

# Parental Engagement: Teachers and Parents Working Together for a Common Goal

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Schooling needs to teach the next generation the skills they require to thrive as adults. The problem lies in the fact that schools were set up for an industrial age and so a new way of thinking and teaching is required for students to be prepared for world they will be a part of, one that is, constantly changing and hasn't been created yet. This world in which knowledge is seen as a commodity is known as the Knowledge Economy (OECD, 1996) and requires the capacity to access and use knowledge to create new knowledge and new ways of doing things (Sell, Lynch & Doe, 2016). This will require the preparation of a different type of teacher (Smith & Lynch, 2006) and a different type of school (Sharratt & Planche, 2016). Schools need to be a place where all students can access and express their learning (Sharratt & Planche, 2016). This article will argue it will require a different type of parenting and a different relationship between parents, teachers and schools to achieve authentic parental engagement.

## Introduction

According to the OECD (2013) students will need new competencies not previously required in education through the industrial age. These competencies include collaboration, creativity and problem solving along with the basic skills of numeracy and literacy and personal attributes of persistence, curiosity and initiative in order for them to flourish as adults in the knowledge economy. The goal of parenting is to have the child grow into an independent adult and the goal parental engagement in children's learning is to allow the child to grow into an independent learner, with the emotional, physical and intellectual resources to learn on their own (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Is this not also the goal of schooling? Students becoming independent learners and independent adults is a collective goal for both schools and parents yet traditionally schools have not welcomed parent engagement.

Historically, when compulsory schooling was set up most parents themselves were illiterate and all parents were expected to do was to get them to school. Teachers were seen as the experts and parents were not to interfere and left at the gate except to be involved by fundraising or helping around the school. Teachers were seen as the experts and this has resulted in more and more calls by parents and society to add more to the curriculum even basic parenting skills. Parents have lost belief in their ability to parent and have abrogated their rights and responsibilities to the school. Schools have perpetuated this belief (Pushor, 2011) and today schools have varied approaches to the engagement of parents from exclusion to open and welcoming (Henderson, Mapp, Johnson & Davies, 2009).

## Why Include Parents In Their Child's Learning?

Growing into an independent learner and independent adult with well-developed 21<sup>st</sup> century skills is a gradual process, which is not usually complete until late in a child's school career.

Parents are the ones that are the constant in a child's life as teachers usually change every year in primary and much more frequently in secondary school. Students need to have someone championing for them and in most cases, it is the parent as parenting is a long-term commitment. What we do know is that most parents want the best for their child but are unsure of what is the best way to do this and the majority of parents wish to be involved in their children's learning whether or not they are present in the school.

Additionally, parents today are more educated and have experience of schooling themselves and when engaged with their child's learning can make a difference. International evidence illustrates engaged parents can improve learning by the equivalent of six months of school attendance (Emerson, Fear, Fox & Sanders, 2012). Students whose parents regularly read and talk to them scored on average 25 points higher on the PISA or 6 months of a school year (Borgonovi & Montt, 2012; Emerson et al., 2012). Parents engaged in their child's learning are equivalent to \$1000 in extra funding a student a year (Houtenville & Conway, 2007, p. 450).

According to the research, (Hattie, 2009), there are many variables and programs in education but unless it has a 0.4 or greater effect it is not worth considering. Teachers matter in the students' achievement and their teaching should have a 0.4 or greater impact on a child's learning. Twelve month's progress for twelve months input. According to parent engagement research, parents can have between 0.43 (Nye, Turner & Schwartz, 2006) and 0.74 (Jeynes, 2005). Students learning, achievement and well-being are enhanced and enriched when home and school educators, student and parents work together (Harris & Goodall, 2008; Weiss & Stephen, 2009).

**But not all parents are engaged.** Some are prevented from being engaged by ethnic and language barriers or their own poor experiences of education and or their socio-economic status. There are 4 "drivers of engagement" (ARACY, 2015) for parents. These are:

- Parents' role construction – this depends on whether parents see their role as supporting their child's learning- is it teachers or parents who are responsible for children's learning?
- Parents' self-efficacy – their confidence that they have the skills and knowledge to have a positive impact
- How welcoming schools are and what Invitations there are to engage in their child's learning – do schools see parents' role as one of spectators or audience or fundraising helpers or as partners and provide opportunities to be engaged in what the child is learning and play a part?
- Life circumstances that enable engagement – whether parents have the time, energy and resources to be engaged and do schools recognize parents' circumstances and respond appropriately.

Parents are time poor and do not know what to focus on and are drawn in all different directions by what other parents are doing, hoping it will give their child "an advantage".

What is known is that there are 6 evidence-based strategies that parents can do in the home that have an effect on their child's achievement and well-being. These are based on research findings in United Kingdom, United States of America, Canada and Australia. They include

1. Authoritative Parenting
2. Know the Value of Education

3. Have High Aspirations and Realistic Expectations
4. Family Led Learning
5. Take an Active Interest
6. Family-School Communication (adapted from the work of Goodall (2013) and Fox & Olsen (2014))

There are two important points to make here. Firstly, parents don't have to be present at school to be engaged with their child's learning. It is their support of learning within the *home environment* that makes the maximum difference to achievement (Harris & Goodall, 2008). Secondly, it is not who parents are (in terms of their own educational backgrounds, socio-economic levels, family style) that matters but what they do with their children in the home (Harris, Goodall & Andrew-Power, 2009).

Subsequently, barriers have developed between home and school, some on the part of schools and on the part of parents but if schools and parents are to have a shared vision and responsibility for the achievement and well-being of children then cultural change needs to occur. There is a need for schools to readily acknowledge and appreciate the role parents play not only as "first educators" but as "continuing educators" and to see a place for them in their child's learning and well-being and there is a need for parents to recognize that they can make a difference and play their part in partnership with teachers (Saulwick & Muller, 2006). This will require dual-capacity building of parents, teachers and school leadership as seen in Diagram 1.

### **This Raises the Question, "What Part Can They Play?"**

Schools are about teaching and learning and parents' engagement needs to value add to what schools do (Caldwell & Spinks, 2013) so therefore needs to be seen through four lenses of what schools do. Let us now briefly look at what is the latest research on:

1. Effective Schools
2. Teaching and Learning in 21<sup>st</sup> Century
3. Effective Professional learning
4. Leadership and Change Management

Parents engaging with their child's learning must be linked to the school's strategic goals for the year and the values and mission espoused by the school. Schools are about the holistic view of the child. Therefore, parent engagement also needs to be linked to the school's social emotional and behavioural framework and as schools are learning communities, it must be linked to the learning goals and pedagogical framework.

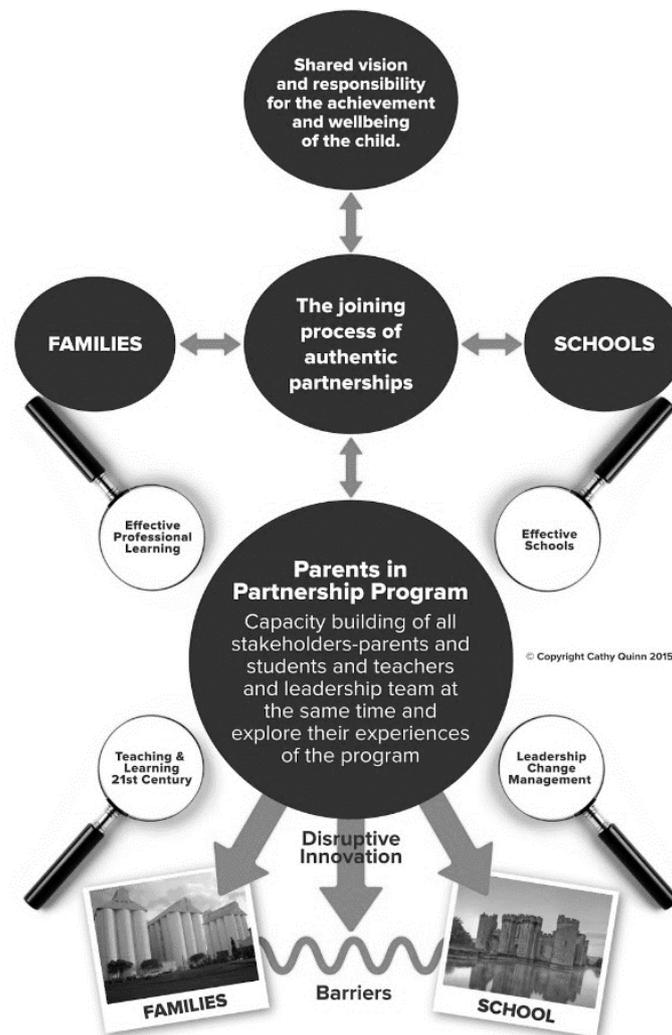


Diagram 1: Parent engagement as a value add to what schools do.

## 1. Effective Schools

Effective schools take a partnership approach and see student achievement and school improvement as a shared responsibility between home and school (Bryk, Sebring & Allensworth, 2009). To teach skills relevant for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, effective schools have a culture of personalised and differentiated, deep and collaborative learning (Sharratt & Planche, 2016).

## 2. Effective Teaching and Learning for 21<sup>st</sup> Century

Effective schools provide students with the Skills they need to thrive in the 21st Century. This requires a different type of culture to be developed by teachers in the classroom. This culture has three aspects (a) personalised and differentiated (b) allow for Deep learning and (c) allow students to develop the skills of collaboration.

### 2.1. Culture of Personalised and Differentiated Learning

For effective teaching and learning in the twenty first century, the school and classroom culture needs to personalise the learning of all students by “putting FACES on the data” (Sharratt & Planche, 2016) and start with where students are at and scaffold learning so that all students can access learning and show progress in their achievement (Hattie, 2015). Teaching starts with a strengths based approach that all students can learn given the right time and support and there are high expectations for all student (Sharratt & Planche, 2016). This is carried out in a framework of Gradual Release of Responsibility.

### *2.1.1. How can teachers & schools encourage engagement of parents?*

Teachers need to operate from a belief that parents can make a difference and according to Mapp & Kuttner (2013) must be prepared to engage in partnerships with families by honoring and recognizing that families’ have existing knowledge and skills and that they already engage with their child’s learning in some form. There is a need to create and sustain school and district cultures that welcome, explicitly invite, and promote family engagement and develop family engagement activities that connect them to their student’s learning and development. <sup>[11]</sup><sub>SEP</sub>

Parents can help teachers personalise the data as parents have knowledge about their children that is not held by anyone else. Schools need to create opportunities for parents to share this knowledge with teachers especially if parents do not feel comfortable being in the school. Two-way communication is necessary for this to occur. Changing from the mainly one-way communication flow which currently occurs in schools, poses a challenge. Parental engagement is “enabling parents to take their place alongside educators in the schooling of their children, fitting together their knowledge of children, teaching, and learning, with teachers’ knowledge” (Pushor & Ruitenberg, 2005). When this knowledge is put together with the expert curriculum and pedagogical knowledge of the teacher for the benefit of the child’s learning and progress (Pushor & Ruitenberg, 2005), a personalized learning pathway can be created (Quinn, 2016).

Schools can focus on communicating the belief that parents can have an impact on their child’s learning (role-construction) and providing relevant information that assists in building their confidence in their ability to support their child’s learning (self-efficacy) (ARACY, 2015).

### *2.1.2. How can Parents Help Schools and Teachers?*

When parents operate from a belief that they can make a difference in their child’s achievement and well-being, they are able to develop in their children a belief in their own abilities and a knowledge of their strengths. **(Evidence based strategy 3: holding and passing on high expectations)**. Parents can make a difference by discussing educational and career aspirations with their children and having high aspirations yet realistic expectations of their children.

## **2.2. A Culture of Deep Learning**

In focusing on the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills gap, schools must strengthen student engagement and put greater emphasis on innovation by shifting to deeper learning approaches (Horizon Report in Madden, 2016). That involves the development of six competencies for deep learning. They are:

- Master academic content
- Think critically and solve complex problem
- Work collaboratively
- Communicate effectively
- Learn how to learn
- Develop academic mindsets (Sharratt & Planche, 2016).

This requires different approaches to teaching such as inquiry or project based learning that crosses traditional subject areas and allows for self-initiated learning and innovation in real life situations. It also requires a new view of assessment, both formative and summative, as a way of providing feedback to students about their progress towards co-constructed learning goals taken from the curriculum expectations and feedback to the teacher as to the impact of their teaching and what instruction or intervention is required next for each child (Sharratt & Planche, 2016). This requires differentiated learning experiences and instruction as individual students will need different levels of challenge and pace (Madden, 2016).

Teachers are responsible for developing a culture in their classes where deep learning thrives because it is a safe, respectful, environment that encourages risk taking, curiosity and wonder (Sharratt & Fullan, 2012). Students are able to inquire into deep questions and present their work in an authentic voice without anxiety, in an environment that honors them when they make their thinking open and visible (Hattie, 2015). It is a culture that encourages multiple opportunities for student voice and student choice and shows concern for the whole student including their social and emotional development as an integral part of their academic development (Sharratt & Planche, 2016). It is a culture that places students as active participants, engaged and empowered in their learning, co-constructing their learning goals and always asking the 5 questions:

- What am I learning?
- How am I going?
- How do I know?
- How can I improve?
- Where do I go for help? (Sharratt & Fullan, 2012; Sharratt & Harild, 2015).

### ***2.2.1. How can teachers & schools help engage parents be engaged?***

What if teachers were able to help parents build such a culture in the home where learning thrives? What is effective? One of the greatest impacts that parents can have is to lead learning in the home (**Evidenced based Strategy 4: Family led learning**).

But what do parents need to lead this learning environment in the home? For parents to be active participants in their child's learning with an understanding of school they require:

- An understanding of the goals of school and the school improvement plan
- A knowledge of 21<sup>st</sup> century competencies needed by their child in adulthood
- Visible & specific opportunities to witness and understand the continuum of learning and curriculum expectations from K-12 (Sharratt & Planche, 2016).
- A common understanding of the language of schooling such as Learning Goals and Success Criteria is not only important for parents' engagement in their child's

learning but also empowering to the parents themselves to improve their own resources (Clinton, Hattie & Dixon, 2007).

With students being active participants in their learning and leading parent teacher interviews in some schools, this has lessened the adversarial relationship that can exist between teachers and parents about their child's results on assessment (Rossi, 2015, in Sharratt & Planche, 2016, p.199). Armed with an understanding of the language of schooling, parents are also able to ask the 5 questions of their child about their learning and be able to offer Descriptive Feedback (i.e. feedback that reflects the effort against the success criteria) (Sharratt & Planche, 2016). This type of communication allows 'just in time feedback' to parents and is a way of fulfilling the teacher's responsibility for communicating children's well-being and their progress. Communication between school and home becomes more effective and two-way and grounded in positive relationships, mutual respect and an understanding of each other's role, knowledge and expertise (ARACY, 2015).

**Evidenced based Strategy 6: Family-School Communication** suggests schools need to create opportunities and clear avenues for 2-way communication. Parents can assist by making teachers aware of any circumstances that may impact on children in the classroom.

Schools can offer opportunities at school that are focused on learning in which they can provide information about practical strategies that parents can do in the home to support learning which will build parents self-efficacy and role construction (ARACY, 2015; Sharratt & Planche, 2016). Although attending school events around their child's learning is one way parents can show their children they value education (**Evidenced Based Strategy 2: Know the Value of Education**) which also assists in the developing of good relationships, it is not the only way. As parents' support of children's learning at home has the biggest impact on academic outcomes (Harris et al., 2009) with the age of technology, these activities don't have to be at school. The concept of flipped classrooms enables parents to be a co-learner with their child and watch with their child the skills teacher will cover in the classroom next day through video links. Parents are then able to be engaged, especially in secondary schools where the barriers between home and school are often the greatest, and have important conversations with their child about their learning (**Evidenced based Strategy 5: Take an Active Interest**). This strategy emphasises the importance of remaining engaged (Goodall, 2013) throughout their schooling particularly at transition points and talking regularly about school and the value of learning (Clinton & Hattie, 2013) to their children.

### ***2.2.2. How can Parents Help Schools and Teachers?***

Parents can assist the culture of deep learning at school by promoting such a culture of learning in the home and being able to lead that learning. Three aspects for an effective culture of learning in the home are Shared reading, discussions about the world and creating a positive environment for homework (ARACY, 2015).

Shared reading- Early interaction can have long-term effects and continues to have an impact throughout schooling (ARACY, 2015). This impact is enhanced when parents

receive guidance about the strategies and approaches that are appropriate at different ages from teachers (ARACY, 2015).

Provide a stimulating and learning-rich home environment in which children are exposed to new things and can explore new areas of passion or interest, and participate in family, community and cultural activities (ARACY, 2015).

Provide a positive environment for homework. As the international debate about the effectiveness of homework continues, what is known is that parents can help by providing a positive environment for homework which includes providing a dedicated space and having the same rules as the school around homework (ARACY, 2015).

Teachers can invite parents to play an active role in the child's learning as aligned with school goals by viewing homework as family-led learning especially in the primary school where research suggests homework has little or no effect and provide activities that invite parents to ask questions and provide feedback, have conversations about learning at school and social issues as well as family stories (ARACY, 2015). This is family led learning (**Evidenced based strategy 4: Family led learning**) and showing an active interest (**Evidenced based strategy 5: Take an active interest**) and allows for positive parent-child interactions and parents to support children's development as autonomous learners (**Evidenced based strategy 2: Know the value of education**).

### 2.2.3. A Culture that is Collaborative

One of the most important skills for the 21<sup>st</sup> century is to be collaborative where the student, teachers and other students are co-learners and co-construct knowledge together. Students and teachers learn to trust and learn from each other in giving and getting descriptive feedback. This requires students to be open to learning conversations and contribute to accountable talk in the classroom.

Teachers need to be able to see the world through the eyes of the students and provide the conditions and opportunities for students to think deeply about topics that interest them in order to build a growth mindset about their abilities. Though opportunities to collaborate they learn to analyse their personal reactions to thoughts presented by peers and graciously communicate these (Sharratt & Planche, 2016). This requires teachers to look at assessment and teaching and learning with a different mindset and will require some teachers to learn new skills sets.

For students' social emotional development this means being taught (and therefore learn):

- How to co-operate to achieve a goal & collaborate to co-construct new knowledge
- Being able to give descriptive feedback that is compassionate and without put downs from which their peers can learn
- Contribute to a climate of trust which allows other students to speak without anxiety to make their learning visible.
- Learn from others
- Take perspective of others
- Be an active/attentive listener
- Be open to learning conversations

#### **2.2.4. *How can Parents Help Schools and Teachers?***

**Evidenced based strategy 1: Authoritative Parenting.** Authoritative parenting suggests parents play an important role in teaching and managing their child's social and emotional well-being especially the skills needed to be collaborative and build and maintain positive relationships with their peers and teacher.

#### **2.2.5. *How can Teachers Help Parents be Engaged?***

By providing parents with the skills they need to be an authoritative parent. This involves sharing with the parents, the strategies they are teaching the students on how to be collaborative. Teachers have expert information on what is appropriate for the social and emotional development for students at different ages. When this is shared with parents, students get the same message at home and at school.

**Teachers need to model what it means to be collaborative.** This entails the third lens of what schools do that parental engagement needs to value add to.

### **3. Effective Professional Learning**

Collaborating with other teachers to investigate what is effective for all students to achieve using inquiry research is seen as effective professional learning for teachers as well as students. Progress is measured against student data so that all students achieve and progress by highlighting possible interventions for those not achieving. The Collaborative Teacher and Learning Model (CTLM) (Lynch & Madden, 2016) is one such model which involves this process in which the social capital of other teachers is accessed to benefit the learning of all teachers in the team. This model also incorporates a coaching, mentoring and feedback regime to assist the performance of individual teachers (Lynch & Madden, 2016). Just as is the case in the culture required by students to learn 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, feedback is crucial for teachers to identify how well they are doing achieving their goal (Madden, 2016).

Quinn & Doe (2016) suggest that just as social capital is important to raise the human and decisional capital of teachers (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012) it is worth exploring if the same is true for parents. What is required for teachers to work collaboratively with parents in a process of inquiry research to improve the achievement of the child by increasing the use of the six evidence based strategies in the home by parents? This also raises questions about the leadership required to lead parent engagement in the school and lens number four.

### **4. Effective Leadership and change management**

Leadership for 21<sup>st</sup> century skills requires the principal to be the lead learner and a co-learner alongside teachers in professional learning (Robinson, Hohepa & Lloyd, 2009). School leaders require a new set of skills including being able to provide data in readily accessible formats for teachers and to talent manage groups of teachers based on the cohort of students (Madden, 2016). It requires Leadership to be extended not only to expert teachers in teams but also to teachers in their individual classrooms as this is where the teacher is most effective (Hattie, 2012).

So, what about the leadership of parents? Doe, Fradale, Lynch, Mason, Quinn, Sell, (2017) argue that all stakeholders (families and educators) have an intrinsic motivation to ensure schools make a difference in the life chances of every student (their moral purpose) a reality. Quinn & Doe (2016, p.152) suggest that “much more could be achieved if the leadership of all stakeholders was recruited to provide good quality teaching and learning for all students.” This would involve *distributing* leadership to parent leaders. Further research will explore if parent leaders working collaboratively with teacher leaders will empower other parents by building their human capital (skills and capabilities) and decisional capital (ability to make informed decisions) through increased access to social capital by working in collaboration with other parents. Just as social capital was found to be the lynch pin to increased professional capital for teachers but not sufficient in itself, according to Lynch & Madden (2015) as it also requires instruction, teacher feedback and performance. This will this also be the case for parent leaders as they work with other parents.

### Conclusion

Finally, the development of students for the knowledge economy requires a new set of skills not only for students but also for school leaders, teachers and parents. Much more can be achieved by schools if they overcome the traditional barriers between home and school and work in partnership to use the social capital of all stakeholders of the school to become co-learners in this process and improve the overall skill set of all.

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