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Engaging parents in schools and building parent-school partnerships: The role of school and parent organisation leadership



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ABSTRACT

A growing body of research suggests that a positive school climate and Principal leadership are pivotal to building parent-school partnerships and supporting parent engagement in child learning more generally. To begin investigating these factors, surveys were distributed to Principals and Presidents of parent organisations in 1233 Queensland State (i.e. government or public) Schools. Results indicated that although overall Principals have very positive attitudes towards parent engagement, they differ somewhat in whether or not they expect parent engagement in areas such as school governance and mandatory requirements. The most commonly perceived barriers and effective engagement strategies were identified, and differed significantly across schools according to the school's location and level of disadvantage. The implications for future research and interventions are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Education is critical in today's society, with many of the conventional paths to success and financial stability dependent upon a certain level of educational attainment. Strong and consistent evidence shows that poor educational outcomes in children are associated with a range of antisocial behaviours including substance abuse, delinquent activity, long term offending behaviour, social exclusion and isolation, teenage pregnancy, unemployment and future dependency on social services (Henry & Huizinga, 2007; Henry, 2007; Stranger, 2002). In an increasingly globalised and technological world, job market success in developed countries such as Australia depends on the attainment of post-secondary qualifications (Ministerial Council for Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs [MCEETYA], 2008). Australian Commonwealth, State and Territory Education Ministers have declared that improving the educational outcomes of young Australians is central to the future well-being and prosperity of Australia, and to ensuring that all young Australians have an equal opportunity to live productive and fulfilling lives (MCEETYA, 2008).

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The quality of educational outcomes of Australian children has been a matter of some concern for recent Australian governments, educational researchers and the general public (Department of Education and Training (Australian Government), 2015a; Thomson, 2013; Wilson, Dalton, & Baumann, 2015). Australian students have performed below the average on a number of recent international achievement measures (Thomson, De Bortoli, & Buckley, 2012), and their results in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) have shown a steady decline since the tests were first implemented in 2000 (Thomson, 2013). Of further concern, approximately two-and-a-half years of schooling separates the achievement scores of students in the highest and lowest socioeconomic quartiles, and student achievement differs significantly according to location (e.g. rural or metropolitan) and cultural background (Thomson, 2013). All Australian governments have recognised the need to increase quality and equity in Australian schooling (Council of Australian Governments [COAG], 2013), and one of the key ways in which they are seeking to achieve this is through improving parent-school partnerships and parent engagement in child learning (Department of Education and Training (Australian Government), 2015b; MCEETYA, 2008).

There is clear consistent evidence that shows that learner outcomes (attendance, behaviour, school retention, academic achievement and wellbeing) improve when parents engage in student learning and schools (Castro et al., 2015; Chazan-Cohen et al., 2009; McNeal, 2001). International research also points to the importance of a positive school climate (Gavidia-Payne, Denny, Davis, Francis, & Jackson, 2015; Goldkind & Farmer, 2013; Kaplan Toren & Seginer, 2015) and the central role that Principals, as school leaders, play in shaping the climate and facilitating parent engagement through their leadership style, communication, attitudes and expectations (Barr & Saltmarsh, 2014). However, in the Australian context such research is limited. By examining the perspectives of Australian school Principals and the Presidents of school parent organisations, this research extends what is known about the importance of inclusive school leadership in creating a positive school climate to build parent-school partnerships and support parent engagement in child learning.

The research presented here is part of a larger project focused on increasing levels of parent engagement and improving parent-school partnerships, with the ultimate aim of raising learner outcomes. Before this lofty goal can be realised, the current study provides the necessary foundation by investigating aspects of school climate, Principal leadership and the role of parent organisations as they relate to parent engagement in Australian schools. To contextualise the research, the following section provides a review of the literature on parent engagement in child learning, parent-school partnerships, school climate, Principal leadership and parent organisations.

2. Literature review

2.1. Parent engagement in child learning

Parent engagement is broadly defined as the behaviours, values, attitudes and activities of parents that promote their child's academic development, ability to learn and educational outcomes (Department of Education and Training (Australian Government), 2015c). More specifically, improved learning outcomes have been found when parents engage with their child's learning at home by reading and playing mathematics games together, communicating high educational expectations, and talking with their child about their school activities and interests (Castro et al., 2015; Fox & Olsen, 2014; Harris & Goodall, 2007; Perkins & Knight, 2014; Van Voorhis, Maier, Epstein, & Lloyd, 2013). Such forms of parent engagement have also been shown to benefit children's social and emotional development (Chazan-Cohen et al., 2009; Fantuzzo, McWayne, Perry, & Childs, 2004; Mistry, Benner, Biesanz, & Clark, 2010; Powell, Son, File, & San Juan, 2010), and improve student attendance and school retention (McNeal, 2001). This vast body of literature clearly demonstrates the many benefits that arise when parents engage with their child's learning at home. Yet another important aspect of parents' engagement with their child's learning is involvement and collaboration with their child's school.

2.2. Parent-school partnerships

It has been widely argued that optimal child learning outcomes occur when the key educators in a child's life, that is parents and schools, form respectful and collaborative partnerships with one another and work towards common goals (Emerson, Fear, Fox, & Sanders, 2012; Epstein, 2011; Fox & Olsen, 2014; Goodall & Montgomery, 2014; Willis, 2013). For example, Goodall and Montgomery's (2014) model of parent engagement conceptualises agency for child learning as belonging to parents, supported by schools. Emerson et al. (2012) state that parent involvement within schools can act as a precursor to effective practices at home. There is also evidence to suggest that parents are more likely to be engaged in their child's learning at home when schools have high expectations for them to do so and provide commensurate practical support (Dauber & Epstein, 1989; Eccles & Harold, 1996; Parental Engagement Project Taskforce, 2011; Toldson & Lemmons, 2013; Whitaker & Hoover-Dempsey, 2013). Schools may be well-placed to help build the capacity of parents by training them in aspects of the curriculum (Emerson et al., 2012; Fox & Olsen, 2014; Parental Engagement Project Taskforce, 2011). For example, Sénéchal and Young (2008) found that training parents to tutor their child in specific literacy skills significantly benefited the child's reading ability. Schools can also promote the benefits of parent engagement and facilitate the mutual sharing of information about the child's wellbeing and progress (Emerson et al., 2012; Fox & Olsen, 2014; Parental Engagement Project Taskforce, 2011).

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