



## Community development in schools—building connections with and for families



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### 1. Introduction

Engaging parents in their children's schooling has long been recognised as a key determinant of school success and creating positive outcomes for children. However for many families deep poverty coupled with unfamiliarity with regulations and social norms surrounding the Australian education system works against school engagement. This is particularly pertinent for newly-arrived migrant and refugee families, who in many instances lack the social and cultural capital necessary to draw upon resources for supporting their children's schooling. Migrant and refugee parents are particularly aspirational regarding their children's futures, especially when coming from desperate circumstances. However, these educational aspirations can be stifled due to 'unfreedoms' (Sen, 1999) associated with poor material circumstances, low parental literacy, and limited ability/confidence to engage with the school community. This can lead to irregular school attendance and non-receptivity to learning opportunities. Likewise, parental unfamiliarity with (cultural) processes for engaging with school, or supporting children's learning at home, can hamper children's learning success.

When exploring issues surrounding parental engagement by families experiencing vulnerabilities, Sen (1999) provides a lens through which to view the social capital of communities, through his focus on 'development', which he argued should be viewed not in terms of economic measures alone but in terms of the real "freedoms" that people can enjoy such as economic facilities and social opportunities (Terjesen, 2004). These freedoms include the freedom to satisfy hunger, freedom to access health care, freedom to gain an education and freedom to participate in the social life of the community.

Sen (1999) went on to suggest that these freedoms are influenced by economic opportunities, political liberties, social powers, and the enabling conditions of good health, and the encouragement and cultivation of initiative. He believes that education is a key enabling condition for development. Sen suggested a view of development as removing major sources of unfreedoms such as poor economic opportunities and social deprivations (pp 3–4). With adequate social opportunities, individuals can effectively shape their own destiny and help each other, thus removing the unfreedoms that impact on their development. Sen described this as "the expansion of the 'capabilities' of people to lead the kind of lives they value—and have reason to value" (p18).

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Drawing on Sen’s notions of ‘unfreedoms’ this paper will present a review of literature that explores the interconnections between schools, families and communities as they impact on the educational outcomes for children. The literature review was undertaken as the initial phase of a small scale project undertaken in the outer eastern area of Melbourne, Australia’s second largest city, working across three primary schools. The locality which is the focus of this study features high levels of migrant resettlement and cultural diversity, low median incomes, high rates of early school leaving and high levels of crime. Over two thirds of residents were born overseas and this locality is the third most culturally diverse in the state.

Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) social ecology model which explores learners in the context of the interconnections that exist between families, community and schools, has shaped a project instigated across a cluster of Catholic schools located in this locality. This cluster has employed innovative approaches to engaging families in their children’s learning environment, through a number of community development initiatives. Schools that value the engagement of parents as partners in their child’s learning and who see parents as capable partners are more likely to have parents engaged in the learning of their child (Baum & Swick, 2008). By working with families to remove barriers to effective participation in school communities, and to enhance parental skills, these schools aimed to improve learning outcomes for disadvantaged students.

A research project designed to explore the extent to which community development through school communities can lead to improved capabilities of families was developed. The initial phase of this project was to undertake a review of relevant literature to inform the research questions and the project design. Phase two of this research will be to explore practices that exist across the site schools. Findings from the fieldwork will be reported in future publications by the same authors.

**2. Literature review method**

The purpose of the literature review was to provide a base for the proposed research project to identify what is already known, and ascertain the gaps in the evidence fine-tune the initial research questions and research methodology. The following research questions, listed below, shaped the direction for the literature review.

Is there a correlation between the aspirations of parents, students and education professionals, and how do these influence learning outcomes?

To what extent does parental engagement impact on children’s school engagement and improved outcomes?

How can community development mechanisms build the capabilities of disadvantaged families and communities to achieve their aspirations for their children?

To gather the data for this literature review a systematic investigation of electronic academic literature databases in the fields of social work, sociology, psychology and education (eg A + Education; Academic Search Complete; ERIC; JStor: Science Direct) was undertaken, using the following search terms:

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Community development	Social capital
Community renewal	Neighbourhood renewal
Parental aspirations	Parent and teacher partnerships
Family	Community
Learning outcomes	Educational outcomes
Educational attainment	Connectedness
Vulnerable children	Disadvantage
Refugee children	Migrant families

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The findings of the literature review were clustered in line with the research questions which will be explored and discussed within this paper.

*2.1. Is there a correlation between the aspirations of parents, students and education professionals, and how do these influence learning outcomes?*

The literature suggests that many parents do have high aspirations for their children (Gutman & Ackerman, 2008). There has been found to be a strong correlation between the aspirations of parents and the aspirations children hold for themselves (Chavira, Cooper, & Vasquez-Salgado, 2016; Gutman & Ackerman, 2008; Strand & Winston, 2008). High parental aspirations have been found to have a significant effect on student outcomes (Strand, 2011).

Aspirations can be related to the desires, dreams and hopes that an individual holds for the future. Bohme (2015) defines aspirations as ‘a desire to achieve a certain objective, the term aspirations describes goals that one would like to achieve in an ideal world without constraints’ (p2), and Chavira et al. describe them as ‘desire and hopes for one’s idea future career and expectations the realistic beliefs in one’s likely career attainment’ (2016, p 214). Gutman and Ackerman (2008) suggest that the aspirations a person holds are shaped by the individual’s perceptions of themselves and their abilities. They suggest that it is the belief that one can achieve success that fosters positive aspirations, and argue that children who believe that they can achieve in school and have the ability to do so are more likely to hold higher educational aspirations.

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