

BUILDING LEARNING RELATIONSHIPS WITH PARENTS

BY RICHARD HESTER

Education is more than schooling, and learning is more than education. Research has consistently told us that parental involvement in learning (through interactions, conversations and aspirations at home), rather than simply involvement in schooling (e.g. through attending parents' meetings), has a significantly beneficial impact on a child. In fact, research has found that the impact caused by different levels of parental involvement is much bigger than differences associated with variations in the quality of schools.

While some international schools are excellent at communicating what is going on, school leaders can also play an important role in building relationships between parents and staff so that parents can support learning, rather than just supporting the school.

PARENTS IN INTERNATIONAL SCHOOLS

Different parents have different hopes, aspirations and, crucially, views on the actual purpose of education. Further, it is not uncommon within expatriate families in international schools for one parent to be less keen than the other to actually be in the foreign country with their children. For local parents, there can be differences of opinion between parents regarding their child attending an international school versus a national school (e.g. the dilemma between the desire for their child to have English-language instruction and gain a qualification with international currency, versus transmission of their own culture and heritage).

TEACHERS AND OTHER STAFF

Andy Hargreaves stated that, “the new relationships that teachers are having to form with parents is one of the greatest challenges to their professionalism in the postmodern age.” However, fewer than 10% of teachers have participated in ongoing professional development on parental engagement, and initial teacher training rarely touches upon this area either. Thus, school leaders shouldn't assume that teachers are confident and knowledgeable in understanding and engaging with parental issues, and should consider providing training. As well as external training providers, leaders can allocate time for teachers and other staff to reflect on and share good practice.

Of all the school-based factors promoting parental engagement with learning, the quality of teachers' partnerships with parents has been found to have the largest impact. Building a true relationship requires mutual trust and respect, but research has found that teachers often view parental knowledge about educational matters as inadequate, supplementary or unimportant. Despite teachers now often using constructivist and engaging methods in the classroom, they can still use didactic, school-centric methods in dealing with parents, which means parents are receivers of knowledge from teachers who are the experts.

Although the personality of a school leader affects the quality of home-school relationships, even in schools that do have a positive and friendly Head teacher, this attitude and practice



does not always extend down to the staff in the school. While a leader's positive and welcoming attitude is considered important as a positive step to achieving parental involvement, it is hard to see how this alone is enough to change the mindset and attitudes of some teachers towards parents.

The aim is for school staff to see families as unique and different, just as they see children as unique and different.

DEMANDING PARENTS

Whether intentionally or otherwise, some parents may advocate for individual pupils or groups to the detriment of the wider school community. Research has shown the importance of the principal 'managing' the relationship and the significant issues of power and control,

highlighting a tension that can exist between parents and principals, which can, in turn, become a barrier to meaningful relationships.

It is argued that it is necessary to acknowledge the power dynamics between parents and schools before a real understanding of the issues relating to authentic relationships can develop. Other researchers have also highlighted middle-class parents' ability to use their social, economic and cultural capital to their advantage within the education system, thus showing that strong leadership is needed to counter the over-influence of 'entitled-minded' parents.

PARENTS AS TEACHERS

International schools may well have a higher proportion of teachers whose own children are at the school than national schools. There

are clear benefits to this, especially relating to recruitment and retention, and given the current situation in international schools, this is no small matter. However, there are also challenges, such as issues if a child's behaviour is less than ideal or perceived favouritism, a child being treated differently, and the reactions of colleagues.

Brené Brown suggests that “leaders must either invest a reasonable amount of time attending to fears and feelings, or squander an unreasonable amount of time trying to manage unproductive behaviour.” This advice is pertinent to international school leaders when building relationships with both parents and teachers.



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SCHOOL LEADERS:

1. Support teachers and other staff by arranging training relating to parental involvement, focusing on knowledge, attitudes and skills.
2. Formulate and develop guidelines with all staff for appropriate practice for teacher-parents and arrange relevant induction for new teacher-parents.
3. Ensure that parents in your school know how important they are to their child's learning (rather than just schooling). Given the increasingly complex lives that parents lead, schools may have to be more creative in the ways they conduct workshops, support programmes and other activities.
4. Initiate a learning project with parents. For example, some international schools have adapted the National Trust's 50 things to do before 11¾, to their own country or city.
5. Work with staff to produce a context-specific parental engagement policy or guidelines to ensure a consistent and whole-school approach.

**PARENTS CAN SUPPORT LEARNING,
RATHER THAN JUST SUPPORTING THE SCHOOL.**



THE AUTHOR

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