

# Lifelong learning: schools and the parental contribution in Australia

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## **Introduction**

*Since lifelong learning is a central focus of UNESCO projections, influences school development and the establishment of learning communities and learning cities, and adds to educational debate on policy formation, the contribution of parents to children's learning needs to be further recognized, articulated and actioned. Caldwell (1997: 244) in revisiting projected future trends for education stated, 'The parent...role in education will be claimed or reclaimed.'*

The term, lifelong learning, needs much discussion for definition. This is because it has been associated mainly with economic advancement, and in many instances, with learning that takes place after compulsory years of schooling. This interpretation is partly true. However, lifelong learning when defined through four pillars - learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together and learning to be (UNESCO, 1998) - aims for personal fulfillment, social inclusion and economic advancement for all (UNESCO, 1998). Shuping (2000) further sees lifelong learning as 'a hope, a joy, a tool, a right, a responsibility and a challenge' and Palamattan (2000) says its focus is to help us 'dream what life could be and make a masterpiece of it.' Within these definitions one then sees the scope of the intent of lifelong learning. It is the basis for creating a world vision for society. This can be achieved partly through the formation of learning communities within cities, estates, towns and regions (Longworth, 1996).

School leaders must sensitively address lifelong learning perspectives and revisit the question, How do we best involve parents in the learning process of their children? School leaders must not only help parents but also the wider community in decisionmaking for the provision of lifelong learning opportunities for children and families. Schools can achieve more when they are recognized as learning communities and are 'reenergising', 'reinvigorating' and 'remarketing' their structures and processes for learning provision in accordance with lifelong learning emphases (McGilp, 2001).

While some teachers have lacked support and training for the utilization of the parental contribution (Senge, 2000) many others are comfortable in achieving parental partnerships. There are many instances of parents occupying different roles in the formal learning of children (O'Donoghue and Dimmock, 1998). This is because of their professional knowledge, their knowledge and skills attained without formal qualification, their enthusiasm and curiosity, and their organizational skills (McGilp, 1994, 2001). The parental contribution has also resulted from training programs offered by schools (McGilp, 1994, 2001). By contrast to the involved parents, others have regarded themselves as 'educationless' (Senge, 2000) and have demonstrated 'learned helplessness' in regard to assisting their children in formal learning offered by schools. This can result when parents have not been given adequate information and assistance to help their children. When this occurs the parental

contribution is developed from a deficit model and the role of parents, as prime educators, is often overlooked (McGilp, 2001). Any parental program for partnerships must mean parent empowerment and family support (Senge, 2000).

There is no doubt that life and parent circumstances have changed - shifting urban populations, fragmentation of families and different employment arrangements, increased social problems, technological advancement, and increased parental interest in children's learning expectations (McGilp, 2001) - and these have influenced commitment to the concept of a 'school that learns' (Senge, 2000) with parents. A school can provide the 'open forum' for the monitoring and development of lifelong learning activities and become the place where the community can find a voice (Senge, 2000), particularly where parents can be heard (McGilp, 2001).

#### **Successful studies**

The following three descriptions illustrate recent, successful studies or programs for the parental contribution for children's lifelong learning in the Australian context. They emphasize family partnerships in relation to understanding of indigenous communities, intervention programs for positive relationships and particular means for making a school 'parent friendly'. The importance of listening to and gaining shared meaning from these illustrations can assist the ongoing learning of teachers and parents.

A study to determine the influence of the cultural context and content on children's learning as seen by indigenous people is described by Flear and Williams-Kennedy (2001). This research project was undertaken by the Australia Early Childhood Association and funded through the Commonwealth Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs. The researchers invited indigenous preschool aged children and their families from different regions of Australia to participate and sought to identify learning

experiences of children prior to school experiences. Videotapes, showing preschool-aged children's learning, were made by their respective families. Taping took place at home, in the community and in preschool, undertaking normal everyday activities (Flear and Williams-Kennedy, 2001). 'A major aim of this project was to provide indigenous families with an opportunity to act as central agents, selecting those valued cultural skills and knowledge exhibited by their young children' (Flear and Williams-Kennedy, 2001:52). 'Each family selected from the hours of video-tape those aspects of their child's life which best represented to non-indigenous people important aspects of being an indigenous child in Australia today' (Flear and Williams-Kennedy, 2001:52). In discussion of the videotapes three guiding questions were explored: What can everyone see? What can only the family see? What can we no longer see because it is so much a part of our lives? (Flear and Williams-Kennedy, 2001:52).

Two major outcomes identified by Flear and Williams-Kennedy (2001:52) were:

- moving the discourse from parent participation to family partnerships; and
- listening for the connections between people. For example, when assumptions about the primary caregiver in families by non-indigenous teachers is made, these can lead to exclusion rather than participation by family members.

*Who in the family is a significant caregiver? Who introduces the child into the environment? The significant caregiver may be a grandmother, aunt, or close relative other than the child's birth parents. Sometimes older siblings look after the younger kids* (Denise as cited by Flear and Williams-Kennedy, 2001: 53).

'Thinking about 'family' partnerships rather than 'parent' participation is a mind set that is needed if schools are to be more inclusive of the voice of families' (Flear and Williams-Kennedy, 2001:53).

Fleer and Williams-Kennedy (2001:54) state 'Active listening was important in the study. This involves not just hearing what is said, but watching closely the non-verbal language and providing space and time for this communication to take place. The families in this study spoke about the need to make connections between people and places and family':

*Sometimes we don't know the kid's name, but we all know the family - that's so and so, you don't need the name, but you need the connection. But as a teacher you need the name for the roll* (Denise as cited by Fleer and Williams-Kennedy, 2001:54).

In the study Fleer and Williams-Kennedy (2001) stress that connectedness is expected as a two-way process and teachers need to reciprocate and share their family connections and places of origin. 'It is important in some indigenous communities for these protocols to be observed before any meaningful partnership can take place' (Fleer and Williams-Kennedy, 2001:54). This study illustrates how active listening by teachers can help to reframe 'traditional school-community relations to be more culturally responsive, to interrupt the norms and to build relationships on Indigenous rather than western terms' (Fleer and Williams-Kennedy, 2001:54).

While the previous description of a parental involvement study relates to understanding of indigenous communities, an emphasis for lifelong learning according to the pillar of learning to live together (UNESCO, 1998) the following description of the Triple P also emphasizes relationships. The case is also situated within the pillars of learning to know and learning to do (UNESCO, 1998).

McTaggart and Sanders (2001) describe The Triple P- Positive Parenting Program as a transition to school strategy for the Australian context. They see the need for programs that aim to equip parents with the skills to maintain good

relationships with their children, and to manage misbehavior.

Triple P is a multilevel, prevention program which 'aims to address severe behavioral, emotional and developmental problems in children by intervening early and providing parenting with the skills needed (McTaggart and Sanders, 2001:61). The program does not solely target at-risk children or families. 'Triple P is promoted as a program for every family as a way of improving general parenting skills' (McTaggart and Sanders, 2001:62). McTaggart and Sanders (2001:61) state that the program involves:

- enhancing the knowledge of parents about the causes of children's misbehavior;
- providing skills on developing positive relationships with children (e.g. praise of good behavior);
- providing skills on the consistent management of misbehavior (e.g. planned ignoring, quiet time, time out); and
- learning how to plan for and prevent future problems (e.g. how to take children on a long car trip).

'The findings across a number of different settings have demonstrated that Triple P produces predictable decreases in child behavior problems, which are maintained well across time'; also it is 'an effective method of parent training' (Sanders, 1999 as cited by McTaggart and Sanders, 2001:61).

The Triple P Program is available at five levels (McTaggart and Sanders, 2001:61):

- *Level 1 interventions* involve the provision of information to parents as a low cost intervention (such as getting children to do homework);
- *Level 2 interventions* combine the use of the above mentioned information with minimal professional support to families. For example, at this level teachers or guidance staff may provide;

- *Level 3 interventions* provide families with more than just information but also active skills training on their specific concerns to complement the written material;
- *Level 4 interventions* provide parents with skills training to assist them in managing behavior of all family members in all situations; and
- *Level 5 interventions* provide assistance to families where the problem extends beyond the parent-child interaction.

Extending the Triple P is 'Transition to School Project'. The program is designed to normalize parent training to promote the successful transition of children to school and to reduce disruptive behavior problems in the school environment (McTaggart and Sanders, 2001). The Transition to School Program has involved 25 State Schools in Brisbane, Queensland, however, as yet findings are not available (McTaggart and Sanders, 2001).

A third interesting parent venture in the Australian context is the development of the Parent Friendly School Program. Tonkin (2001), as principal, describes the school within her charge develops as it develops as a 'VicParenting – Parent Friendly School'. The components of such include developing a family friendly environment, establishing a resource service, providing parenting programs and training school personnel in parent consultation. Tonkin (2001:63) says, 'We were one of twenty three schools across the state involved in this trial. Our story is similar to most schools but it is also unique to us as all schools were left to plan their own changes.'

Prior to this decision to become a VicParenting school Tonkin (2001) described her school as strongly parent welcoming. 'We had parents involved in classroom activities on a regular basis, we had an active School Board, Parent and Teacher Association, a play group or two using

the school hall twice a week, and parents involved in various programs around the school' (Tonkin, 2001:61).

A focus of VicParenting is that it locates parent support in schools. This normalizes parenting support and help seeking, thus it enhances the school's capacity to actively support parents in developing parenting practices known to be associated with optimal development of children. It influences the development of structures, policies and practices that promote parent involvement and collaborative teacher-parent relationships and strengthens community partnerships (Tonkin, 2001).

Vic-Parenting assisted Tonkin's school to form a steering committee for interpreting and realizing the four emphases of the program. The school environment is now changed in many ways (Tonkin, 2001). The school corridors are transformed into friendly meeting areas. Crèche support is provided by means of roster timetabling for parent supervision. A three-way conference reporting process is in operation. Skill and expert information sheets are sent to parents. Parents are frequent guest speakers and skill demonstrators in classrooms. Also play groups have been established for parental support with twice each week preschoolers and their parents gathering to play, talk and share hospitality in the school facilities. The school also conducts a resource centre and a library service for parent borrowing operates, together with availability of computer access to recommended websites. Parents have a designated news section on the school noticeboard where resources available in the area are publicized. The school also offers parenting programs on general topics to assist all parents of children (Tonkin, 2001).

'Conversations' replace the title of parenting courses to emphasize equality. 'Every participant has something to offer, a point of view to be explored and to be listened to. A conversation is not about experts with all the answers, nor does it imply that it is for 'bad parents only' (Tonkin,

2001:65). 'It is friendly, welcoming and inclusive. A first conversation takes place in the morning session and the repeat in the evening. This takes into consideration working parents and provides opportunities for both parents to attend' (Tonkin, 2001:65). The conversations are lead by a parenting support person from Centacare (a provider of services for parents), not by the school. The VicParenting initiative also supports the skill development of teachers to 'a level of awareness and competency when parents ask for support or advice' (Tonkin, 2001:65).

The VicParenting program has assisted Tonkin (2001) to make a school 'family friendly' and to invite parents to be more active at whatever level they can in the school. The school reciprocates this support by offering parent support. While it is acknowledged that many schools do similar things to those described by Tonkin (2001) the VicParenting initiative has supplied the foci for the decisionmaking for improved liaison and partnership with parents. Tonkin (2001:64) states, 'From the moment of inquiry we are there to support parents in the marvelous job they do in raising children.'

As communities of learning develop and schools provide opportunities such as the three described in the Australian context, teachers will be further called upon to assist parents in considering lifelong learning opportunities for children's development. The call is not for preoccupation with changing parents' attitudes or selling our approaches to lifelong learning, rather, it is one of listening and understanding children's learning from the parents' perspectives. Teachers must inquire from parents and welcome inquiries from parents (McGilp, 2001). It is through listening and dialogue that lifelong learning for children will be better understood and activated (McGilp, 2001).

Some means for the promotion of parental partnerships have been identified: to revisit and

refine school policies and guiding principles, to invite engagement through larger teams, to develop representative committees at the local level, to use a broad range of people on sub-committees; to replace controlled activity with experimentation; and, to provide shared learning opportunities and additional learning opportunities for whole families (Chapman and Aspin, 1997 as cited by McGilp, 2001). These strategies help to increase awareness and connectedness between parents and teachers in the learning community.

Making parents equal with teachers in the choice and direction of the educational experiences and activities being offered to and determined for their children (Senge, 2000) is one definition of partnership. It is certainly a challenging one. Partnerships with parents can assist children to take control of their lives, can increase communication of high expectations, and help children to work for their future. Parents and teachers can assist the reversal of a less meaningful lifestyle in which some children's families are caught. Partnerships between parents and teachers can lead to them providing a mutual support system for lifelong learning. This means parents need to know and understand innovations in content and current changes in approaches to teaching and learning (Senge, 2000). Parents need to gain understanding and competence in formal learning in order to assist their children at school (Senge, 2000). Parents might need to undertake courses to be familiar with recent developments in learning. A crucial component for partnership development is active co-operation between teachers and parents.

### **Promotion of lifelong learning**

Ten principles for the promotion of lifelong learning through active cooperation between teachers and parents are:

- Recognition that the family has equal importance with the school as a place where lifelong learning can be instituted and protracted;

- Clarification of conditions on a school's openness and accessibility to other groups of people;
- Modeling of lifelong learning by schools;
- Development of greater lifelong learning opportunities offered by school communities;
- Generation of different agendas of time and conditions for lifelong learning;
- Utilization of the school as a 'one-stop shop' where people could go and identify things they might want to learn about or courses;
- Enhancement of teachers' and parents' efficacy through the development of lifelong learning opportunities for both;
- Acknowledgement of present boundaries and moving beyond these to a school being a community resource;
- Acceptance of help, advice and resources from cultural, ethnic and religious organizations in the community that themselves have a strong part to play in promoting lifelong learning; and
- Enrichment of community life by networks of lifelong learning.

(Adapted from Senge, 2000 and Chapman and Aspin, 1997 as cited by McGilp, 2001).

While some of these principles mean the revisiting of existing emphases, consideration of new means for advancement in parental partnerships is essential. Perhaps the answer to different means of operation is dependent on the leadership portrayed. Leadership styles for the promotion of lifelong learning and for the further development of the parental contribution are those that are based on a service philosophy, invitational approaches and collaborative agreements (McGilp, 2001). However, this means that leaders must be aware of parental expertise and challenges and work towards synergy in partnerships which will give children a sound grounding in lifelong learning. Isolated experiences of learning can be 'jigsawed' into integrated, lifelong learning through partnerships with parents (McGilp, 2001). One of the challenges for school leaders today is to emphasize the value of lifelong learning

experiences for children rather than perhaps concentrating on early specialization which seem to feature strongly today because of unpredictable employment opportunities (McGilp, 2001).

The following means, some of which are identifiable in the three specific foci for advancing the parental contribution in the Australian context - family partnership in indigenous communities and the Triple P and the VicParenting programs - are worth revisiting for they are reminders and assistance for leaders in promoting lifelong learning and partnerships with parents:

- declaring the vision for lifelong learning by UNESCO (1998);
- promoting values for lifelong learning-trust, openness, honesty, integrity;
- encouraging ownership of lifelong learning and practice (McGilp, 1999, 1997);
- journeying with others (Kouzes and Posner, 1999) in the lifelong learning process;
- exploring, discovering and actioning leadership opportunity (Binney and Williams, 1997) and developing leaders (Conger, 1999) through liberating the leader in each lifelong learner;
- activating continual regeneration, renewed commitment and consequent ownership of the parental contribution (Fullan, 2000);
- facilitating roles for parents to be opportunists, advocates, partners, communicators and motivators in lifelong learning for children;
- allocating time for reflection and scrutiny of practice (Koch, 1999; Kouzes and Posner, 1999) for lifelong learning.

### Conclusion

In this time of emphasis on lifelong learning, it is important to share understanding of lifelong learning and the actioning of studies and projects which enhance its realization. Many of these demonstrate the building of parental partnerships with schools. However, these are dependent on the demonstration of goodwill and perseverance by both teachers and parents. Schools developing as learning communities can assist understanding

of lifelong learning and provision of different learning opportunities; also the development of parental partnerships. Teachers and parents must

be proactive and lead the actioning of the life dimension of learning.

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