



Beyond the Classroom Walls: the rediscovery of the family and community as partners in education

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ABSTRACT *Teachers have been aware of the influence of home on school success for a long time. However, in the last decade we have seen a significant increase in the interest of educational researchers, educational authorities and individual teachers in the relationship between home, school and community. In this paper I want to set this emerging interest in its historical context and challenge readers to consider this topic through multiple, and more diverse and appropriate lenses. I want to argue that there is a need to look closely at the nature of the relationship between home and school and to deconstruct the purposes that drive these initiatives. There is a need to examine the many claims about the relationship between home and school, and to critique the deficit views that have driven much of this interest. However, rather than just to critique, I want to explore alternative more responsive models for developing partnerships between home and school, and use literacy practices as one way to illustrate some of the options available.*

While there has been a dramatic increase in awareness and research concerning the relationship between home and school in the last decade, the stimulus for this increased interest has its roots in education reforms of the 1960s and 1970s. Some of the most significant early interest in the topic area occurred in the United Kingdom. The Plowden Report (Department of Education and Science, 1967) was one of a number of factors that led to a growing awareness by schools of the home and its relationship to school learning. The report argued strongly for the concept of partnership between home and school. One of the consequences of the report was an increased interest in the desire of schools to involve and communicate with parents. The 1970s and 1980s saw a number of successful program initiatives take place. Many of these were programs designed to help parents support children in school learning, particularly those experiencing reading problems. One well-known program, the Haringey Reading Project found that some of the children whose parents were involved in their program made significant gains in reading achievement irrespective of reading ability. This project was to be a stimulus for other initiatives (Tizard *et al.*, 1982). Many of these initiatives involved programs focusing on the need to offer parents a limited range of reading strategies to use with their children. One of the most commonly used was the Paired Reading technique. This simple

technique was first designed by Morgan (1976) and was later refined by Topping and McKnight (1984) and Topping and Wolfendale (1985).

Other more recent programs have continued this strong interest in the importance of the home. For example, the UK Reading Association established the House of Fiction group, a cohort of teachers who decided to meet to support one another in the dual goals of developing partnership with parents in reading. These reading group projects were established in response to findings that there was a lack of home-school liaison, and a lack of books in many homes. A second, more recent project is the Children's Book Foundation's Bookstart project, which provides new parents with materials such as a books, information on the local library and bookshops (Harrison, 1993).

What is interesting to note is that most of the early responses to the Plowden Report involved efforts to encourage parents to become more involved in school and support school agendas in a variety of ways. There was also strong emphasis on offering parents information and support rather than exploring genuine partnerships between home and school.

In the United States interest in home/school collaboration was a little slower to emerge, but by the 1990s Nickse (1993) estimated that there were more than 500 family literacy programs alone in the USA. In the rest of the 1990s this number has continued to expand rapidly. The major stimulus for these initiatives can be traced to a variety of State and Federal government programs including Head Start, Even Start, and the Family School Partnership Program (PACE).

In Australia, like the United Kingdom and the USA, the early interest in the home and parents was primarily to obtain support for school learning. Curriculum documents in many curriculum areas (particularly literacy) during the 1970s and 1980s stressed the importance of parents and a supportive home environment in children's learning. But there is little evidence to suggest that these early efforts were motivated by a desire for genuine partnership between home, school and community. In a review of national initiatives in this area Cairney *et al.* (1995b) identified 261 major initiatives and over 100 small-scale projects in Australia. Overall, 76.3% of these projects were initiated by schools and were largely designed to fulfil school purposes and transmit information about schooling.

In the last decade there has been a renewed interest in the need to involve parents more fully in their children's learning through integrated programs that seek to involve parents, children and teachers. One example is *Making A Difference* (Furniss, 1991). This is an intensive program which requires teachers to work with Year 7 students who are experiencing difficulties with literacy. Parents and community volunteers are trained by a Making A Difference teacher to work with the students. Contained within the program is a Volunteer Tutor manual that trains parents and community volunteers to work with students.

Other programs like Talk to a Literacy Learner (TTALL) and Effective Partners in Secondary Literacy Learning (EPISLL) (Cairney & Munsie, 1992a, b, c, 1993a, b, 1995) were designed to focus on parents. They sought to achieve this by involving teachers, students and their parents in a partnership that would help students cope more effectively with the literacy demands of schooling. The TTALL program was designed to involve parents more closely in the literacy development of their pre-school and primary school children. The EPISLL program was an outgrowth of the TTALL program and was designed for parents of secondary-aged children. The program was developed at the request of parents, and involved parents at every stage

of development and implementation of the project. Both these programs have been evaluated and have been shown to have positive outcomes for parents, students, teachers and schools, including performance gains for students (Cairney, 1995; Cairney & Munsie, 1993a, 1995).

Educators have increasingly begun to examine the relationship between home and school in order to uncover the reasons for the differential performance of children from different backgrounds. For example, there has been increased interest in the factors leading to greater success of specific cultural groups at school (Heath, 1983), with the desire being to seek social justice for all children.

As well, extensive child development research demonstrates that from birth parents are centrally involved in children's learning. In relation to language alone the role is complex, with parents introducing children to the mysteries of language, as they seek to communicate with them, and jointly make sense of their shared world. The parents' role in language and learning is extensive and includes being a listener, prompter, information giver, asker of questions, and fellow meaning maker interested in the communication process (Cairney, 1989, 1990; Lindfors, 1985; Snow, 1983; Wells, 1985, 1986). Families do this by selecting, arranging and using specific experiences that serve to show what is valued and seen as useful by family members. Within these daily practices specific activities are promoted through joint construction, personal engagement with written language, and observation of family members engaged in literacy (McNaughton, 1995).

However, while many educators have viewed the home as an interesting foundation for later learning and as the site for the emergence of practices such as literacy, many schools and teachers have failed to appreciate its significance for learning in school and indeed in later life. Increasingly, researchers and educators have come to realise that the influence of the home and community does not end at age 5 when most children enter formal schooling.

Beyond Deficit Views

It is clear that there is a relationship between school success and home factors (for a review see Schaefer, 1991). What is less clear is the nature of this link and reasons for such a relationship. There have been a variety of claims about the relationship between home and school, many of which have been deficit views of two types. The first I will call Family Deficit explanations. Explanations that fit into this category are based on the faulty assumption that school achievement varies for some students because their families lack the specific skills to enable them to create an environment of support that will enable their children to succeed at school. A second explanation is one I will call Educational Inadequacy. This view suggests that differential achievements are largely due to the failure of educational institutions to develop student strengths and abilities.

Neither of these explanations is very helpful because each assumes that educational practices are simply skills to be mastered, and that school success is dependent on students having the right mix of abilities and home support as well as access to 'appropriate' teaching practices. Each also assumes that the reason for differential performance in school practices can be traced to weaknesses in the learner, the parent or the teacher.

Connell (1995, p. 5) has suggested an alternative explanation and argues that explanations such as the above ignore the 'link between distribution and content [of

curriculum]'. That is, there are differences between people based on class, race and even culture, and such differences are associated with different relationships with the curriculum in schools. Specifically, Connell claims that there is an in-built class history within school curricula which privileges the 'ruling-class' over the 'working-class'. Similarly, others have suggested difficulties for some children due to the significant cultural diversity within families and communities when compared to the culture of schooling (Cairney & Ruge, 1998).

What deficit explanations of differential school achievement fail to recognise is the fact that much of the variability of student achievement in school reflects discrepancies that exist between school resources and instructional methods, and the cultural practices of the home (Au & Kawakami, 1984; Auerbach, 1989; Cazden, 1988; Heath, 1983; Moll, 1988), not deficiencies.

It has been suggested that our views on learning are inevitably reflective of a specific ideology, and as a consequence, arbitrarily advantage some while disadvantaging others (Lankshear & Lawler, 1987; Street, 1984). Hence, to understand school success fully we need to understand the groups and institutions through which we are socialised into specific school practices (Bruner, 1986; Gee, 1990). Scribner and Cole's (1981) work is influential here, having argued that schools need to consider the learning activities they institute not as separate skills but as social practices into which people are enculturated (or apprenticed) as members of specific social groups. Children who enter school already having been partially apprenticed into the social practices of schooling, invariably perform better at the practices of schooling right from the start.

With this recognition of learning as a sociocultural practice, schools and community groups have increasingly sought to meet the needs of students by acknowledging and responding to the richness and diversity of the language and culture of their communities. However, schools have done better at acknowledging than responding to difference. An acknowledgment of difference has led many schools to seek greater involvement of community members in schooling.

New Models for Responding to Home and Community Diversity

One promising more recent response to the need to understand and respond to the relationship between home and school has been driven by the desire to more firmly contextualise school education. This work has its foundation in sociocultural theory (e.g. Gee, 1990; Moll, 1992; Rogoff, 1990). This body of work recognises that if the relationship between the home and school learning is to be optimised, then we must find new ways to understand the complex relationship between these two important social settings in which children spend so much of their lives. The work of Moll (1992) has been particularly influential. He has used the term 'funds of knowledge' to describe home and community knowledge and skills that are not necessarily drawn on or privileged in classrooms. Moll and others argue that many minority students experience curricula that are not responsive to their funds of knowledge or specific needs.

This work has attempted to reform school practices to change interaction patterns, participation structures, curriculum content and classroom practices to more closely match the diverse backgrounds and strengths of students. Ladson-Billings (1994) has defined more responsive and culturally relevant curricula as being more 'congruent with the cultures, background, language, speech and communication styles, and

participation structures' (p. 16). Street (1998) and Cairney and Ruge (1998) have also argued that we need more detailed research that conducts microanalyses of the way people use linguistic resources, particularly the way they link communicative practices across multiple domains. The major implication of this work would be increased understanding of the complete spectrum of communicative competencies and the impact of the implementation of restricted practices in school and the failure to acknowledge and build on the social richness of home and community.

But care is needed here because there is a fine line between acknowledging a community's diversity and seeking to make its families conform to school expectations for learning. Since schools have typically been responsible for initiating most family and intergenerational programs, it is not surprising that many of these have been dominated by concerns with school learning. What is needed is a more equal sharing of agendas, open dialogue between parents and teachers, and concerted efforts to value and encourage genuine collaboration and partnership.

Attempts to Establish Home/School Partnerships with Literacy as the Starting Point

Literacy as Sociocultural Practice

In the rest of this paper I want to provide an example of how one body of research has evolved and led to new responses to the need for better relationships between home and school. Nowhere has the interest in the relationship between home and school been more vigorously pursued than in the field of literacy education. After the early work of the 1970s and 1980s recent work has moved beyond simple school-based programs for parents. A number of researchers have challenged traditional views of literacy as unitary skill and have instead recognised that it is a social practice with many specific manifestations (Cairney, 1995; Gee, 1990; Luke, 1993; Welch & Freebody, 1993). These researchers have suggested that there are many forms of literacy, each with specific purposes and contexts in which they are used. From this conceptual base researchers have argued that to understand literacy fully, we need to understand the groups and institutions through which we are socialised into specific literacy practices (Bruner, 1986; Gee, 1990).

This has led to 'a shift away from a view of individual learners to a view of learning as participation in a community of practice' (Moll, 1993). The emphasis has in turn led researchers to consider why and how people learn through their participation in the practices that make up specific groups and communities, how communities organise their resources, and how participation in the culture shapes identity.

Like schools and classrooms, families can be understood as cultures in which participants (family members) construct particular ways of acting, believing and valuing through the interactions among family members. As Hannon (1995) suggests, 'The family's literacy values and practices will shape the course of the child's literacy development in terms of the opportunities, recognition, interaction and models available to them' (p. 104).

Research into family literacy practices across cultural groups has the potential to contribute a great deal to our understanding of the relationship between literacy practices at home and at school, and the impact of this relationship on school success. Understanding the differences between the literacy of home and school has been examined in order to develop curricula that better suits the needs of students.

Ogbu (1992), for example, has argued that the impact of cultural differences on school success needs to be considered in the light of comparative research among minority groups. He has concluded that the historical and structural contexts of 'becoming' a minority group influence the community forces which operate within the group. Ogbu found in his research that some groups interpret cultural and linguistic differences as obstacles to be overcome, whereas other groups interpret these as differences to be maintained as an expression of identity. As well, some groups have a larger proportion of strategies that will not lead to success, and therefore are the groups most likely to need culturally compatible schooling.

Ferdman (1990) has argued that 'cultural identity mediates the process of becoming literate as well as the types of literate behaviour in which a person subsequently engages' (p. 197). Since literacy education is not simply a matter of teaching particular skills but involves the transmission of values, each person's cultural identity both shapes and is shaped by their experiences of literacy education. When there is a mismatch between the definition and significance of literacy as they are represented in a person's cultural identity and in the learning situation, the individual is faced with a choice. Either they must adopt the perspective of the school and risk undermining their cultural identity, or resist the externally imposed activities at the risk of becoming alienated from the school (Au, 1993; Cummins, 1986; Ferdman, 1990). Such forces have a significant impact on students who daily have to negotiate the curricula and pedagogy of schooling. For some these cultural practices are familiar and offer few challenges, while for others they represent significant obstacles to their success at school.

Understanding Social and Cultural Differences and the Impact of these on School Success

Recognising differences is of interest, but knowing how and why such differences impact on school success is even more important. Two major theories have been suggested as possible explanations for schools' failure to ensure high levels of academic success for students from minority backgrounds. The first is the theory of *cultural discontinuity*, while the second can be termed the theory of *structural inequality* (Au, 1993).

The theory of cultural discontinuity, or cultural difference, suggests that cultural mismatches between teachers and students may result in difficulties in communication and interaction in the classroom (Jacob & Jordan, 1993). These differences, or mismatches, work against the literacy learning of students whose home culture does not reflect that of the school. The theory of structural inequality looks beyond mismatches between the culture of the home and the school. It suggests that the lack of educational success of students of diverse backgrounds reflect structural inequalities in the broader social, political and economic spheres (Au, 1993; Ogbu, 1987). This theory takes into account the power relationships between groups, and argues that schools function to maintain the status quo. Au (1993) suggests that neither of these two theories on their own adequately explains the continuing educational disadvantage of students from minority backgrounds, and that both need to be considered in any attempt to improve students' chances of educational success.

Recent Australian studies (Breen *et al.*, 1994; Cairney & Ruge, 1998; Cairney *et al.*, 1995a,b; Freebody *et al.*, 1995) have shown that there are differences between the language and literacy practices of school and community. In contrast,

evidence exists which suggests that diversity of literacy practices within and between schools is far less evident (Cairney *et al.*, 1995a; Freebody *et al.*, 1995) than might be expected.

A number of American researchers have also explored differences in the suitability and impact of curricula and pedagogy on minority groups. For example, Foster (1992) in analysing research over the past two decades or so concludes 'that many of the difficulties African-American students encounter in becoming literate result in part from the misunderstandings that occur when the speaking and communication styles of their community vary from those expected and valued in the school setting' (p. 303). She argues that this research has contributed to our understanding of differences in language use at home and at school, and has helped us to recognise the contextually specific nature of language use, and hence demonstrate that classrooms are cultures with culturally specific ways of using language. However, she argues further that little has been done 'to advance our ability to use knowledge about cultural and linguistic differences to improve classroom learning' (p. 304) and that this has had little impact on creating classroom environments, pedagogy, or curricula 'specifically designed to improve the literacy learning of African-American children' (p. 308).

Several researchers have also investigated the impact of differences between the cultural beliefs and expectations of native Americans, and those of the dominant Anglo approach (Deyhle & LeCompte, 1994; Locust, 1988; McCarty, 1987). For example, Locust (1988) examined traditional native American belief systems, including their holistic approach to life and death, their emphasis on non-verbal communication, and their valuing of visual, motor and memory skills over verbal skills. She investigated the ways in which these beliefs conflict with the education system, and argued that traditional psychological education tests reflect the dominant culture resulting in native American children achieving low scores and being treated as learning disabled.

Like Locust, Deyhle and LeCompte (1994) argued that cultural differences in expectations and approaches result in the low school achievement of native American children in middle schools. Through an in-depth case study of one middle school, they showed how some features of the educational structure and pedagogy were congruent with Navajo culture, while many were not. They argued that 'Navajo children face conflict not only because their parents' conceptions of proper ways to raise children are different from those of Anglos, but also because of a related set of differences in attitudes and beliefs about stages in child development' (p. 157). They found that although many educators at the school were genuinely interested in good teaching, cultural differences other than language were ignored, rendered invisible, or considered to be irrelevant.

Cummins (1986) suggests that the educational success or failure of minority students is related to more than just curricula mismatches, and argues that it is 'a function of the extent to which schools reflect or counteract the power relations that exist within the broader society' (p. 32). His work provides a useful framework for evaluating the efforts of the schools included in this research. Cummins identified four structural elements of schooling which, he argued, influence the extent to which students from minority backgrounds are empowered or disadvantaged:

these elements include the incorporation of minority students' culture and language, inclusion of minority communities in the education of their

children, pedagogical assumptions and practices operating in the classroom, and the assessment of minority students. (Cummins, 1986, p. 24)

Similarly, Cairney and Ruge (1998) in conducting case studies of four schools judged effective at acknowledging community language and cultural diversity found that within each of these schools curriculum was driven by six basic premises:

- staff believed that all children could achieve school success irrespective of language or cultural background;
- language was used in an integrated way across the curriculum;
- curricula acknowledged that literacy development benefits from the maintenance of first language competence;
- success was seen as critical to learning and students were given opportunities to succeed as they learnt new skills.
- parents were seen as playing an important role in children's educational success and were actively involved in the activities of the school.

What this research and that of Cummins (1986) shows is that an understanding of language and cultural diversity of one's students and families is important. It also highlights the need for reform of curriculum and pedagogy to accommodate and respond to diversity in order to improve outcomes for all students.

The Way Ahead

As the above discussion has shown, research from a range of disciplines and perspectives has contributed a great deal to our understanding of the inter-relationships between culture, language, learning and school success. Interest in the relationship between home and school has moved from a preoccupation with how parents can assist their children and teachers to achieve better outcomes, to attempts to understand the complexity of relationships in order to reform curriculum and classroom practices. However, the difficulties associated with applying these understandings to the development of culturally responsive classroom environments and pedagogy have meant that the research is still largely theoretical (Foster, 1992). As well, there are still relatively few schools where genuine reciprocal partnerships have been developed between home, school and communities. As Cairney *et al.* (1995b) have shown, relationships between home and school are still very much centred on marshalling parents and community members to support school agendas.

Sociolinguistic analysis of the match and mismatch in language and literacy between home/community and school is one fruitful area of educational research that may help to challenge schools to consider more significant reforms to classroom practices in order to acknowledge diversity. However, there is still much to be learned about this topic. What we do know is that classrooms are not simple places; they are dynamic interactional spaces where individuals come together for the purpose of schooling to construct situated definitions of teacher, student, knowledge, values and so on (Fernie *et al.*, 1988; Green *et al.*, 1991). Bruner (1986) has suggested that classrooms are a forum for negotiating culture. But as Cairney (1994) has suggested we need to ask whose culture, and on what (and whose) terms is it negotiated? Furthermore, what impact do such practices have on the achievement of all students?

- Content**—What information is shared? What is the focus of group discussions, demonstrations, home tasks and so on? What is the stated purpose of the content?
- Process**—How is information shared? Who acts as the facilitator or leader for any program and how does this person structure opportunities for discussion, observation etc?
- Source**—Who has initiated the involvement? Was it a parent, school, community, or government initiative?
- Control**—Who is in control of the program? Where is the program located (home, school, community building)? How do parents become involved in programs (chosen, selected, parent initiative)?

FIG. 1. Framework for the evaluation of family literacy initiatives

While much has been done in the last 30 years to facilitate more effective partnerships between home and school, there is a need for a significant shift in school understanding of the type of relationship possible with their communities. In response to this need Cairney *et al.* (1995b) devised a framework for evaluating home/school initiatives in a far more comprehensive way (see Figure 1).

This simple framework attempts to assess any initiative on a number of key variables. However, rather than attempting to categorise home/school initiatives this framework is based on the assumption that categorical distinctiveness is not helpful, and in fact masks significant diversity. Instead, this framework employs key variables that it is believed give shape to any home/school initiative. Each of these variables is seen not as categories but as continua. Furthermore, each of the variables has many potential dimensions that shape the particular character and directions of any initiative.

By overlaying these variables onto programs or initiatives one is able to gain a better sense of their nature and purposes. Variations in home/school initiatives are at times quite subtle. Cairney *et al.* (1995b) also identified a number of multiple dimensions relating to each variable. For example, when examining the content of programs, purpose was identified as important. It was noted that the purpose(s) of an initiative could vary from those focused on 'treatment' (based on notions of deficit) of a perceived problem, to 'prevention', which was characterised by strategies to support families through partnership. As well, it was observed that the comprehensiveness of programs varied from those with virtually only one component (e.g. parent support of literacy) to those with multiple components (e.g. provision of resources, literacy support, homework programs, etc.). Program content also differed in terms of variability, ranging from those that were highly prescriptive to those that were responsive to the needs of parents. Within each of these and the other dimensions it was apparent that continua existed, rather than just categorical characteristics, and that there was a complex interplay between all of these variables and dimensions (see Cairney *et al.*, 1995b for a full discussion).

Using frameworks like the above it is possible to critically examine home/school programs and initiatives and test the extent to which genuine partnership is evident. It is only when we begin to apply more complex frameworks or lenses to examine home/school initiatives that we will be able to reflect critically on our work, and create effective partnerships. While many school initiatives claim to 'involve' parents, or attempt to develop 'partnerships', one needs to test the veracity of such claims.

Conclusion

The increased interest in the relationship between home and school is one of the most positive educational developments of the last decade. While this interest is not new, recent initiatives have increasingly begun to move beyond simply transmitting knowledge from schools to parents and their children. Instead, there has been a growing desire to move towards genuine partnership between home and school, and a search for processes to facilitate the reaching of mutual consensus between parents and teachers. This process of reaching shared understanding is what Vygotsky (1978) has called 'intersubjectivity'. It involves a shared focus of attention and mutual understanding of any joint activity.

We need to know more about intersubjectivity and how it is developed between schools and their families and communities. Foundational to this will be new knowledge concerning:

- learning practices within these multiple contexts and the differences between them;
- the consequences of matches and mismatches in the language, learning and culture of school and the home and community;
- the mechanisms for creating a climate of analysis and reflection within the teaching profession that will lead to self-analysis of classroom discourse and its impact on children.

Involving parents more closely in school education has the potential to develop new understanding by each party of the other's specific cultural practices, and lead to the type of 'reciprocity' which Harry (1992) argues is needed. Teachers and parents need to understand the way each defines, values and uses literacy and learning activities as part of cultural practices. Such mutual understanding offers the potential for schooling to be adjusted to meet the needs of families. As well, it offers parents the opportunity to observe and understand schooling, and the cultural practices which ultimately empower individuals to take their place in society (Cairney, 1994).

In this paper I have argued that there is a need for schools to respond to the diverse cultural resources of families in positive ways, rather than simply attempting to transmit school knowledge to them. The relationship between school success and home factors has been confirmed (Schaefer, 1991), but there is much to be learned about how schools can be more responsive to cultural diversity and the uneven spread of resources within and across communities.

The big challenge is to transform schools into sites for learning that are far more responsive to the social and cultural diversity of the communities that they serve. We need to provide opportunities and alternative programs and curricula which challenge existing educational practices (Cairney, 1994). If we can manage to build genuine partnerships between communities and schools that enable shared understanding to develop between teachers and parents, there is some hope that equitable school outcomes for all students, irrespective of social and cultural background, may become a reality.

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