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Barriers to parental involvement in education: an explanatory model

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The issue of parental involvement (PI) in education is notable for the extensive rhetoric supporting it and considerable variation in the reality of its practice. It is proposed that the gap between rhetoric and reality in PI has come about because of the influence of factors at the parent and family, child, parent–teacher and societal levels which act as barriers to the development of effective PI. This article presents a model which has been developed in order to clarify and elaborate on the barriers in each of these four areas. First, parent and family factors are discussed, focusing on parents' beliefs about PI, parents' current life contexts, parents' perceptions of invitations for involvement, and class, ethnicity and gender. Next, child factors are addressed, focusing on age, learning difficulties and disabilities, gifts and talents, and behavioural problems. Then, parent–teacher factors are discussed, focusing on differing agendas, attitudes and language used. Finally, societal factors are addressed, including historical and demographic issues, political issues, and economic issues. It is argued that the model will enable education professionals to achieve a greater understanding of the barriers to PI, which is a necessary precursor to the development of more effective PI in education. The model can also be used in pre-service teacher education and professional development courses for education professionals, as well as for identifying areas of future research on PI.

Keywords: parents; teachers; schools; parental involvement

Introduction

Parental involvement (PI) in the education of their children has been regarded as an important element of effective education for at least 40 years (see DES 1967). There is now an extensive research literature indicating that PI is advantageous for children of all ages (Cox 2005; Desforges and Abouchaar 2003; Eccles and Harold 1993; Epstein 2001). This includes home-based PI such as listening to children read and supervision of homework as well as school-based PI such as attending parent education workshops and parent–teacher meetings. The effectiveness of both home-based and school-based PI in facilitating academic achievement has been reported by several reviews and meta-analyses of the literature (Fan and Chen 2001; Henderson and Mapp 2002; Jeynes 2005, 2007; Pomerantz, Moorman, and Litwack 2007). Other benefits of PI which emerge from these reviews include: improved parent–teacher relationships, teacher morale and school climate; improved school attendance, attitudes, behaviour and mental health of children; and, increased parental confidence, satisfaction and interest in their own education.

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Despite widespread acknowledgement of these potential benefits however, there are clear gaps between the rhetoric on PI found in the literature and typical PI practices found in schools. As stated by Christenson and Sheridan "… there is still more rhetoric than reality about family and school working together as genuine partners" (2001, 18). This view is reinforced by the findings of two surveys. First, a survey of 1035 secondary school teachers in the United States found that 83% of teachers considered that the level of PI in their schools should be increased (Binns, Steinberg, and Amorosi 1997). Second, a survey of parents in the UK reported that 72% of mothers wanted more involvement in their children's education (Williams, Williams, and Ullman, 2002).

There is now extensive literature available for teachers on improving PI that includes such things as templates for various PI activities, meetings, programmes and workshops (Bastiani 1989; Blank and Kershaw 1998; Boult 2006; Grant and Ray 2010; Hornby 2000; Henderson et al. 2007). In addition, a number of theoretical models of PI have been developed. These range from Sattes' (1994) simple three-dimensional framework of commitment, training and variety, to Lueder's (2000) more complex "energy-in and energy-out" model, which argues for an expansion of the traditional roles of family support for schools and for schools reaching out to families. In contrast, Christenson and Sheridan (2001) have suggested that the four key elements for enhancing PI are: approach; attitudes; atmosphere; and actions. Swap (1993) has proposed that there is a hierarchy for PI beginning with the "protective model", moving through "school-to-home transmission" and "curriculum enrichment models" to the preferred "partnership model". Hornby (2000) has combined elements of a number of models to create a framework that elaborates hierarchies of parental contributions and parental needs in order to provide a model for involvement which includes eight types of PI: communication; liaison; education; support; information; collaboration; resource; and, policy. Epstein (2001) has distinguished six types of PI: parenting; communication; volunteering; home tutoring; involvement in decision-making; and, collaboration with the community. Epstein's model presents family, school and community as overlapping spheres of influence, the congruence of which is of considerable importance for the optimal development of children.

The literature on PI therefore encompasses research indicating the effectiveness of PI, the reported value given to it by both educators and parents, and a substantial collection of theoretical models and practical guides aimed at its development. The reality of PI is however, quite different.

Henderson and Berla (1994) summarised the situation succinctly when they stated, "The benefits of effective collaborations and how to do them are well documented across all the age ranges of schooling. Still they are not in widespread practice" (18). Fifteen years later this situation has not subtantially changed. The current reality is that there is considerable diversity in the type and degree of PI, with modal practice being at the more traditional end of the spectrum which focuses on a one-directional flow of support from parents to schools. The typical approach reflects a lack of consensus, guiding framework and training on PI, which not surprisingly results in variable effectiveness (Hornby 2000; Lueder 2000; Pomerantz et al. 2007).

There are many reasons for the gap between what is said and what is done in the name of PI and these can be conceptualised as barriers to PI. The various barriers to PI can be categorised by adapting Epstein's (2001) framework of overlapping spheres of influence focused on the three areas of family, school and community. For the purpose of discussion in this article these three spheres of influence have

Individual parent and family factors	Child factors
• parents' beliefs about PI	• age
• perceptions of invitations for PI	• learning difficulties and disabilities
• current life contexts	• gifts and talents
• class, ethnicity and gender	• behavioural problems

Parent–teacher factors	Societal factors
• differing goals and agendas	• historical and demographic
• differing attitudes	• political
• differing language used	• economic

Figure 1.   Model of factors acting as barriers to PI.

been adapted to become: broader societal factors, which influence the functioning of both schools and families; parent–teacher factors; individual parent and family factors; as well as an additional focus on child factors. This article presents a model which has been developed in order to clarify and elaborate on the barriers in each of these four areas (see Figure 1). These barriers to the establishment of effective PI in education are discussed below. First, individual parent and family barriers are discussed, focusing on parents' beliefs about PI, parents' current life contexts, parents' perceptions of invitations for involvement, and class, ethnicity and gender. Next, child factors are addressed focusing on age, learning difficulties and disabilities, gifts and talents, and behavioural problems. Then, parent–teacher factors are discussed, focusing on differing agendas, attitudes and language used. Finally, societal factors are elaborated on, including historical and demographic issues, political issues, and economic issues.

Parent and family factors

Parents' beliefs about PI

Parents' beliefs about various issues can act as barriers to effective PI. First, the way that parents view their role in their children's education is crucial. Parents who believe that their role is only to get children to school, which then takes over responsibility for their education, will not be willing to be actively involved in either school-based or home-based PI. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) reported that this attitude is more prevalent in some communities and national cultures than others, but that there is considerable variation within these. For example, Clark (1983), in his research on high achieving students from low-income black families, found that what distinguished the parents of these students from others at the school was that they believed that they should be involved in their children's education, by both supporting their learning at home and interacting constructively with schools. Clark found that parents of high achieving students had a greater belief than the other parents that they could effectively help their children to do better at school.

The belief that parents have in their own ability to help their children succeed at school is the second belief which is crucial to PI. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler

(1997) point out that parents with a low level of belief in their ability to help their children are likely to avoid contact with schools because of their view that such involvment will not bring about positive outcomes for their children. For some parents lack of confidence in helping their children may be because the language of instruction is not their first language and they feel they cannot communicate effectively with teachers. For others, it can come from them having had negative experiences with their children's previous schools, or through them experiencing either learning or behavioural difficulties during their own schooling. Lack of confidence may also come from parents taking the view that they have not developed sufficient academic competence to effectively help their children. This view is more apparent as students progress through secondary schools and their academic work becomes more advanced (Eccles and Harold 1993). Such views act as a barrier to PI, despite widespread acknowledgement that the ability to support children's learning does not require a high level of education from parents (Clark 1983; Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler 1997; Hornby 2000).

The third type of parental beliefs which are critical to involvement in their children's education are parents' views about children's intelligence as well as how children learn and develop their abilities (Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler 1997). Parents who believe children's intelligence is fixed and that school achievement is mainly due to children being lucky enough to have high ability will not see the point in getting too involved in their children's education. They believe that children's innate ability will set a limit on their achievement so that such things as encouraging children to do their homework or attending parent–teacher meetings at school are viewed as a waste of time. Alternatively, parents who believe that achievement at school depends as much on effort as ability, and that children's abilities can always be developed, are more likely to be positive about PI. Related to this are parents' beliefs about the role they should play in supporting this development, in fact their beliefs about child rearing in general (Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler 1997). Parents who believe that the way they bring up their children will have considerable impact on their development are much more likely to be positive about PI than parents who believe they can have little impact on their children's development.

Parents' perceptions of invitations for involvement

Another potential barrier to PI is parents' perceptions of the level of explicit and implicit invitations for involvement. When parents think that PI is not valued by teachers or schools they are less likely to get involved (Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler 1997). Therefore, parents' perceptions of invitations from schools are considered crucial in developing effective PI. Epstein (2001) has found that parents are most effectively involved when teachers actively encourage PI. Teachers with positive, facilitating attitudes toward involving parents encourage more parents to become involved and increase the effectiveness of PI (Eccles and Harold 1993). When parents perceive that teachers are not open to involving parents this acts as a major barrier to PI. Similarly, schools which are welcoming to parents, and make it clear that they value PI, develop more effective PI than schools that do not appear inviting to parents. Secondary schools are often seen by parents as large bureaucratic organisations which are not welcoming to parents, which is considered to be one of the reasons why there is a tendency for higher levels of PI in primary than secondary schools (Eccles and Harold 1993).

Parents' current life contexts

Several aspects of parents' life contexts can act as barriers to PI. Parents' level of education will influence their views on whether they have sufficient skills and knowledge to engage in different aspects of PI (Green et al. 2007). For example, parents who did not complete high school may be diffident about helping their children with homework once they get to secondary school. Also, parents without university degrees may feel in some ways inferior to teachers who they know are better qualified than them and therefore be reluctant to work closely with teachers.

Family circumstances can be major barriers to PI. For example, solo parents and those with young families or large families may find it more difficult to get involved in PI because of their caretaking responsibilities. Parents' work situations can also be a factor. When parents are unemployed money could be an issue as they may not be able to afford a car or to pay babysitters in order to get to school meetings. For parents with jobs, whether both parents work and the kind of jobs they have may be issues. When both parents work there will be less time available for both home-based and school-based PI. Also, while some jobs allow little flexibility for taking time off for school-based PI, other jobs may leave parents too tired at the end of the day to help children with homework (Catsambis 2001; Green et al. 2007).

Finally, parents' overall psychological resources may be a barrier to PI. For example, parents with poor physical or mental health or without an effective social support network, including extended family members, may find it difficult to engage effectively in PI (Eccles and Harold 1993).

Class, ethnicity and gender

There are also barriers relating to class, ethnicity and gender of parents that are relevant when accounting for the gap between rhetoric and reality in PI. Differences in class, ethnicity and gender may play a role in determining the degree to which parents are involved with schools (OECD 1997). While the rhetoric on PI does include suggestions of how to overcome the typical disadvantages of social class and ethnicity, it does so with an essential bias of white middle-class values that ignores difference and diversity. It is a rhetoric of PI that benefits, and is committed to, a dominant white middle-class involvement which, unsurprisingly, is precisely the group of parents who are the main participators in PI (Bastiani 1989). Those largely involved are, as defined by teachers, the "good parents" who typically are white middle-class, married and heterosexual (Reay 1998).

Reay (1998) suggests that it is these parents who possess cultural capital which matches that generally valued by schools. In contrast, working-class parents, though possessing their own undervalued cultural capital, are aware of the difference between the cultural capital they possess and that of teachers. Reay (1998) concludes that, for working-class families, home-school relationships are about separateness, whereas for middle-class families they are about interconnectedness, and this difference shapes their respective attitudes to PI. In general, minorities are less involved, less represented and less informed, and are less likely to have access to resources, as well as more likely to have problems associated with language, transport, communication and child care. They have substantially different relationships with teachers, who most often share white middle-class cultural capital (OECD 1997). In comparison, white middle-class parents face no such obstacles in becoming involved at school. They have the resources and power to enable them to continue to seek advantages for their

own children, for example, by engaging home-help to free up time for greater involvement at school. This type of class related PI helps maintain the current inequalities in the system and the gap between rhetoric and reality (Reay 1998).

Barriers related to ethnicity and culture are also important. A report by Koki and Lee (1998) explains some of the issues involved in PI for parents in New Zealand who have come from the Pacific Islands. They make the point that it is impossible to understand these issues outside of the context of the history of Pacific education and cultural tradition, but the reality is that PI programmes typically pay scant regard to these issues. For example, there is a general lack of skill and knowledge about how to capitalise on Pacific cultural background positively when trying to involve parents. Since within these cultures there is a significant emphasis on titles and social class, with an understanding that lineage and culture are family domains, whereas education is considered the domain of schools, it is argued that PI will remain limited unless support is gained from community and church leaders (Koki and Lee 1998).

In another study Young (1998) examined the impact of cultural issues in the development of trust between Mexican-American parents and schools in the United States. The study found that the "existence or absence of trust between the home and the school affects the development and sustenance of meaningful parental involvement" (Young 1998, 1). Young's finding that cultural roles, expectations and values play a pivotal part in how trust is perceived and developed, is further evidence of the need to be aware of the context of culture and ethnicity. Failure to understand the impact of ethnicity on PI and to incorporate programmes that are genuinely inclusive of other cultures is probably another reason why the practice of involving parents in schools is typically less effective than it could be.

It is also significant that, despite policy and research supporting the importance of PI in schools, the term itself is a misnomer because, as Reay (1998) points out, the reality is that it is predominantly mothers' involvement. Since most of the rhetoric and research ignores the issue of the gendered nature of PI, it also fails to consider and evaluate its impact on practice. However, analysis of the "mother's world" does clearly show there are tensions, power issues, contradictions and compromises involved in determining levels of PI. The involvement of many mothers is heavily influenced by their family-focused lives and this context puts constraints on how they understand, respond to and interact with, educators and educational systems. Their view of educational issues is often vastly different to that of educationalists since it is concerned with a holistic focus on the family unit (David et al. 1993).

There have also been significant changes over the past few decades in family structures, and the political, economic and historical context in which mothers' involvement occurs. Now mothers face balancing issues of working with schools, negotiating boundaries, increased workload, participation in the labour market, as well as the effects of class, marital status and ethnicity. These issues contribute to the reasons for the discrepancy between the rhetoric and typical practice of PI.

Child factors

Age

The age of children can be a barrier to the involvement of parents since it is widely acknowledged that PI decreases as children grow older and is at its lowest level for children of secondary school age. The tendency for PI to be greater for parents of younger children may be partly because younger children are more positive about

their parents going into school. Whereas, older children are less keen about school involvement, such as parents going on class trips, which is at least partly due to adolescents wanting to become independent of their parents (Eccles and Harold 1993). However, adolescents are still considered to desire and benefit from their parents being involved in other ways, such as helping them with homework and making subject choices. Deslandes and Cloutier (2002) found, in their study of 872 14-year-old children in the United States, that over three quarters of these adolescents were willing to show their parents what they learned or did well on at school, ask parents for ideas for projects, listen to parents tell them about when they were teenagers, and take home notes, notices and newsletters. Also, in their study of children's perspectives on PI, Edwards and Alldred (2000) found that children referred to far more PI occurring in the home setting than at school. In spite of these findings, parents, and sometimes teachers, can misinterpret the situation and assume that older children do not want parents to be involved in their education, which can act as a barrier to effective PI.

Learning difficulties and disabilities

Children's performance at school can be a barrier or facilitating factor for PI. When children are struggling with their school work, due to learning difficulties or disabilities, then parents are generally more inclined to be active in PI activities (Eccles and Harold 1993). In fact, many authorities on special needs education consider that involving parents is an essential aspect of effective education for children with disabilities or learning difficulties (Hornby 1995; Seligman 2000). Because the involvement of parents is required for the process of implementing individual education programmes this facilitates PI for many parents of children with learning difficulties or disabilities. However, this is not always the case since there are many possible areas for disagreement between schools and parents of children with learning difficulties or disabilities, which can act as barriers to effective PI. For example, when parents consider that their children can achieve more acdemically or when teachers want more support from parents in backing up at home what children are working on at school (Seligman 2000).

Gifts and talents

For children who are doing well at school it is usually a pleasure for parents to attend parent–teacher meetings, so children being gifted or talented is usually a facilitating factor for PI. However, barriers to effective PI can be evident when parents consider their children are academically gifted if this view is not shared by teachers (Montgomery 2009). Parents in this situation tend to lose confidence in the school and therefore reduce their involvement with teachers. Also, many children who are acdemically gifted become frustrated at school, typically because they are being insufficietly challenged, and either begin to underachieve or develop behaviour problems. Either situation is likely to lead to conflict between parents and teachers which then acts as a barrier to effective PI.

There is also potential for conflict between teachers and parents of children who are talented in extra-curricular areas such as sport or musical abilities. Developing their talents in these areas demands that children put in a lot of time and effort practicing or competing, which often requires them to take time off school and can lead to

them getting behind with their academic studies. Schools vary in how understanding they are of the needs of such children and when parents consider that schools are not responsive to the extra-curricular demands on their children it can prove to be a barrier to positive PI.

Behavioural problems

When children develop a reputation for exhibiting challenging behaviour their parents can be reluctant to go into schools for fear of getting more bad news. In fact, there is usually a negative corelation between PI and children's behaviour problems, such that the more disruptive the behaviour the less parents are inclined to be involved with the school. When behaviour problems become so severe that schools begin to consider suspension or expulsion conflict between schools and parents is almost inevitable and presents a formidable barrier to meaningful PI (Parsons 1999).

Parent–teacher factors

Goals and agendas

Related to the parent and child factors discussed earlier is the issue of differences in goals and agendas between families and schools involved in making home–school alliances a reality. Parent and teacher interactions and roles are frequently shaped by differing expectations and vested interests (Wolfendale 1983). The PI rhetoric that exists is not merely a function of a simplistic desire to benefit children, but also the result of these differing and sometimes opposing goals and agendas. For example, governments and schools may, from the perspective of their goals, see PI as a tool for increasing school accountability to their communities and for increasing children's achievements, or as a cost effective resource, and a method of addressing cultural disadvantage and inequality. However, parents' goals are more likely to be focused on improving their children's performance, wishing to influence the ethos or curriculum within the school, and wanting to increase their understanding of school life (OECD 1997). Teachers also have their own goals for PI, as is illustrated by Rudney (2005) who reports that the focus of teachers is on PI in the areas of homework, providing a nurturing environment, raising money, as well as attending school events and parent–teacher meetings.

Parent–teacher meetings provide a good example of how much the goals and agendas of parents and teachers can differ. Bastiani (1989) has suggested that teachers' goals for parent–teacher meetings include: discussing children's progress and any difficulties they are having; finding out from parents how children are coping with school; identifying ways in which parents can help their children at home; and, identifying potential conflicts with parents. Parents goals for parent–teacher meetings include: discussing children's progress and any difficulties they are having; comparing their children's progress with that of others in the class; learning more about the school and methods of teaching used; and, questionning teachers about any concerns they have (Bastiani 1989). So it is clear that, although there are similarities, there are also important differences in parents' and teachers' agendas for these meetings which could act as barriers to the establishment of effective PI.

Adelman (1992), in discussing the impact of these differing goals, considers that home–school relationships are based upon an agenda of socialisation, where schools attempt to shape parental attitudes and practices so that they facilitate schooling. He

suggests that models and rhetoric concerning PI often have underlying agendas that are largely concerned with meeting the needs of the school or society and it is possible to differentiate the many different types of PI according to whether they are about improving individuals or the school (Adelman 1992). These differences in goals create conflicts which limit the type and success of PI practices, and result in frustration as each party seeks to maximise its own agenda, independent of, and often in opposition to that of the others. Understanding these underlying and typically covert agendas provides an example of the influence of the complex context in which PI occurs.

Attitudes

Another critical factor in understanding the complexity of the difference between what is said and what is done in regard to PI is the attitudes of parents and teachers. It is at this level that the impact of many of the other factors already discussed becomes evident. Teachers and parents each bring to the melting pot of PI personal attitudes that are deeply rooted within their own historical, economic, educational, ethnic, class and gendered experiences. There persists amongst many teachers a deficit model of parents which is manifested through attitudes whereby parents are viewed as "problems", "vulnerable", or "less able" and are therefore best kept out of schools (Hornby 2000). However, within the context of the new neo-liberal market driven economy, where parents are often constructed as consumers, parental attitudes have changed from ones of deference and helplessness to a recognition of their rights (Bastiani 1993). Nonetheless, as Bastiani states, "parents speak with many voices" (as cited in Waller and Waller 1998, 113) and they are far from being a homogenous group, generally lacking clear agendas, and possessing little political power (Munn 1993).

At a fundamental level parents and teachers may also differ in their understanding of the relationship between schooling and education. If education is largely about schooling then logically it is teachers that possess the greatest knowledge, skills, power and expertise. If however, schooling is merely a part of education, then there is a clear shift in power and expertise towards parents, who are intimately involved in the other 85% of children's education which occurs outside of school (Munn 1993). To put it succinctly, "Should school teachers educate children while parents humbly support the schools? Or … Are parents the main educators of their child, while schools supplement home-learning with specialist expertise?" (OECD 1997, 52). Clearly, differing attitudes on this point will have major repercussions for how PI is perceived, structured, valued and most importantly, how it is implemented.

There are many assumptions made about parents, including a pervasive notion that they are increasingly not meeting their responsibilities nowadays, as once was done in the past. Whereas, research findings suggest that parent–child relationships are increasingly more loving, that child health has improved and that abuse once tolerated is no longer accepted (Rudney 2005; Waller and Waller 1998; Wolfendale 1983). However, media and television constantly highlight negative examples of parenting and often portray parents as weak, incompetent and besieged by problems. Many teachers make assumptions that some parents are not interested or do not really care about their children's education (Hornby 2000). Whereas, parents often feel ignorant of the curriculum and processes of schools. They may believe that teachers are seeking a superficial relationship and are only concerned with addressing problems rather than

working toward solutions. In this context, it is not surprising that there is a lack of mutual understanding between parents and teachers with the result that mistrust builds and barriers increase.

It is widely accepted that the vast majority of parents do care about their children's education, and that working-class parents care just as much as middle-class parents (Epstein 2001; Wolfendale 1983). Further, most teachers are genuine in their desire to actually find solutions and to engage meaningfully with parents. Teachers are nowadays however, working in an environment where they are increasingly held accountable for children's achievements (e.g. through the publication of the results of national tests) and are often required to assume responsibilitiy for tasks for which they have received little or no training, including working closely with parents (Hornby 2000; OECD 1997). The result is that the gap between the assumptions held by parents and teachers contributes to the gap between the rhetoric and reality of PI. This gap in assumptions and the disparity between the goals of parents and teachers, can result in poorly planned attempts to increase PI which may result in parents and teachers being pushed further apart, thereby increasing distrust (Waller and Waller 1998).

A comparison of two studies of parent and teacher attitudes illustrates the depth and breadth of the attitudinal obstacles that play such a central part in the gap between reality and rhetoric in PI. First, a parental attitude survey conducted by the National Opinion Research Centre (1997) in the United States shows that parents believe overwhelmingly that schools see them as being valuable for their child's learning and that they want both themselves and teachers to learn more about ways they can be involved in schools. Parents wanted more involvement, particularly in the areas of the educational programme and decision-making. Second, an investigation into teacher perceptions shows that they have quite specific ideas about the type, frequency and the nature of the PI that they wanted from parents (Baker 1997). The participants in this study expressed a desire that parents support their ideas and efforts and, although recognising that parents face some barriers, they expressed a belief that, if parents really wanted, they could find ways to be more involved. They saw support of homework as being very important along with the need for parents to care properly for their children physically and emotionally. They believed parents to be good resources of skills, talents and funds, but also often saw them as questionning their professionalism.

Language

Another major factor in understanding the rhetoric-reality split is an examination of the language used. There is considerable confusion in this area across all dimensions of PI. The issue of what is really being said is itself filled with contradictions and anomalies. Although there is, on one level, a consensus that PI is desirable and worthwhile, there remains throughout the literature an array of theories and ideas concerning the "how" and "what" of that involvement. The language which is used to describe both the participants and the processes involved defines the interactions to some extent. For example, when talking about "parents and professionals", the language itself defines one, professionals, as expert and the others, parents, as non-experts (Bastiani 1993; Munn 1993; Wolfendale 1983).

In addition, there has developed a widespread use of the term "partnership" at all levels from school brochures to government policy papers. Despite its wonderful "feel-good" nature its use is problematic. The use of language such as partnership, sharing, mutuality, collaboration, reciprocity, and participation, masks the inequalities

that exist in reality in the practice of PI (Reay 1998; Wolfendale 1983). Despite the use of terms like partnership which, according to Bastiani (1993), should actually be about shared purpose, negotiation and mutual respect, home–school relationships are typically much more adversarial, and about rights and power. According to Bastiani, parents' experience is often of a system that "talks with a forked tongue" (1989, 8). Similarly, Hegarty (1993, 129) describes the word "partnership" as filling people with a "warm glow of right thinking", but criticises it because it leads to feelings of complacency that are counterproductive to action. He argues that it is a term that has vastly different meanings to different people and that, although often used with little recourse to its implications in terms of power or practice, it is in reality about a process.

Drawing on the literature, Lueder (2000) provides an interesting example of the imbalance between the language used and the underlying meaning and intent. Lueder discusses the gap between rhetoric and reality and talks of the need to shift our thinking to schools working with and supporting families. He bases his model of parent–school interactions on the theory that there is a central problem in parental support of education because large numbers of parents, whom he names "missing parents", are not involved in education at home. He proposes a "self-renewing partnership model" of PI based on the idea of what he terms "energy-in", which is an extension of the traditional roles of families in supporting schools, and "energy-out", which involves schools supporting families. He presents a detailed list comprising eight "Parent Partner Roles" which are ways in which parents can support the school. The list is hierarchical with each step depending upon the prior one and viewing parents through such roles as nurturer, communicator, supporter, advisor and collaborator. There is recognition of the barriers that many families face which he categorises as either family, school or community-based barriers. In recognising that some parents may be disenfranchised from school he has formulated a "Strategic Partnership Planning System" to help identify "family populations to be targeted", and to select strategies and best practices to help them resolve their problems (Lueder 2000, 6).

Lueder's work contains considerable sound and well supported theory and the language he uses leaves the reader thinking that this is indeed a book about parental partnership. However, critically analysing the substance of his model illustrates the problem that exists so often with the language used. Though the model focuses on "partnership" as its overall aim, the reality is that the model may be counterproductive to building a real partnership since it appears to assume that parents are problems. The model is based on the principle that parents are "failing" and need help from experts to ensure that education operates as it should and that the, "case of the missing parents can be solved" (Lueder 2000, 7). A partnership based on the premise that one party is a problem is likely to be doomed from the start. It is parental understanding of this covert agenda that inhibits the success of many such plans to increase PI.

Further, although the term "parent partner roles" creates that "warm glow of right thinking" which Hegarty (1993, 129) referred to, the content of each of Lueder's (2000) eight steps is concerned only with school directives of how parents should engage with schools. As a partnership it is one-sided, presenting no accommodation to, or even acknowledgment of, parents' goals, but instead aiming to employ parents in such a way that school agendas and concerns are met. This is at odds with the notion of partnership suggested by Bastiani (1993) where there is mutual respect, negotiation and shared purpose. In fact, the stated purpose of the energy-out half of the model, where the language so nicely refers to schools reaching out to support families, is "to

create the collaborative relationships and to enhance the families' willingness and ability to play their Parent Partner Roles" (Lueder 2000, 6). In this respect, the model appears to be simply a tool for schools to groom and shape parents to ensure they meet goals that the "experts" have developed. This illustrates that there is a gap between rhetoric and reality in part because the language of the rhetoric itself is not in harmony with the substance of that rhetoric.

Societal factors

Historical and demographic factors

Further understanding of the development of the rhetoric-reality gap can be found in examining the historical context in which PI occurs. Behind the gap lies an historical background of social and educational development and change (Bastiani 1989). The history involved provides a silent and often unacknowledged barrier to involving parents in education. For example, Henderson and Berla (1994) point out that school organisation, historically structured along factory production lines, continues today. This is a largely accepted part of our school culture that is an obstacle for both teachers and parents in their efforts to collaborate more. Many schools still bear the hallmarks of the formality, inflexibility and timetabling that characterised schooling historically, and which are counterproductive to forming parent–school relationships that require flexibility.

Also, traditional definitions of PI have been narrow, with a central focus on supporting the school and fundraising within an environment where schools assumed responsibility for, and power over, education. Although modern times have seen a major shift, with parents now being seen as having an important role to play in education, many attitudes and perceptions that have their roots in this traditional heritage continue to linger. Generally, governments are supportive of the devolution of power to parents, partly since it suits other agendas they have, but it has come at a time when there are also major changes to family structures, mobility and work, which are all in opposition to improved PI (OECD 1997).

These changing family structures are marked by an increase in parental working hours and mobility, greater numbers of families in which both parents work, accompanied by an increased number of divorces and separations, resulting in increases in sole parenting and the number of re-partnered families. Concurrently, there are fewer extended family arrangements, a decrease in religious practice, and increased community fragmentation, as well as greater individualism and competition (David et al. 1993; OECD 1997). The combined effect of these factors is that significant numbers of parents are operating with higher stress levels, less money, and less time, which makes it difficult to develop optimal involvement in the education of their children.

Political factors

At national government level several factors act as barriers to PI. There is an absence of specific legislation on PI so it is not surprising that espoused policy on PI, which relies on voluntary participation by schools, leads to uneven practice (Macbeth 1984; Hornby 2000). Inconsistency within different sections of education legislation and differences between government policy and action also play roles in limiting the practice of PI. For example, governments may outwardly support PI yet concurrently

undermine it through other policies that are in conflict with this support (Bastiani 1993; Munn 1993). This can be seen in New Zealand and the UK where governments simultaneously seek to promote PI through initiatives such as the "Schooling Strategy" (MoE 2005) in New Zealand and the "Children's Plan" (DCSF 2007) in the UK, whilst at the same time pursuing the politics of educational consumerism that pushes parents and schools towards competition rather than cooperation. Further, unless government policy on PI is accompanied by appropriate action, such as strategic implementation, information dissemination and training, it is unlikely to be effective in improving PI. Government failure in these areas results in a lack of consistency in approach, the implementation of PI policy being fragmented and therefore barriers to PI remaining in place.

One determiner of the levels of PI that is decided at a political level is the way school systems are organised. For example, New Zealand schools have catchment zones which mean that the vast majority of pupils attending them live in the community in which the school is located. Where school zones do not operate, as in most parts of the UK, many of the pupils attending live outside the community in which the school is based, which makes it more difficult for schools to build partnerships with parents (Epstein 2001; Hornby 2000).

Another example of how decisions at national government level affect PI is in the issue of teacher training. The content of teacher education programmes in countries such as New Zealand and the UK has in recent years been largely set by government education policies. Yet despite the policies promoting PI noted earlier (DCSF 2007; MoE 2005) there is still no requirement to include courses on working with parents and families in teacher education programmes. The importance of such courses for providing teachers with the skills to work effectively with parents has been widely acknowledged (Epstein 2001; Greenwood and Hickman 1991) but because government policies do not require these they are typically not included. This is in contrast with the situation in the United States where accreditation standards (NCATE 2002) require the topic of PI to be a compulsory course in teacher education programmes. However, a recent survey of the staff who teach these courses on PI has concluded that they do not include sufficient practical experiences of PI to ensure that teachers are adequately prepared to work effectively with parents (Flanigan 2007).

Economic factors

Closely aligned with these political issues are factors of economics and funding. In many Western countries free market policies have come to dominate economics resulting in education being organised to service the needs of the market. In essence, education practices have to justify their share of available funding while operating in a field that is continually evaluated for increased performance by such means as national tests of literacy and numeracy. Programmes aimed at increasing PI are disadvantaged in this climate because they are concerned with a process relating to long-term rather than short-term goals (Bastiani 1993). The result of these conflicting pressures between the educational market and funding is that there is little or no money assigned to develop PI, which clearly limits programmes, resources, training and further research (Adelman 1992; Sanders 2006). The impact of the market on the reality of PI is such that economic constraints are echoed in the constraints on PI (Hegarty 1993).

An example of this is the "Home–School Liaison Scheme" which was set up by Humberside Local Educational Authority (LEA) in the UK in 1988. In this scheme schools in deprived areas in and around Hull were provided with additional funding so they could employ Home–School Liaison Teachers (HSLT) who worked half-time in this role and half-time as classroom teachers. The 43 HSLTs appointed received additional training focused on developing effective PI in their schools. The HSLT role focused on developing partnerships between parents and schools which included setting up parent rooms, providing parent education and relieving class teachers so they could make home visits. Despite the clear benefits to schools which resulted from this scheme, when finances for LEAs were reduced by central government in the 1990s the HSLT scheme was one of the first services to be cut.

Conclusion

Through developing the model described in this article it has become evident that the issue of PI in education is a complex matter which requires educators to move beyond simplistic notions about the underlying factors which affect the effectiveness of PI. The barriers to effective PI, discussed in this article, provide an explanation for the existence of the gap between rhetoric and reality with regard to PI. Collecting the various factors together in the model presented has made it clear that PI is shaped and limited by a divergent range of barriers related to parents and families, children, parent–teacher differences and societal issues.

Clarification of the specific factors responsible for the rhetoric-reality gap is considered a necessary precursor to the further development of the practice of PI in education. The model presented in this article is intended to help all those concerned with the education of children gain a greater understanding of these factors and thereby encourage more widespread development of effective practice with regard to PI.

The model is also intended to be used to generate ideas for further research on PI. Some aspects of the model have been well researched, such as the demographic factors which influence PI, but little research has been conducted on others, such as differences between parents and teachers in their goals for PI. Other factors identified in the model on which further research would be useful are parents' beliefs about PI and parents' perceptions of invitations for involvement.

The model has also been developed so that it can be used in the pre-service and in-service training of teachers, educational psychologists, counsellors, social workers and other professionals who work in the education system. Studying the model will enable these professionals to gain greater insight into the factors which act as barriers to and facilitate the development of effective PI. This will enable such professionals to develop more effective practices with regard to PI in education so that they can optimise the impact of this important aspect of the educational process.

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