the school. A genuinely collaborative approach towards parents was seen to be fostered from the top, and communicated personally by the principal:

It was, it was – it was very positive. It had a lot to do with the principal in that particular school and I think that makes a difference – if your principal’s got the attitude to involve parents and wants them there and treats them as equals and we were talking about all being

on the same playing field – the parents, the school, education, the whole thing – then if everyone sees that then it will happen. (Bridget, Northern NSW focus group 1, July 2011)

Parents' comments showed that they were not unaware of the ways that parental choice within a competitive marketplace makes questions of school culture and image an important one. Parents in some of the groups we interviewed, particularly in smaller, less stable regional centres with declining or highly mobile populations and high numbers of disadvantaged families, were particularly aware of what they saw as the principal's role in managing the reputational project of the school. Parents openly discussed the competition between schools, and the ways that they saw principals working to ensure the reputation of schools over time. We see this as indicative of the high level of pressure placed on the principal as an entrepreneur and risk manager, within a competitive and volatile market of rising and falling school numbers. Parents themselves noted the power of the 'grapevine' in influencing school choice in their area:

Wendy: That school's going down, and then somebody they'll say "Well over at my school we wouldn't do that" so that school is on the rise. There is that, there's a fluid population that moves between schools based on the grapevine -

Anne: And the previous principal here worked very hard at building links with the community, with pre-schools so that [school] has quite a high profile in the community here, and so it's well stamped as being a good school, an open school, a welcoming school. So that culture has been built and then [principal] as the newer principal has built on that. So they're doing things really well here, but very much – it's top down – it's the culture of the school.

(Northern NSW focus group 2, July 2011)

The reputational management work of principals was regularly discussed by participants in terms of the notion of a ‘welcoming’ school as being inclusive and fostering a ‘familiar’ place of ‘community’. Parents in our study had clear ideas about how welcome they (and their children) were in their schools, and this was attributed both directly and indirectly to the principal:

Theresa: Principals model a behaviour there too, because I don’t think our principal is at all ..., never steps outside his door unless he's on his way somewhere. Once, he was like “It's great to see so many parents here but you know you can drop them off”.

Nicky: He said that?

Theresa: Yeah.

Nicky: Oh that’s terrible. It's like this is your opportunity to get to know the parents, and so ... to be here for everyone.

Helen: See I think that’s a personality thing isn’t it-

(Sydney inner west focus group, June 2011)

These parents have an expectation that the principal would want to get to know the parents, suggesting a perception of themselves as stakeholders and valued clients. The shared view that the

principal should be available to all communicates an expectation of inclusivity, and the principal's unavailability is attributed to limitations in motivation and personality.

Parents also considered the principal's visibility, particularly in primary school contexts, as indicative of the principal's attitude toward parent involvement. Parents frequently referred to a great principal as being regularly seen in the playground, at the school gates or joining bus duty, as well as knowing the names of children and parents. As one parent noted:

And you know just by things like she would come and visit the class and know all the kids' names and she would come into the playground. (Rosie, Sydney inner west focus group, June 2011)

In terms of parent access to teachers as well as the principal, there was a clear differentiation between primary and secondary schooling. Consistent with the research literature (Desforges, 2003; Hornby & Witte, 2010; Vasquez-Nuttall, Li & Kaplan, 2006), parents in our study who may have enjoyed an active presence in their child's primary school with regular communication with teachers and the principal spoke about their greater physical, cultural and academic distance from their children's secondary schools through a greater hierarchy of authority. They generally accepted this as relating to their child's increased independence and the higher number of teachers involved in the teaching process. As a result however, parents in the secondary schooling context emphasized the importance of clear structures of two-way communication between parents and the school, with a number of parents voicing concerns about being easily shut out by the school hierarchy. For example:

Our principal's really, really good that way, but he has a delegation process, if you ever get to him it's amazing, you never get to him, you always deal with the welfare, the assistant, ... coordinator, then welfare coordinator, or curriculum coordinator and then the AP, and you never get to the principal. So my son was suspended for 2 days and I still didn't get to the principal- there's just enormous brick walls about that sort of thing. (Leila, north coast NSW focus group, April 2011)

In addition to the need to effectively manage communication with individual families, the principal's skill in working effectively with parents through parent committees and Parents' and Citizens' groups^{iv} emerged as a key issue across both primary and secondary schooling. These committees were described as highly political and often conflicted, and parents discussed differences between principals who engage with the community via such groups, and those who employ gatekeeping practices that silence parents at meetings, and prevent them from having input into any policy areas of schooling:

And that's the thing, isn't it, you're allowed –you're allowed to basically, ask him anything. They've never said, "No you can't ask me that," whereas, in [another Independent secondary school] it was made quite clear to us that the P&F wasn't there to bail up the principal and ask all the hard questions at a P&F meeting - that wasn't what the purpose of the meeting was. The purpose of the meeting was fundraising and fundraising, but not to bail up the principal and ask the hard questions.

(Margaret, Western NSW focus group 1, April 2011)

A common criticism made by parents in our focus groups pertained to a perceived disinterest on the part of principals attending Parents' and Citizens' group meetings, or as one parent described it, the principal 'who didn't want to be there' (Janelle, Western NSW focus group, April 2011). It should be noted that within Australia the function of such groups differ from school to school, in some cases functioning primarily as an opportunity for parents to be provided with information or to participate in the organization of events and fundraisers, in other cases operating as a platform for the debate of relevant issues pertaining to the school community and the representation of parent views, and in other cases a combination of these. Similarly, some principals play an active part in such meetings, whereas others see their role as facilitating or supporting such groups, rather than directing or leading them in some way. In our study, parents' views of effective leadership in such contexts centred on the need for the principal to demonstrate leadership through a level of knowledge, interest and involvement that ensured inclusion and democratic representation, and demonstrated a capacity for innovation.

“It really filters down, you know”: (mis)trust, inclusiveness and positive engagement

Parent groups commonly referred to principals having played a transformational role in altering the culture' of a school by changing the ways in which parents engage with the school. One middle class parent group in Sydney's north, for example, described themselves as very actively involved. As one parent put it, she had been:

...exceptionally involved in the school ...I would have been in there virtually everyday, doing reading or maths groups or art, or helping with different things, helping with the teachers...' (Sue, Sydney north focus group, May 2011)

Other parents in the group agreed that they had been similarly actively involved. However, these women found their access to teachers suddenly restricted by the arrival of a new principal, which in turn impacted upon their perception of the school and their place in relation to it:

Paula: We had a new principal a few years ago, who changed I think, a lot of parents' attitude towards the involvement in the school. She's changed the teacher's attitudes towards accepting parents' help, I must say. ... She's very much someone who, may be good at her job, but is not comfortable, and been threatened by the level of development that parents can have with the school. She pays lip service to it, on a public basis in the newsletter in terms of ... (Talking over each other).

Sue: She only, she writes good stuff-

Barb: Good on spin-

Paula: She changed the entire culture of the school. (Sydney north focus group, May 2011)

For these parents, having conditions of their involvement in the classroom changed unexpectedly was experienced as disempowering, and had given rise to skepticism about the principal's attempts to maintain a public perception of inclusivity. While it could be argued that in some cases a principal might consider it necessary to temper the influence of some parents in order to regain 'professional control' (Landeros, 2010), the ability to effectively perform this kind of 'boundary work' requires high levels of communication skills and emotional management in order to achieve an outcome of mutual understanding and respect. By contrast, other parents pointed to the importance of proactive, transformational leadership needed to address entrenched patterns of exclusion among more vulnerable parent groups traditionally marginalised within schooling. Parents spoke of effective leaders as those prepared to challenge deficit views held by school personnel about parents and

communities. The importance of “embracing the community” was highlighted by a group of Indigenous parents in Southern Sydney:

Maureen: There are schools that have been there for a long time and the issues in the school could go from leader to leader and then they adopt the last leader’s stuff and then when the parent realises oh that’s another dodgy leader there, I’m not going to go back to that school and they won’t, you might get a charismatic and a really enthusiastic new leader who does new stuff and really works in the school and the community and gets out there, then you will get parents filtering into the school more.

Rhonda: I think what [Maureen] is saying is absolutely true, that unless the leaders of the school, the executive, the Principal, the RE, unless they actually embrace the community and say yes we want you to be part of our school, it’s got to be visible and it’s got to be fair dinkum, it’s got to be genuine, you start bullshitting people you will lose them real quick but for me it’s more about the school, the community isn’t part of the school, the school is part of the community.

Maureen: To make a school user friendly for parents is quite easy, you can just have a “welcome” or you could just have like an Aboriginal sign or flag or something like that to show that people here, you are welcome to come in and I know some parents don’t realise that they’re welcome, they get to the front gate, drop the kids off and then run. (Southern Sydney focus group, May 2011)

The feeling of being an outsider who is expected to ‘fit’ with the demands and expectations of the school was strong among parents from marginalized groups, who emphasised the importance of school operating as part of the community. As the example above of the Aboriginal flag illustrates, principals are regarded as key agents in framing new meanings for schools, including establishing symbolic displays of connection and genuine invitation that are consistently followed through in the

practices of the school. As Sheard and Avis argue, system leaders ‘set the terrain on which others are empowered to act’ within a ‘shared vision’ and a ‘core set of goals’ (2011: 85). This understanding of the principal as orienting the whole school community towards shared values and goals was often drawn on by parents, as a participant in a focus group with Indigenous parents described:

I done a presentation to the Board and when I finished I thought I explained what identity was and the next minute a person turned around and said yeah I’ve got an Aboriginal student in my school that’s one eighth - this Darwin sort of thinking. And that was the Principal ... I was like shaking in my boots because I had not known this lady very long, and I said well I’m Aboriginal but I’m fair and very proud, that’s what I said to her but I don’t know whether I’ll sit next to her next time but that was, I was really shocked to think that ... We’ve got so much to teach and learn from each other but if they’d only see that but if it isn’t supported from high up, like the Principal and the teaching staff because if the leadership’s there, of course your staff are going to go with the same views, and there’s a lot of negativeness ... (Katriona, Southern Sydney focus group, May 2011)

For parents who occupied marginal positions in schooling, trust was paramount, and these parents spoke openly about feelings of powerlessness and vulnerability in dealing with schools. In this instance, the principal’s apparent lack of understanding regarding racial and cultural politics undermines the confidence and trust that these Indigenous parents are hoping to foster in their children’s school. The importance of the principal’s role both in embodying the values of the school and in building relationships of trust was particularly evident among parents who felt that they were

not being heard, had difficulty gaining access to teachers and principals, or even in going through the front gates of their child's school:

To say you want to stay or be a part of the Catholic education as an Aboriginal family, just to get the courage up to walk through that gate, to ask the Principal how do I go about 'Hardship' [refers to Catholic sector schools Financial Hardship Policy]? It's just so hard because I've been there as a parent and I haven't done it because of feeling that my kids are going to be reprimanded or treated differently, myself treated differently because it has happened. (Maureen, Southern Sydney focus group, May 2011)

The new principal, he arrived the same time as when I separated. I went and seen him and told him I had separated. I told him my change of numbers and everything else. Well Josh was a little bit gifted and he wanted him to sit these OC classes and everything else. So he rang my ex up and I went and seen him and I said Josh lives with me – you should be ringing me up. He said "I ring who I want to ring unless you get a court order" and I really haven't been back to the school since. He said "I rang your husband at work". I said "Sorry, my husband – well my ex-husband hadn't worked for 15 years". I said "You rang him at the old family home." (Melinda, Illawarra focus group, June 2011)

In one focus group in Sydney's north, a parent with a child in a class for intellectually moderate students in primary school highlighted the way that the principal's attitude towards her son's class influenced how the class felt about themselves as well as the attitudes of others in the school:

It filters down, it really filters down, you know ... if the person at the top is showing some inclusiveness and being proud to have us in the school – it filters down through the school. (Liz, north west Sydney focus group, March 2011)

The parent's use of "us" highlights the way parents felt and identified with their child's marginal positioning in schooling, and the important role of the principal in fostering inclusiveness in the school. Similarly, a parent with a secondary school child with learning difficulties described the way the principal in a new school demonstrated his concern for her son's well-being after years of her having been 'against the wall' in another school:

I'm staggered actually, absolutely staggered. I mean the first – after his first week at the new [high] school I had the principal ring and say "How's Cameron going?" Has he settled in? Now I never heard from the principal at [previous high school] – I mean I am not saying I expected to but I didn't even ever have a conversation. He was there from year 7 to 10 and I have never seen the man and maybe that's my problem too. Maybe I should have maybe gone to him whereas I was going through counsellors and the special needs people and the year advisor but I felt much very I was against the wall up there, whereas here it's a much more – it's amazing and I think a lot of it comes from the top. The principal of the school is a very inclusive person. (Carly, Sydney north focus group, March 2011)

An attitude of inclusiveness toward parents and effective interpersonal communications were shown to be particularly important for more vulnerable members of school communities. Parents pointed to the proactive role the principal can play in breaking down the often quite entrenched stereotypes of what one parent participant called the 'staffroom put-down of certain parents'. One Indigenous parent, for example, related a positive intervention by the principal in reaching out to parents at her child's primary school:

One of the best strategies I ever seen was down at [urban school] where the teachers wouldn't even go near the parents so what the Principal did –the Principal actually made the teachers go and meet the parents at the front gate and parents were absolutely amazed that teachers were saying hello to them. Now it's a great word "hello" because you always respond no matter what, even if you don't like the people, you respond to them but that just started a communication. Now the parents know that they can actually come into the school. Before they didn't know, so it's about again the schools knowing their community and they have to come and meet our parents half way to break down the barriers. (Maureen, Southern Sydney focus group, May 2011)

This example of one principal's intervention and its positive effect in the school community highlights the principal's crucial role in building the kind of welcoming school culture that for many of the parents we interviewed is indicative of whether they are either valued within or disregarded by the school as a whole. Across the focus groups we conducted, parents consistently highlighted the importance of strong leadership in relation to both modeling positive approaches to parent engagement, and fostering such approaches amongst teaching staff, the school executive, the Parents' and Citizens' groups, and front office staff. The leadership shown in establishing a welcoming environment, building a climate of respectfulness and maintaining relationships of trust was seen as fundamental to parent-school engagement within their children's school, and by extension, the local school community.

Conclusions

Our focus group discussions with parents in NSW highlight the diversity of ways in which parents engage with their children's schools, as well as the aspects of school leadership they consider important for encouraging and supporting their engagement. Despite the emphasis on the importance of relationships between parents and teachers in both the policy context and in the research literature,

parents in our study also highlighted the crucial role that principals play in shaping parents' relationships with schools. For parents in our study, the principal's attitude toward parents is a significant factor in determining whether they feel entitled to be involved in and contribute to the everyday activities of the school, or whether they feel too intimidated to enter the school gates. While it could be argued that school choice and associated parental expectations contribute additional layers of pressure and responsibility to the already intensified work of principals, we see the ambiguities, tensions and shifting power relationships experienced by many of the parents we interviewed as indicative of the need for principals to be mindful of their role not just as entrepreneurs and 'impression managers' but rather as relationship builders in their communities. Thus, while the research literature has tended to focus on the need for teachers to be better prepared for working effectively with parents, parents' understanding of the principal as setting the parameters and guiding the culture of the school highlights the importance of ensuring that principals are well appraised of the significance that parents attribute to them in building and maintaining relationships with families and communities. This is particularly so with respect to vulnerable and marginalized families or groups within the school community. This calls for an agenda for educational leadership that can strengthen both the conditions for broader and more equitable understandings of parent engagement, and the practices that foster and sustain it in its multiple forms. Such an agenda, we would suggest, is crucial for recognizing and valuing the importance of parent engagement to the inclusiveness and vibrancy of school communities.

References

- Auerbach E (1995a) Deconstructing the discourse of strengths in family literacy. *Journal of Reading Behaviour* 27(4): 643-661.
- Auerbach E (1995b) Which way for family literacy: intervention or empowerment? In: L. M. Morrow (ed.) *Family Literacy: Connections in Schools and Communities*. New Brunswick, NJ: International Reading Association, 11-27.
- AITSL, (July 2011) National Standards For Principals. Available at: http://www.aitsl.edu.au/verve/resources/NationalProfessionalStandardForPrincipals_July25.pdf
- Ball S (1998) Performativity and fragmentation in 'postmodern schooling'. In: Carter J(ed.) *Postmodernity and the fragmentation of welfare*. London: Routledge, 187-203.
- Ball S (2009) Privatising education, privatising education policy, privatising educational research: network government and the 'competition state'. *Journal of Education Policy* 24(1): 83-99.
- Barrett-Baxendale D and Burton D (2009) Twenty-first-century headteacher: pedagogue, visionary leader or both? *School Leadership and Management* 29(2): 91-107.
- Blackmore J (2004) Leading as emotional management work in high risk times: the counterintuitive impulses of performativity and passion. *School Leadership and Management* 24(4): 439-459.
- Blackmore J (2010) Preparing leaders to work with emotions in culturally diverse educational communities. *Journal of Educational Administration* 48(5): 642-658.
- Blackmore J and Thorpe S (2003) Media/ting change: the print media's role in mediating education policy in a period of radical reform in Victoria, Australia. *Journal of Education policy* 18 (6): 577- 595.
- Blackmore J and Thomson P (2004) Just 'good and bad news'? Disciplinary imaginaries of head teachers in Australian and English print media. *Journal of Education Policy* 19(3): 301-320.
- Bush T (2011) Becoming a School Principal: Exciting Opportunity or Daunting Challenge? *Educational Management Administration and Leadership* 39(5): 514-515.
- Clark JM and Hockey L (1979) *Research for Nursing*. Leeds: Dobson Publishers.
- Clarke S (2006) From fragmentation to convergence: shaping an Australian agenda for quality school leadership. *School Leadership and Management* 26(2): 169-182.

- Clarke S and Wildy H (2004) Context counts: Viewing small school leadership from the inside out. *Journal of Educational Administration* 42(5): 555-72.
- Connell RW (2004) Working class parents' views of secondary schooling. *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 8(3): 227-239.
- Connell RW (2010) Interview: Raewyn Connell. Teacher Quality and the Problem with Markets. Partnerships with Parents. *Professional Voice* 8(2)
- Cranston N C (2007) Through the eyes of potential aspirants: another view of the principalship. *School Leadership and Management* 27(2): 109-128.
- Cranston N, Ehrich L and Billot J (2003) The secondary school principalship in Australia and New Zealand: an investigation of changing roles. *Leadership and Policy Studies in Schools* 2(3): 159-188.
- Crozier G (2001) Excluded parents: the deracialisation of parental involvement. *Race Ethnicity and Education* 4(4): 329-342.
- Daniel G (2005) Parent involvement in children's education: implications of a new parent involvement framework for teacher education in Australia. Proceedings of the 33rd Annual Australian Teacher Education Association Conference held at the Crowne Plaza Surfers Paradise, Australia, 6 – 9 July 2005: 141-148.
- Day C (2004) The passion of successful leadership. *School Leadership and Management* 24(4): 425-437.
- Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) (2008) Family-Schools Partnership Framework. Available at: http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/school_education/publications_resources/profiles/Family_School_Partnerships_Framework.htm
- Desforges, C. (2003) *The Impact of Parental Involvement, Parental Support and Family Education on Pupil Achievements and Adjustment: A Literature Review*, Research Report 433. London: Department of Education and Skills.
- Drysdale L and Gurr D (2011) Theory and practice of successful school leadership in Australia. *School Leadership and Management* 31(4): 355-368.
- Epstein JL (1987) Toward a theory of family-school connections: teacher practices and parent involvement. In K. Hurrelman, F. Kaufmann, and F. Losel (Eds.) *Social Intervention: Potential and Constraints* (pp. 121-136). New York: DeGruyter.
- Epstein JL (1995) School/family/community partnerships: caring for the children we share. *Phi Delta Kappan* 76: 701–712.

- Epstein, JL (2001) *School, Family and Community Partnerships: Preparing Educators and Improving Schools*. Boulder, CO: Westview.
- Ezzy, D (2002) *Qualitative Analysis: Practice and Innovation*. Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin.
- Giles C (2006) Transformational leadership in challenging urban elementary schools: a role for parent involvement? *Leadership and Policy in Schools* 5(3): 257-282.
- Goodall, J and Vorhaus J (2011) *Review of Best Practice in Parental Engagement*. UK Department of Education: Institute of Education, Ref: DFE-RR156, URL, accessed 22 February 2012: <http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/11926/1/DFE-RR156.pdf>
- Gronn P (2003) *The New Work of Educational Leader: Changing Leadership Practice in an Era of School Reform*. London: Sage Publications.
- Gronn P and Rawlings-Sanaei F (2003) Principal recruitment in a climate of leadership Disengagement. *Australian Journal of Education* 47(2): 172-184.
- Harris A (2002) Effective Leadership in Schools Facing Challenging Contexts. *School Leadership and Management* 22(1): 15-26.
- Harris A (2011) Distributed Leadership: Current Evidence and Future Directions. *Journal of Management Development* 30(10): 20-32.
- Henderson AT and Mapp KL (2002) *A new wave of evidence: The impact of school, family, and community connections on students achievement*. Austin, TX: National Center of Family and Community Connections with Schools: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.
- Hornby, G and Witte, C (2010) A Survey of Parental Involvement in Middle Schools in New Zealand, *Pastoral Care in Education*, 28(1): 59-69.
- Hoyle E and Wallace M (2005) *Educational leadership: Ambiguity, professionals and managerialism*. London: Sage Publications.
- Kimber M and Erich LC (2011) The Democratic Deficit and School-Based Management in Australia. *Journal of Educational Administration* 49(2): 179-199.
- Landeros M (2010) Defining the ‘good mother’ and the ‘professional teacher’: parent-teacher relationships in an affluent school district. *Gender and Education* 20 October 2010 (iFirst): 1-16.
- Leithwood K and Riehl C (2005) What we know about successful school leadership. In Firestone W and Riehl C (eds) *A new agenda: Directions for research on educational leadership*. New York: Teachers College Press, 22-47.

- Leithwood K, Patten S, and Jantzi D (2010) Testing a conception of how school leadership influences student learning. *Educational Administration Quarterly* 46: 671–706.
- Maclure, M and Walker, B (2000) Disenchanted evenings: the social organization of talk in parent-teacher consultations in UK secondary schools. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 21 (1): 5-25.
- MacNeill N, Cavenagh R, and Silcox S (2003) Beyond Instructional Leadership: Towards pedagogical Leadership. Paper submitted for presentation at the 2003 Annual conference for the Australian Association for Research in Education: Auckland. Available at <http://www.aare.edu.au/03pap/mac03415.pdf>
- McFarlane K (2008) Playing the game: examining parental engagement in schooling in post-millennial Queensland. *Journal of Education Policy*, 23(6): 701–713.
- Murphy J, Smylie M, Mayrowetz D and Seashore Louis K (2009) The role of the principal in fostering the development of distributed leadership. *School Leadership and Management*, 29(2): 181-214.
- Peters, M, Seeds, K, Goldstein, A and Coleman M (2007) *Parental Involvement in Children's Education 2007*, London: Department for Children, Schools and Families, URL accessed 22 Feb 2012: <http://www.efn.eu/assets/pdfs/DCSF-RR034.pdf>
- Ranson S (2011) School governance and the mediation of engagement. *Educational Management, Administration and Leadership* 39(4): 398-413.
- Ranson, S, Martin, J and Vincent C (2004) Storming parents, schools and communicative inaction, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 25(3): 259-274
- Su Z, Gamage D and Mininberg E (2003) Professional preparation and development of school leaders in Australia and the USA. *International Education Journal* 4(1): 42-59.
- Sheard M and Avis J (2011) Schools, Governance and Community: A Next Practice Intervention. *Educational Management Administration and Leadership* 39(1): 84–104.
- Tate, J (1998) The hermeneutic circle vs the enlightenment. *Telos*, No 10, pp. 9-38.
- Thomson P (2001) How principals lose “face”: A disciplinary tale of educational administration and modern managerialism. *Discourse* 22(1): 5–22.
- Thomson P (2002) *Schooling the Rustbelt kids: Making the difference in changing times*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.
- Thomson P (2003) No more Managers-R-Us! Researching/teaching about head teachers

- and “schools in challenging circumstances”. *Journal of Education Policy* 18(3): 333–345.
- Thomson P (2004) Severed Heads and Compliant Bodies? A speculation about principal identities. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 25(1): 43-59.
- Thomson P and Blackmore J (2004) Beyond the power of one: Redesigning the work of school principals. Paper presented to the Annual Research Conference, Australian Association of Research in Education, University of Melbourne, November.
- Thomson P, Blackmore J, Sachs J, and Tregenza K (2003) High stakes principalship: Sleepless nights, heart attacks and sudden death accountabilities. Reading media representations of the US principal shortage. *Australian Journal of Education* 47(2): 118–132.
- Troman G (2000) Teacher stress in the low-trust society. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 21(3): 331-353.
- Vazquez-Nuttall, E., Li, C. and Kaplan, J. P. (2006) Home-school partnerships with culturally diverse families, *Journal of Applied School Psychology*, 22 (2): 81-102
- Victory M (2011) Beyond the Classroom: Beginning teachers’ communication with parents. *Professional Voice* 8(2): 41-48. Available at http://www.aeuvic.asn.au/pv_8_2complete.pdf
- Vincent C and Martin J (2002) Class, culture and agency: researching parental voice. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 23(1): 109-128.
- Vincent C and Tomlinson S (1997) Home-school relationships: ‘the swarming of disciplinary mechanisms’? *British Educational Research Journal* 23(3): 361-377
- Vincent C (2010) A sociology of mothering. In: Apple M, Ball S and Gandin L (eds) *The Routledge International Handbook of Sociology of Education*. London: Routledge, 109-120.
- Warareba G and Clarke S (2011) Acknowledging Emotional Intelligence in the Preparation and Selection of School Principals. *Leading and Managing* 17(1): 84-99.
- Watson L (2009) Issues in reinventing school leadership: reviewing the OECD report on improving school leadership from an Australian perspective. *Leading and Managing* 15(1): 1-13.
- Watterson J and Caldwell B (2010) System alignment as a key strategy in building capacity for school transformation. *Journal of Educational Administration* 49(6): 637-652.
- Wildy H and Clarke S (2008) Principals on L-plates: Rear view mirror reflections. *Journal of Educational Administration* 46(6): 727-738.

ⁱ Acknowledgement of funding to be inserted here.

ⁱⁱ [University name to be inserted here] HREC approval number Q2010-49.

ⁱⁱⁱ In order to protect participant confidentiality, pseudonyms have been used for all participant names, and locations have been designated only by geographic region.

^{iv} In Australian schools, formally structured parent groups within the local school are commonly referred by a number of terms: parents' and citizens' group, P & C, parents' and friends' group, P & F, and in some cases, parent councils. Here we adopt the term parents' and citizens' group, while some participants use the more colloquial P & F.