

The Educate Together Ethos and Parental Participation.

Dr Mary Nugent and Caroline Mooney, July 2008

A key element of the Educate Together Ethos is that schools are democratic and this principle encompasses the view that the input of parents should be embraced ‘to enable the highest level of participation and partnership’.

Parental participation is therefore a key element of the Educate Together Ethos. This paper draws together findings from international research on the significance of parental participation.

The parental right to choose suitable education.

The parental right to choose the most suitable education for their child is set out in documents such as the European Declaration of Human Rights (art 2, protocol 1) and the Constitution of Ireland (Article 42, 1 and 3).

The democratically run school.

The democratically run school has been found to offer the best chance of positive outcomes for all participants. Carter’s (2002) study, which explored school ethos in a comprehensive school setting, recommends ‘the adoption of a democratic ethos as the best way to provide schooling which supports holistic and reflective growth for all’ (p36).

Trafford has also written extensively about school democracy. He is particularly interested in student participation. His definition of democracy in schools is as follows: “a considerable degree of consultation, a right for individuals to speak their minds, whether or not they agree with the official or majority line of the school, and the implication that the rights of the individual will be enshrined while at the same time being balanced with the needs of the community as a whole, and the expectation of active participation by all those involved.”

What is parental participation?

We are not speaking here solely of family involvement in learning, often called ‘parental involvement’ in the literature, see Epstein 2001. This type of involvement

happens irrespective of support from school. Instead we are looking at what Epstein would call ‘School and Family participation programmes’. These programmes are designed to support parental involvement in learning at home and at school and this would refer for example to specific interventions such as parental involvement in literacy.

However, Smit and Driessen (2007) note that parental involvement is a poorly defined term and can cover diverse activities, ranging from conscious involvement with children’s learning and well being at school to parents evenings organised by the school and formal participation in school boards and participation councils.

In line with the Educate Together’s democratic principle which encompasses the view that input of parents be embraced ‘to enable the highest level of participation and partnership’ Epstein’s 1995 classification system of parental participation may be appropriate:

1. **Parenting:** Helping families to establish home environments that support children as students and helping schools understand families.
2. **Communicating:** Designing and conducting effective forms of two-way communication about school programmes and children’s progress.
3. **Volunteering:** Recruiting and organising help and support for classrooms, school functions and student activities.
4. **Learning at Home:** Providing information, ideas and opportunities to families about how to help students at home with academic decisions, homework and curriculum related activities.
5. **Decision Making:** Including families in various aspects of school governance.
6. **Collaborating with Community:** Strengthen and support schools, students and their families, and from schools, families and students to support the community.

Benefits of Parental Participation.

General.

There is now a significant body of research over the last 30 years that indicates that parental participation has a positive impact on student outcomes and this finding holds true irrespective of family background, the resources available to school and cultural background. Henderson and Berla (1994) reviewed 66 studies of parental participation and concluded, *'Regardless of income, education level or cultural background, all families can –and do contribute to their children's success.'* (p14).

In summarising the research on parental participation, it becomes clear that extensive, substantial and convincing evidence suggest that parents play a crucial role in both the home and school environments. In general, parental involvement is associated with children's higher achievements in language and mathematics, enrolment in more challenging programmes, greater academic persistence, better behaviour, better social skills and adaptation to school, better attendance and lower drop-out rates. (Heymann 2000, p53, Henderson and Mapp, 2002, p24).

'There are many reasons for developing school, family and community partnerships. They can improve school programs and school climate, provide family services and support and increase parent's skills and leadership, connect families with others in the school and in the community and help teachers with their work. However, the main reason to create such partnerships is to help youngsters succeed in school and in later life'. Epstein 1995, p701.

Cotton and Reed Wikelund (2001) reviewed information from 41 documents and concluded, *'The research overwhelmingly demonstrates that parent involvement in children's learning is positively related to achievement. Further the research shows that the more intensely parents are involved in their children's learning, the more beneficial are the achievement effects. This holds true for all types of parental involvement in children's learning and for all types and ages of students.'* (p3)

So great are the benefits of parental participation, that parental and community involvement are increasingly seen as a strategy to make education more effective, see Smit and Driessen (2007).

Benefits for Students - Educational Outcomes.

There are benefits to parental involvement and parent's interest in children's education have an important influence on children's educational outcomes. In fact, Flouri (2006) reported that 'parental interest in children's education, through motivation, interest and support, was the major influence on attainment'. (p42).

Benefits for Students, Attitude, Behaviour and Affective Measures.

Cotton and Reed Wiklund (2001) note that all the research studies which focused on affective measures found that parental involvement has positive effects on student attitudes and social behaviour. (p4).

This study further notes that '*in general, active parent involvement is more beneficial than passive involvement but passive forms of involvement are better than no involvement at all*'. (p4)

'Parental involvement supports students learning, behaviour and attitudes regardless of factors such as parent's income, educational level and whether or not parents are employed. All parental involvement works and works well'. (p4)

'Indeed disadvantaged children have the most to gain from parental involvement programmes.'(p5).

Research reviewed indicates that parental involvement is important and beneficial to all student groups with this study noting that '*special education, gifted, limited English proficient and other student groups also experience achievement and affective benefits when their parents are involved in their learning*'.(p.6)

While we know that there are many benefits of parental participation on student outcomes, attitudes and behaviour, it is also important to acknowledge the positive impact of paternal participation on schools and on parents themselves.

Benefits for Parents.

The benefits are at least two-way. When parents have opportunities to participate in their children's education, there are positive benefits both for children's cognitive development and their performance as learners and their parents' attitude to school.

Involvement in school governance has been found to lead to better communication between school staff and parents and better understanding of each others roles. This is important since a lack of mutual understanding has been found to be one of the greatest barriers to effective parental involvement of all types. Additionally, engagement with the school enhances the development of the parents' own resources and skills, with an impact on the academic, social and psychological development of their children.

Benefits for Schools and Teachers.

Benefits for school staff, in obvious and everyday ways, such as improved student behaviour, but also in support for new initiatives, help with fund-raising, availability of additional supervision on trips etc. It has also been found that there is a positive benefit for schools because of the impact of parents serving as advocates for the school within the community. Research has also found that *'the many ways in which parental involvement benefits student's achievements, attitudes and behaviour have a positive impact on school staff'*. Cotton and Reed Wikelund (2001)(p4).

Benefits for the Wider Community and Society.

It needs to be appreciated that the benefits of parental participation go beyond education and include social and financial benefits (OECD 1997, pp.22,27). These include improved health outcomes, reduced dependence on social welfare and lower levels of crime (Wolfe and Haveman 2002).

One of the most interesting findings of an OECD report of 1997 relates to the relatively untapped potential of parental education in assisting parents from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds to support their children's learning more effectively. It was noted that parental participation can reduce exclusion and improve

equality, which have been key elements in Irish educational policy over the last number of years.

'Education is a powerful tool in the integration process'.

(OECD, The economic and social aspects of migration 2003 report.) The importance of parental involvement is vital to this process. Educational integration is one of the measures used in assessing social integration of migrants internationally. One of the measures assessed is parent-teacher communication. In the view of researcher Annemiek Veen *'School as the professional partner, is the initiator in this. Schools must demonstrate supportive behaviour towards parents so that parents behave in an educationally supportive way towards the schools'.*

What kind of Parental Participation?

Henderson and Berla (1994) p16 make an important point when they argue that there is little evidence that putting parents on advisory committees or governing bodies improves student outcomes unless the parents are also involved in the school and their child's learning in other ways. The best results seem to occur when parents are involved in both learning and decision-making roles.

Henderson and Berla (1994, pp103-104) cite several studies that indicate that schools with high achievement levels are also schools that are more open to parent and community involvement.

There is also evidence that parental involvement must be planned to be effective and that the most successful parental participation efforts are those that offer parents a variety of roles, so that parents can choose from a range of activities which accommodate different schedules, preferences and capabilities.

What about parental involvement in school governance? School governance includes any activity which provides parents the opportunity to take part in decision making about school programs. This can include being on the board of management or PTA or contributing to a working party or advisory group.

Barriers to Parental Participation.

‘Surveys show that most parents would like to play a more active role in this type of involvement, whereas most school administrators and teachers exhibit great reluctance to encourage parents to become partners in governance’ (p6), Cotton and Reed Wikelund (2001). Research indicates that school management generally are not enthusiastic about parental involvement in management decision making, such as recruitment, selection of teaching materials or curriculum priorities or deciding on priorities for the school budget. School management often feel that parents are not trained/ skilled or competent in these areas, while surveys of parents indicate that they feel they are capable of making sound decisions. There is not yet adequate research on parental involvement in school governance and its impact on student outcomes, (although the research done to date does suggest benefits). For example, Beck and Murphy (1999) describe situations where involvement in decision making appears to increase parental agency and influence in a way that positively shapes learning and teaching. They promote the ideal of powerful parental participation in all aspects of school life. However, other benefits of parental involvement in school governance are already documented;

Tett (2001) argues that in order for parents, particularly those from disadvantaged communities, to fully participate in the educational process, *‘some of the control that professionals have imposed on schooling for so long will have to be released and parents would needs to be regarded as people with important contributions to make as collaborating educational partners’*. (p188)

The experience in the UK mirrors this and Harris (2005) argues that *‘over the past 25 years little power has been ceded to parents, individually or collectively’* (p957)

In relation to the effective education of children with special educational needs, it has been found that parental participation if particularly important, yet Buswell and

Schnaffner (1999) found that *'parents often experience resistance to their involvement in setting policy for schools'*.

In Europe this difficulty is now well documented. Sliwka and Istance (2006) found that in some countries parents tend to believe that the issues on which their engagement is sought are relatively simple, practical ones rather than fundamentals, and that there may even be active discouragement of parental involvement. (p29)

Second Level Education.

Research indicates that parents generally become less involved in their child's schooling as the child gets older, for many reasons; the more complex curriculum, bigger schools, schools located further from home, the greater independence of the child, the larger number of teachers involved in the child's education etc.

However, research shows that parent involvement remains very beneficial in promoting positive achievement and affective outcomes with older students.

Schools are encouraged to engage and maintain this involvement throughout the middle schools and secondary years.(Cotton & Reed Wikelund, 2001. pg 4).

A feasibility study carried out by Trinity College Dublin (University of Dublin, School of Education, Project Team, Dr. A. Seery, Dr. A. Loxley & Dr. D. Limond, 2008.) provides strong evidence that parents who send their children to Educate Together primary schools wish to continue to participate in an active way in their children's second-level education. It is Educate Together's belief that the positive experience of these parents in working with Educate Together primary schools can provide the foundation for a new type of meaningful partnership between second-level schools and parents. The strong sense of ownership that Educate Together parents and students feel towards their primary schools can pave the way towards a new and more meaningful engagement at second-level.

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