

Looking back, looking ahead: reflections on lessons over twenty-five years

Don Davies

For the last 25 years my professional life has been dominated by my work for the Institute for Responsive Education, which I founded in 1973 to study and promote family, community, school partnerships. I embarked on this work after 5 years as an official in the US education department, and several years as official of the largest American teachers' union, the National Education Association. Before that I was engaged in teacher education in universities and in teaching in high school. These years in education convinced me that really good education for all children, rich and poor, was only going to be possible if families and communities became full partners with schools in the enterprise.

I have come to see that all parts of the child's world must share responsibility for the child's learning and development. This concept of shared responsibility is seen by some as a radical idea, and by others as unrealistic. The majority opinion by academics and educators is that the jobs of schools and families and communities are basically separate and should be kept that way. And, yet for me, this concept of shared responsibility, is at the heart of all the efforts I have made over the years.

I also became convinced that good partnerships between schools, parents and communities are possible in all kinds of schools and communities 'pre-school, elementary, urban, rural, rich and poor. I know this because we have good examples all across the US and overseas. (Unhappily, partnerships are still the exception and not the rule, as can be seen in the recent 1997 OECD report on the status of parent involvement in nine countries.) My work over these 25 years has involved dozens of studies and projects in the

US and several other countries and the opportunity to work with and learn from dozens of other researchers and advocates doing similar work. The International Roundtables, which Joyce Epstein and I initiated more than ten years ago have been a particularly rich source of learning from scholars and practitioners in many other countries.

This Roundtable in Amsterdam offers me the opportunity to reflect back on those 25 years of studies and projects in several countries and on what I have been able to learn from others working in this field. What I want to do in this brief paper is to identify and discuss a few of the lessons that seem especially important to me. These are reflections and interpretations, based only partly on research and colored by own perspectives, values, and opinions. I will also draw to a limited extent on papers presented at earlier Roundtables. So, how do schools and families and communities make partnerships happen. I'll offer a few brief thoughts and recommendations.

Look first to the teachers

Partnerships work best if teachers are given help, support, and training. If increased involvement of families and community organizations and agencies with the schools is the aim, why worry first about the teachers? The answer: Teachers can make or break any effort to change the traditional separation of schools from the families and communities they serve. I have seen this in many American schools and in IRE's recent cross-national study in five countries. Without teacher interest, support, and skill much of that that is commonly known as parent

involvement won't work. For most parents in the world, the teacher is the primary and sometimes the only connection to the school and holds the key to good communication. Yet, often plans for partnerships are developed with little or no teacher input and teachers are told 'Here is our new parent involvement project, funded by this or that foundation or government. So, teacher, just do it.' Sometimes they do it, but often they don't. The apparently natural and almost universal teacher concern about professional status and expertise and traditional resistance to outsider influence is difficult to overcome. We saw teacher resistance and fear of losing professional status as a factor in many of the schools in a recent cross-national study, across five very different cultures and national traditions. We saw in all of the countries that teachers were proud of their expertise and wanted to protect their own turf (Davies and Johnson 1996).

What is needed? Teacher education institutions need to prepare future teachers to work positively with parents and community agencies and institutions and to learn how families and the community can benefit the teacher and the students. New teachers learn through instruction and experience that partnerships with parents and community agencies does not diminish their professional expertise or status but in fact can enhance these.

Once he or she starts to teach the new teacher needs to be given positive encouragement by other teachers and school administrators to engage in the desired partnership activities, and to be protected if and when things go wrong. Teachers on the job also need specific training, information, and recognition when they are asked to undertake new kinds of partnership activities such as student homes, using parents as volunteers in the classroom, or participating on a decision-making committee with parent representatives. And, when a new policy or project is to be launched, teachers must be involved in planning for it. The issue of preparing

teachers for partnership has been addressed by several participants in the International Roundtables in Europe and the US, including Deanna Evans-Schilling, Joyce Epstein, Martha Allexaht-Snider, and Dan Safran from the US, Helen Phtiaka, Cyprus, and Birte Ravn, Denmark.

Make it official

Partnerships work best when they have the official sanction of written policies.

Like it or not, schools are bureaucratic and conservative institutions. They mostly live by rules and policies. So, if you want to have teachers and administrators reach out to parents and to community institutions, there should be written policies which recommend or mandate such activities and provide guidelines for how such partnerships might be established and maintained.

I have seen that it is helpful to have compatible written policies in support of partnerships at all levels, national, state or province, local district, and individual school. It is also useful when supportive policies are negotiated into teacher union contracts.

Another way of achieving official sanction for partnership practices is to win the support and positive endorsement of the head of the school. There are many case studies, including the action research studies of the Institute for Responsive Education for the Center on Families, that support this belief (Palanki and Burch, 1995). My own experience is dotted with many both positive and negative examples of the powerful influence of the school principal on efforts to initiate or sustain school, family, community partnership efforts.

Having laws and written policies is not enough, of course. These must be implemented and enforced. For example, Smit and van Esch reported that not many of the goals of

participation in their country were being realized (Smit and van Esch, 1992). Isabel Solomon in Australia discovered that the official structures created by national government have produced a lot of rhetoric but little action.

Focus on children's learning

Partnerships work best when improved children's learning is seen as the main goal by teachers, parents, and community agencies. The partnership idea is most acceptable to policymakers if they believe that such partnerships contribute to children's academic success in school. This is usually true for teachers, community agencies, and parents themselves. There is a good evidence that connects various kinds of partnerships with student learning, if those partnerships are well designed and carefully implemented.

Joyce Epstein has reported that when schools inform parents about children's academic progress in schools, their expectations for their child's success goes up. Epstein's work on homework has shown that families are more likely to be able to help their children with academic work at home if teachers give homework assignments that are interactive, provide clear and specific information about the content and methods being used in the classroom, and offer encouragement along with written materials and guidelines.

Dozens of International Roundtable presentations over the years have focused on how parents and community agencies can promote children's learning. One example has been the work of Raul Pizzaro in Chile who has conducted and reported on several studies of the effects of home interventions on student achievement in mathematics and Spanish and has concluded that families and schools can work together to enhance students' cognitive achievement

(Pizzaro 1992). But, my own experience in schools suggests that many administrators and teachers still see parent involvement as a marginal activity 'nice,' but not central to the school's instructional goals and many school reform programs give only a little attention to parents and the community.

Provide for a diverse opportunities

Partnerships work best when they are comprehensive. Joyce Epstein developed and tested a five part typology for parent involvement and then expanded it to include a sixth type of partnership involving exchanges with the community. This typology was used in many of the studies of the Center on Families, Communities, Schools, and Children's Learning (Epstein 1992). My own experience and studies suggest that a wide range of opportunities, both in the school and the home and the community is needed to meet the diverse interests, needs, and conditions of the variety of families in most communities. For many families, supporting their children's learning at home and in the community is more attractive and feasible than attending events or committee meetings in the school. Nancy Chavkin reported that non-traditional activities outside the school attracted more parents than activities organized in the school (Chavkin 1992). Few schools actually undertake a comprehensive approach. The efforts I see are often piecemeal, a series of programs, events, or small projects. I have seen good results from using Epstein's typology planning tool, which encourages those involved to consider all six types of involvement, including: 1) The basic obligations for child-rearing, building positive home conditions that support children's development; 2) Basic obligations of schools for communicating about school programs and children's progress; 3) Family involvement at school as volunteers, aides, audiences for student performances, participants in meetings and social events; 4) Involvement in learning activities at

home, monitoring and assisting children; 5) Involvement in governance, decision-making and advocacy in school-based organizations and in the community; 6) Collaboration and exchanges between the school and the community (Epstein 1992). Ultimately, a comprehensive approach can and should lead to a change in the culture of the school and its connections with families and the communities. There are some examples of such culture change in several countries. One of the best examples is the Patrick O'Hearn School in Boston. The altered culture in this school is noticed by even the most casual visitors to the school and described in IRE's report on its action research projects (Palanki and Burch 1995).

All families need help sometime

Partnerships work best when the schools and health and social service agencies join together to plan how best the needs of the children and their families can be served.

There is no one best way that schools can link with community agencies. But the point is that all families need support and help at one time or another 'some need more help than others and need it more often' if schools want to help all children succeed they need to be concerned about meeting the non-academic health and social service needs of the children and the families. There is much research evidence, bolstered by much common sense, that academic achievement is linked to health, emotional stability, nutrition, sleep of children and to the social and health conditions of the home. It is obvious that schools cannot meet all the complex social and health needs of the children and families they serve and must enlist to other community agencies and institutions. There are many promising models in the US and other countries that point the way to coordinated or shared services. Some of these models and their results have been reported in various of our International Roundtables.

My own experience suggests strongly that partnerships work best when the relationship between schools and community organizations and agencies is really an exchange, not just community groups or business doing things for the schools. The schools and their staffs have much to offer to other agencies and other community residents, including access to their physical facilities (such as computer labs, gyms); access to their expertise, teachers and administrators who offer their talents and skills to the community; and students who serve the community in service projects. The relationship between schools and their communities should be reciprocal. This reciprocal relationship means more than the community contributing to the child and to the school. It must also mean that the school contributes to the economic and social development of the community. A true partnership involves an exchange of resources.

I see family literacy programs as another form of family support. Many participants in International Roundtables have described various approaches to intergenerational literacy including Trevor Carney, Jacqueline McGilp, and Derek Toomey from Australia; Lorrie Connors-Tadros, and Ruth Handle and Ellen Goldsmith from the US; and Adelina Villas Boas from Portugal. Many of the projects reported aim to raise parents' awareness of the important role that they play in their child's language development and help them learn try practical ways to help their children read better.

A room of their own

Partnerships work best when there are visible signs and symbols of welcome in the school itself and when there are practical organizational means of planning and carrying out partnership activities. Family or parent centers fill this need for a symbol of welcome and for a location and capacity for organizing partnership activities. Such centers are a low-cost, easy-to-manage way to make schools more hospitable to parents, to

plan and carry out activities, and to serve as a handy locale for parent-to-parent and parent-to-teacher communication.

In the US and a few other countries they are functioning for many different purposes: operating food banks; providing libraries for parents with books, toys, computer hardware and software; clothing exchanges; language classes; and workshops and support groups for parents. Vivian Johnson, who was one of the researchers for the Center on Families, Communities, Schools, and Children's learning and a frequent participant in International Roundtables, has studied parent/family centers and reported on their effectiveness (Johnson 1993).

Reaching the hard to reach

Partnerships work best when they are designed to benefit all children and families, across lines of race, ethnicity, social class, and family income. I see the gap between the haves and the have-nots is the most important political, social, and educational problem that the world faces as it starts the new millennium. Educators in every place must make sure that progress toward higher standards of academic content and performance for students is shared across lines of race and social class. We must make sure that the wonderful new benefits of technology don't further widen the already large gaps between the poor and the affluent.

This means finding ways to help all students achieve, despite economic disadvantage. It is important to ask parents to work hard not only for the interests of better education for their own children but also for better schools for all children. I must point out with considerable embarrassment that the US has the widest gap between rich and poor families (and the gap has increased in recent years). The country offers fewer and less generous social programs for families and children than other countries. There is an important new study which documents the achievement gap between

middle-class and affluent children and children who are poor, black, Hispanic, and low-income white families. This report by the Education Trust argues that raising standards of academic content and performance for all children is both possible and essential (Education Trust 1996).

Well executed partnerships can help schools reach those parents they consider hardest to reach. These are very often families that are poor, from minority groups, or considered outside of the mainstream. I have seen many successful efforts to 'reach the hardest to reach,' but I have also seen what Derek Toomey has been warning us about for several years: that parent involvement programs, if they reach and help more affluent, middle-class families and their children can actually widen and not narrow the gap between the have's and the have nots.

Toomey writes: I believe that many parent involvement programs in schools fail to include the hardest-to-reach families and that often these families are not able to give the support to their children's education they would like to be able to give' (Toomey, 1992).

This warning leads me as I look ahead to recommend that educators and organizations concerned about narrowing the economic and social class gaps pay special attention to designing diverse and imaginative strategies aimed at those families who are often left behind.

Partnership also means power-sharing

Partnerships work best when democratic principles are applied.

These principles which include involving families and other community residents in planning and making decisions about their schools and about how partnerships should be set up and managed so that family members are seen as partners not 'outsiders' clients (for whom you do something). When educators begin to see families as partners and not just 'clients,' I find that they will discover ways to involve them in governance and decision-making processes. This means they will

include them in decision-making about budgets, personnel, and curriculum. They will tap their opinions through surveys, focus groups, conferences, and telephone hot lines. They will keep them informed about problems and issues. We know that active or passive resistance will be found to such participation which leads to power-sharing, but those school leaders who take the risks involved usually find that the benefits outweigh the costs. The benefits include better decisions, decisions that are more widely supported, a stronger sense of parent and community ownership of school programs, and increased political support from parents and the community. To make power sharing workable and realistic requires a careful re-design of the decision-making structures usually found in schools and larger districts in which schools are embedded. Many studies have shown that many advisory or decision-making committees that are set up become only tokens or are dominated by the educators. We know also that many structures set up are dominated by the most sophisticated and well-educated members of a school's parent community.

One way to increase meaningful family and community participation in decision-making is to decentralize important decisions from the center to the individual school. Another is to broaden the kinds of opportunities and structures. On this point, I have been influenced by the work of Philip Woods of the Open University in England who provided a framework for thinking about parent roles and aspirations which includes: transforming the way services are provided, making choices about which school to send their children to; making sure the school is meeting the needs the parents want it to; letting service providers know their views; seeking to influence or take part in the school decision-making process (Woods 1993). Strong parent associations or parent-teacher organizations can help provide some parents with a stronger voice in school affairs, if these groups address important school

issues and represent parent interests as well as school interests.

Another very important form of power-sharing or parent/community influence on schools is through independent organizations such as community development associations and child advocacy groups. These groups can give parents and others in the community a stronger voice on school matters. The importance of parent and community organizations working on school issues goes beyond helping the school. There is a broader social benefit. I have been struck by the work of Robert Putnam of Harvard University who has demonstrated that one important element of a civil society and stronger communities is networks of civic associations. In his research in Italy over a decade Putnam has demonstrated empirically the direct link between the existence of a network of civic associations and economic productivity and the flourishing of democracy. By civic associations he means organizations such as parent groups, local choruses and orchestras, sports clubs, neighborhood councils, and community organizations working on school issues (Putnam 1994, 1997).

Putnam points out that the quality of public life and the performance of social institutions (e.g. schools and families) in America and elsewhere are powerfully influenced by norms and networks of civic engagement, which he and others call social capital.

Putnam's work corroborates the political theory of 'civic humanism,' which means that a strong and free government depends on a virtuous and public spirited citizenry and a civic community that supports the government. To reach such a goal and sustain it a society must create education for its citizens that emphasizes good citizenship. While America has often been credited as being a model for democracy and citizen activism, Putnam notes that civic participation in our country has declined markedly in the past four decades. Reversing this decline is both an educational and political challenge.

So, my point here is that collaboration between schools, families, and communities is one strategy that can be helpful in democratic societies seeking to sustain and advance democratic principles. Schools can make an important contribution by striving to give the families they serve a variety of opportunities to participate in setting policies about budget, personnel, and programs, and in important decisions about the school.

Cross national exchanges do work

I think our International Roundtables have demonstrated over and over that studies and examples in one country are useful to those in seeking to change policies and practices in families, communities, and schools in the direction of partnership. This is what I call the 'more distant mirror' phenomenon. Looking at one's problems and alternative solutions at a distance seems to give policy-makers, planners, administrators, and researchers different ways of thinking about closer-to-home problems. Research and successful practice in one country offer support for those who want to act to improve education in another. Some anthropologists who have studied the process of cultural change point out that 'diffusion does not typically involve the replication in one society of

some practice developed elsewhere; rather what is transposed is the basic idea, a model 'one might even say a metaphor' which is then applied to the particular circumstances of the receiving society' (Renfrew 1976).

Final words

Educators must be optimists, and I am one, even though cynicism is always fashionable in academia and world events sometimes make it difficult for anyone to maintain his or her optimism. My hope is that my work and yours about partnerships and schools, families, and communities is of more than trivial importance. A stronger, more positive reciprocal relationship between schools and their communities can be forged, and those relationships will help educators and communities use the positive potential of education for good and humane purposes. As I look ahead my optimist's hope is that we can harness the potential of education to develop new generations that can escape the legacies of violence, war, hatred of people who have different color, ethnicity, race, or religion that the twentieth century has left for the coming hundred years. I think that educational systems that put the partnership idea in practice can help to meet this challenge and the other challenges that the new century will bring.

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