Teacher–Parent Collaboration

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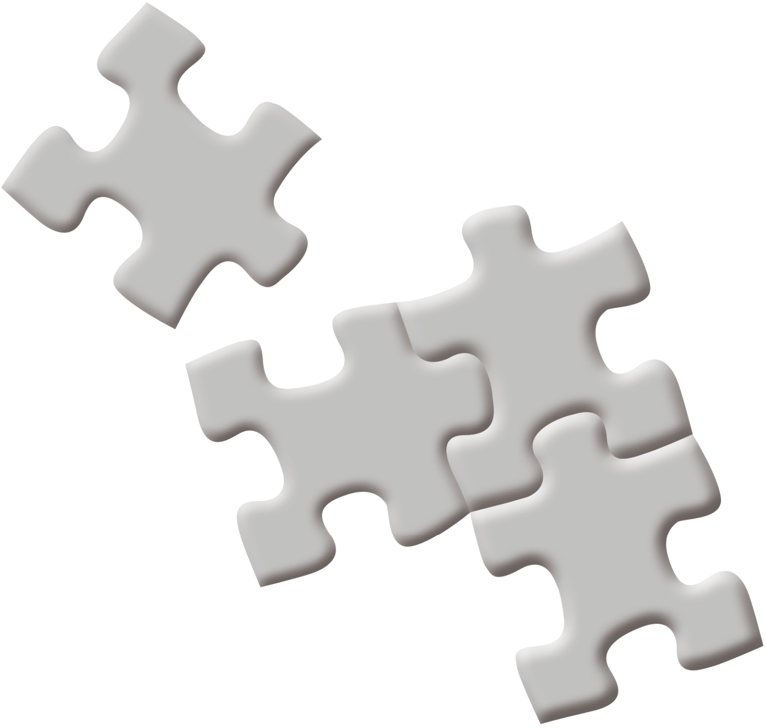
Early childhood to adolescence



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Dedication

To my daughter's Steiner teachers,
in gratitude and admiration

Part I

Foundations of collaboration

Your students will feel safe when they see the adults from the two parts of their lives, school and home, come together to focus on their interests. When, in your interactions, you honour your students' parents, the students themselves will feel honoured (Keyser 2006). And when children see their parents relating comfortably with their teachers, they perceive this as 'permission' to develop comfort and trust in you also (Keyser 2006). Through their interactions with each other, parents and teachers gain access to information, acknowledgment, support and a sounding board for their educational concerns about students, while authentic interactions between them enhance the self-confidence of both (Keyser 2006).

Of course, when referring to 'parents' throughout this book, I include any caregivers who are significant to young people in schools, regardless of whether these adults are the students' biological parents or not. In many families, grandparents or other extended family members have crucial roles as elders, or as prime or supplementary care providers for children. Similarly, although in this book I address you as the teacher, the principles of collaboration apply to any paediatric professional whose role is to teach children or promote their development.

As a teacher or other professional, your primary responsibilities are to the children in your care. However, any individuals who are in ongoing contact unavoidably have an influence on each other (Fisch & Schlanger 1999). Therefore, what happens with your students during their day at school goes home with them and reverberates within their family environment. And some of what happens at home comes in with them when they start their day at school. Like the ripples that spread outwards when a pebble is dropped into a pond, events in one location can affect individuals elsewhere. This interplay between children and their families means that your role is more multifaceted than simply relating with students. You need also to be attuned to their family experience.

Collaboration with your students' parents is a process built upon a personal commitment, which comes from having a clear rationale and a high level of collective and personal self-efficacy. This commitment, which honours the diverse structures and backgrounds of families, employs authentic communication skills, provides curricula and solutions to problems that are in tune with parents' and students' aspirations, and occurs within a parent-driven relationship. These elements are depicted in Figure I.1.

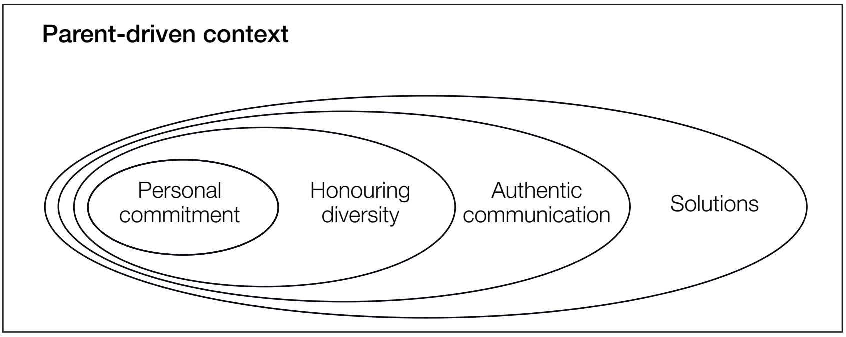

Figure I.1: Components of collaboration in schools

Source: adapted from Friend & Cook (2007, p. 23)

The four chapters in Part I of this book describe these components of collaboration in schools, while the chapters in Part II apply them to specific, school-based challenges that commonly require collaboration with parents.

1 Rationale for collaborating with parents

> *Entering interactions only to give – whether knowledge, support, direction, or something else – with no acknowledgement of what others can contribute, inhibits not only what we might receive but also the full potential of what we seek to give.*
>
> Barrera & Corso (2002, p. 106)

A student's adjustment to school relies, at least in part, on the practical and emotional resources made available to him or her over the years from home, school and the wider community (Christenson 2004; Deslandes et al. 1999). An over-riding rationale for collaborating with your students' parents, then, is to coordinate these sources of support. Parents and teachers commonly believe in the value of education, want the best for children and want them to be happy at school. Yet, teacher–parent relations are often strained (Hughes & MacNaughton 2002). I contend that this is because their relationships are based on a flawed model that entrenches a power imbalance between parents and teachers. The problem is one of politics.

Parent–teacher relationship styles

As teachers, our reasons for engaging with parents in schools differ according to the model that we use to guide our interactions. As summarised in Table 1.1 (page 4), there is a continuum of parent–teacher relationship styles, ranging from those that are driven by professionals through to those directed by parents. These speak to the overt power differences between teachers and parents. However, in schools, parent–teacher relationships are also characterised by *concealed* power. Educators have supremacy by virtue of their expertise, being part of the system and being the ones who frame understandings of students' disabilities or behavioural difficulties

Table 1.1: Continuum of parent–teacher relationship styles

	Professional-driven	**Family-allied**	**Family-centred**	**Family-driven**
View of parents	Source of their child's problems Joint victims	Agents of practitioners	Equal participants with complementary skills and expertise	Family leaders Teachers' employers
Parents' role	Comply with practitioner advice Show deference towards professionals	Carry out assigned tasks to support their children's learning at school and home	Parents and teachers share responsibility for planning and enacting programs	Parents steer their child's education Parents choose their style of participation
Assessment	Practitioners locate deficits within the child or family	Practitioners assess children's needs	Practitioners assess children's needs and the family's strengths	Solution focused: identify solutions that are already in place
Source of goals or priorities	Practitioners dictate goals and interventions	Parents consent to a program designed by practitioners	Joint goal setting and shared decision making to meet family needs	Parents and students articulate their own goals or aspirations
Purpose of interaction with parents	To advise parents of their child's needs and program	To engage parents in helping practitioners to teach their child	To empower parents to meet their child's and family's needs	To listen to parents so that practitioners can provide a service that meets their goals
Communication style	One-way flow of information Parent training	Communication is task focused Parent education	Communication aims to build a relationship and empower parent participation	Communication aims to build a relationship and support parents' interest in their child's education Responsive to parents Collaborative consultation
Common venues	Secondary schools	Primary schools Preschools Child care centres	Some early intervention services	Some private practitioners e.g. tutors, therapists

Sources: Dunst 2002; Osher & Osher 2002

(Fylling & Sandvin 1999). Furthermore, teachers are university educated and typically come from the middle classes and the dominant culture, while parents may be none of these things.

Even without these differences in background, parents have needs that make them vulnerable (Waters 1996). When their child is young and a new school entrant, has recently changed schools, or has additional educational or emotional needs, parents are especially reliant on the quality of care and education that you provide their child. Yet, they have imperfect information on which to base their selection of school and, even when confident that they have selected the 'right' one, are painfully aware that they cannot anticipate problems that might arise after they have enrolled their child (Larner & Phillips 1994). Changes of teacher, the unfolding needs of a growing child and other unforeseen events can neither be anticipated nor guarded against. This vulnerability makes parents reliant on teachers.

Professional-driven interactions

The first style of parent–teacher relationships is characterised by teacher dominance. When professionals 'drive' their relationships with parents, it is assumed that they are exclusively qualified to apply a specialised body of knowledge that is considered the only information relevant to the issue at hand (Osher & Osher 2002; Thompson et al. 1997). They are the ones to assess children's needs, interpret these to parents and formulate a suitable program, with parents expected either to defer to practitioners' diagnoses and comply with their recommendations, or clear the scene to allow the professionals to get on with their job. Parents must either accept professionals' advice or go elsewhere (Osher & Osher 2002).

From this elevated position, professionals often regard parents as the source of children's problems, particularly when their family is disadvantaged socially or has a structure other than the idealised nuclear family (Fylling & Sandvin 1999). Sometimes this view is softened into a conceptualisation of parents as joint victims with their child, as being somewhat fragile and in need of 'empowerment'. For their part, children are considered too young, badly behaved, incompetent or troubled to participate in devising solutions to their problems (Osher & Osher 2002). Thus, within this model, professional diagnosis focuses on deficits, within children and/or their families. When students are making inadequate progress at school, for example, teachers often blame this on a lack of family support, rather than reflecting on the nature of teaching.

Although this model is usually ascribed to the medical profession, from the middle of the 20th century some schools not only evolved an unwritten ethos of 'No parents past this point', but on school gates some actually posted signs to that effect. This view has been termed ‘turfism’. One review found it to be common in schools today, particularly at secondary level (Dunst 2002). Turfism dictates that parents should assist their children with their school work and behaviour, but must not interfere by questioning teachers about their curriculum or teaching strategies (Daniels & Shumow 2003). Within this style of relationship, the rationale for engaging with parents is largely to give them enough information to explain the professional’s recommendations and how he or she is planning to achieve these. Hence, communication largely entails a one-way flow of information from the practitioner to parents.

The first disadvantage of professional dominance is that it can work only when short-lived, but will not sustain an ongoing relationship (Galil et al. 2006). During a medical crisis or when a child’s learning difficulties are being diagnosed, for example, it is clearly vital that parents receive enough information to be able to make prudent decisions. But even in these instances, the professional’s expert stance makes it less likely that information about children’s needs will be provided sensitively or with follow-up so that parents can ask their questions (Whitehead & Gosling 2003). Instead, a hierarchical frame of reference and deficit orientation lead to attempts at ‘parent education’, which implies a one-way flow of information from the skilled (the professionals) to the unskilled and inadequate (that is, parents) (Winton, Sloop & Rodriguez 1999). The effectiveness of this style of parent training is doubtful, however. Some research has found that the quality of parenting improves barely at all, with only weak benefits for children’s development or behaviour (Fagan & Iglesias 1999; Wagner, Spiker & Linn 2002).

In short, this is not a model for the 21st century. It cannot equip teachers with the information from parents that they need to teach their students well, nor secure for them the support of parents. Its deficit orientation criticises parents and leaves teachers feeling increasingly pessimistic over time about their inability to counteract family ‘inadequacies’ (Daniels & Shumow 2003). It sets up teachers to fail by expecting them to be the ones to generate solutions to problems that are beyond their sphere of influence. And this professional-driven stance contravenes both the spirit and provisions of departmental policies on parent collaboration.

Family-allied relationships

Epitomised in the platitude that, ‘Parents are their child’s first (or best) teachers’, a common stance within schools, preschools and child-care centres is that parents should actively help teachers to educate their children (Dunst 2002). This view recognises that families and parents cannot work in isolation: parents need schools and teachers need parents

(Christenson 2004). Therefore, educators accept the responsibility to communicate with parents about their child's education, while parents are expected to support the school. Nevertheless, this parental engagement is often only in token activities that do not challenge teachers' domain, with teachers directing parents and the two working in parallel rather than jointly (Elliott 2003).

However, even these relatively modest expectations for parents are both excessive and unworkable. They are excessive because it is not parents' job to act as their children's teachers, to 'police' homework completion, or to discipline their children at home for problems that occur at school. Parents function best as parents: they 'should not try to feel like teachers, or act like social workers or behave like psychologists' (Blodgett 1971, p. 92). And the expectations are unworkable, because parents' instructional support is seldom beneficial. For children with disabilities, for example, placing parents in the role of their child's instructor does not improve outcomes for children, and can even be detrimental to them and to their family (Foster, Berger & McLean 1981; Ramey & Ramey 1992; White, Taylor & Moss 1992). Formal instruction highlights for parents their child's difficulties, can focus them on the next developmental skill and thus deny them the opportunity to appreciate their child's present skills and qualities, can limit the exchange of affection between parent and child as the parent becomes task focused rather than nurturing, and can require parents to neglect their other commitments to themselves and other family members (Harris & McHale 1989). Instead, across the ability range, formal teaching by parents is less vital than merely reading to their young children. This is beneficial both because it fosters children's literacy skills and allows them thereafter to access information independently (Halle, Kurtze-Costes & Mahoney 1997).

The second reason that a family–allied model fails us in schools is similar to the shortcomings of professional-driven relationships. This is that, in dictating how parents should raise their children, it pits teachers against those parents who do not conform to expectations. An adversarial and confrontational relationship is established, which leads to more negative or fewer interactions between teachers and nonconformist parents (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta 1999). The end result is that the parents and students who most need teacher support in order to be educationally successful are the ones who are least likely to receive it (Hill & Taylor 2004; Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta & Cox 2000; Schulting, Malone & Dodge 2005).

A family-centred philosophy

Family-centred relationships are based on a philosophy of openness to parents. They uphold that schools and families share the common task of educating young people (Adams & Christenson 2000). Therefore, power between parents and teachers is equalised (Daka-Mulwanda, Thornburg & Klein 1995), with the two collaborating to determine goals for children's education, jointly planning strategies and sharing responsibility for delivering educational programs (Friend & Cook 2007; Hostetler 1991). Nevertheless, while power is shared between parents and teachers, the two can fulfil different roles, as negotiated between them.

This philosophy recognises that teachers and parents have complementary expertise. Thus, family-centred practice entails both equal status and parity, which refers to valuing and blending each partner's ideas and knowledge (Christenson 2004; Friend & Cook 2007). While recognising teachers' expertise, a collaborative stance also appreciates that parents have the most important and enduring relationship with their children, possess detailed knowledge about them across time and in a variety of settings, have a strong commitment to their children and families, and know best how to meet their family's and individual children's needs. By harnessing this intimate knowledge, you gain information that helps you to teach these students, while feeling assured of parents' support for your efforts.

In a departure from the deficit orientation characterised by the two interaction styles described previously, family-centred relationships focus on the strengths of both students and their families (although the presumption that practitioners are the rightful diagnosticians of these assets violates the principles of true collaboration). Having diagnosed, teachers and parents will jointly design an intervention to meet the needs of children and their parents. On the understanding that, when families are functioning successfully children can function successfully, some support focuses directly on the parents, not just the child (Dunst, Trivette & Deal 1994; McWilliam, Maxwell & Sloper 1999). Communication aims to empower both parents and teachers to meet students' needs (Turnbull et al. 2006) by exchanging information and building a relationship that enables them to function as equal and joint participants in decision making.

There are two disadvantages of this model. First is that there is little evidence of its effectiveness. One study within early intervention found no developmental gains for children with disabilities, no reductions in parental stress, nor any improvements in parent–child interaction patterns in those programs that were family centred, compared with those that were child centred (Mahoney & Bella 1998). Second, despite being a legislative requirement within special education in the United States (Deslandes et al. 1999) and being stated education policy in many other places, family-centred practice is rare in early intervention services and even less common in preschools and schools (Dunst 2002; McWilliam et al. 1999). Even when enacted, it is tinged with the sense that schools are ‘giving’ parents equality, rather than that equality is their entitlement (Roffey 2002).

Many writers explain the dearth of family centredness in schools as being due to teachers’ lack of training for collaborating with parents (e.g. Bruder 2000; Soodak et al. 2002). However, when practice so often falls short of its stated goals, the fault cannot lie with such vast numbers of practitioners. Instead, the model is failing them. Family-centred practice is impractical in schools because teachers lack the resources (especially time) that they would need to establish frequent enough contacts with parents (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta 1999). This is particularly so for high schools, where teachers instruct a large number of classes and thus would have to form relationships with unmanageable numbers of parents. For their part, parents must develop trust in many teachers (Adams & Christenson 2000). This inevitably results in a lessened focus on parent–teacher interactions at this age level (Cattley 2004).

Thus, whereas the family-allied model imposes inappropriate expectations on parents, a family-centred model imposes inappropriate expectations on teachers, particularly when it comes to supporting students and families with multiple problems. While it is fair to expect teachers to be skilled communicators – as that is the essence of teaching – it is unreasonable to expect them to possess the counselling skills and experience needed to act as social workers, psychologists or counsellors. The more challenging the students, the more skilled teachers have to be at their job – but their job is teaching. In a diverse society, this is enough to expect. Children need dental care, but that does not mean that their teachers should perform dentistry along with their other duties. We must let teachers do what they do best: teach – and, when students and their families have issues that are beyond teachers’ sphere of responsibility, to refer them to relevant outside services.

A parent-driven model

In its stance that teachers and parents are full and equal partners, family-centred practice gives too much power to professionals – without, however, giving them the resources or knowledge base to exercise that power. The one remaining option, then, is for teachers to adopt a parent-driven model to guide their relationships with their students’ parents. This stance honours parents’ role as family leaders. It recognises that, more than being mere consumers or even equal participants in a partnership with you, parents are actually your employers. Their function is not to help you teach their children, but the reverse: they employ you to assist them in raising skilled, knowledgeable and well adjusted children. They hire you for your expertise as an educator, much as they might employ doctors, naturopaths or other practitioners to consult about their children's health, and tutors and various therapists to advise on children's developmental or atypical educational needs. Parents pay your salary by way of private school fees or taxes for public education. Therefore, your task is to further their aims for their children. In a parent-driven model, you are accountable to parents: they are not accountable to you.

Using the analogy of taking a road trip, in a parent-driven approach, parents work out the route, with the practitioner holding the map as a guide so that the parents can reach their destination satisfied by the journey and its outcome (Tannen 1996, in Osher & Osher 2002). In other words, parents are the ones to steer their children's education. This style of interaction assumes that parents know more about themselves and their family than outsiders ever will (Selekman 1997). It also assumes that young people have the capacity to contribute to solving their own problems. Both students and their parents are the experts in their own needs. This stance extends beyond the family-centred notion of empowering parents, arguing that in reality you cannot give people skills that they are incapable of performing (Murphy 2006). Instead, all that students and their parents need is enfranchisement to use the skills they already have.

The parent-driven model shares the aims of the family-centred approach – namely, to build constructive relationships with parents and support their interest in their children's education. This transforms communication from 'telling' parents to listening to them (Dunst, Trivette & Deal 1988, 1994; Sokoly & Dokecki 1995). Parent 'education' becomes collaborative consultation through which professionals respond to parents' expressed requests for information, rather than assuming what parents need to learn and imposing training on them (Winton et al. 1999).

Dimensions of parental involvement

Parental engagement with their children's schooling can span three dimensions: values, beliefs and aspirations; indirect support and involvement at home; and direct engagement at school (Fan 2001; Grolnick et al. 1997; Hong & Ho 2005; Kohl et al. 2000; Raffaele & Knoff 1999; Scott-Jones 1995; Singh et al. 1995). Parents' values, beliefs and aspirations about education explain why they become involved, while the remaining two dimensions describe the form their involvement takes (Fan 2001). These three dimensions may be quite distinct from each other, have differing effects on children's educational outcomes (Fan 2001; Keith et al. 1998) and will be more or less appropriate and effective, depending on the children's ages (Singh et al. 1995).

Values, beliefs and aspirations

Parents' negative values, particularly their attitudes to schooling itself, will to some extent limit their educational involvement. Some parents distrust schooling altogether as a result of their own schooling history (Miller 2003; Roffey 2002). Many have residual feelings of anger, fear or distrust of teachers as a result of their childhood school experiences (Rafaelle & Knoff 1999), while some from minority cultures or socially disadvantaged groups regard middle-class education as a form of imperial colonisation. Many parents resent the dictates of teachers and intrusions by schools into their family life, such as with the imposition of homework. Such negative parental attitudes indirectly reduce children's educational attainments by minimising their academic engagement and also by lowering teachers' expectations, particularly when teachers perceive a difference in education-related values between themselves and their students' parents (Hauser-Cram, Sirin & Stipek 2003).

On the other hand, parents' positive values do not necessarily lead to active engagement in their children's education (Jodl et al. 2001): their engagement will also depend to some extent on parents' beliefs about their own versus teachers' roles. Parents from lower socioeconomic circumstances tend to give schools more autonomy over their children's education than do middle-class parents (Wood & Baker 1999). Across all groups, however, some believe that schools should meet their children's educational needs; others assess that schools are not adequately resourced to do this and therefore that they must provide supplemental teaching at home; while still others value home time as an opportunity for relaxation and leisure, not for doing more schoolwork (Coots 1998). Thus, when children have learning difficulties, some parents respond by increasing the amount of academic work that they oversee at home, while others reduce it to nil to give their children time to relax (Coots 1998). Those with the economic resources to hire tutors sometimes prefer this to teaching their children themselves (Coots 1998).

In terms of aspirations, most parents want their children to do well in school, have friends and contribute to their communities in adulthood (Hanson et al. 1998). They hold optimistic expectations for their children's futures (Halle et al. 1997; Wood & Baker 1999). Nevertheless, when asked how much schooling they would like their child to complete, their expectations in large part reflect their children's actual abilities and become more realistic as these unfold over time (Clare, Garnier & Gallimore 1998; De Civita et al. 2004; Singh et al. 1995). Parents who themselves are well educated expect their children to be also (Davis-Kean 2005; Singh et al. 1995). It is not surprising, therefore, that research consistently finds that parents with high aspirations for their children's learning tend to have children who are academically successful, hold positive attitudes towards school and are well adjusted emotionally and socially (Demaray & Malecki 2002; Demaray et al. 2005; Deslandes et al. 1997; Englund et al. 2004; Fan 2001; Fan & Chen 2001; Feinstein & Symons 1999; Flouri 2006; Flouri, Buchanan & Bream 2002; Gonzalez-DeHass, Willems & Holbein 2005; Hill et al. 2004; Izzo et al. 1999; McBride, Schoppe-Sullivan & Ho 2005; McWayne et al. 2004b; Marcon 1999; Miedel & Reynolds 1999; Paulson 1994; Ratelle et al. 2004; Shumow, Vandell & Posner 1999). But most of these benefits are due to the children's innate abilities and reflect the advantages of being middle-class (Fan 2001). Children who are economically advantaged receive enough home stimulation to achieve well academically, with or without parental engagement at school (Dearing et al. 2006a; McWayne et al. 2004b).

Parents' high aspirations do, however, have some small additional benefits, over and above the advantages children enjoy from being capable and receiving adequate stimulation and resources. One study found that higher levels of parental aspirations lowered the likelihood of academic failure during primary school by 48 per cent compared with equally poor but low-aspiring parents (De Civita et al. 2004). When parents hold higher aspirations, the children themselves develop high self-appraisals and consequently achieve better initially and make more academic progress than those with similar aptitude but whose parents have lower expectations (Fan 2001; Halle et al. 1997). Particularly in the primary school years, parents' aspirations influence young people's commitment to schooling by conveying to them the sense that their parents value both them and their education (Bouchey & Harter 2005; De Civita et al. 2004; Gonzalez-DeHass et al. 2005; Hong & Ho 2005; Jodl et al. 2001; Marchant, Paulson & Rothlisberg 2001; Noack 2004; Scott-Jones 1995). In turn, young people internalise their parents' values about effort and learning.

Indirect involvement at home

Parents can encourage their children's educational attainment through providing indirect support at home. This can involve keeping informed of what is happening for their children at school, monitoring their academic progress, reading to them and providing intellectually stimulating activities for them at home and within the community. These forms of emotional support actually have more influence on children's academic outcomes than parents' direct participation at school (Ho & Willms 1996). The benefits are particularly tangible during early childhood, when parents' high-quality instruction and guidance teach children to regulate their emotions and, thereby, help their children to develop the task attack and social skills that are necessary for academic success (Englund et al. 2004; Hill & Craft 2003).

A more interventionist form of home-based support is providing active help with children's schoolwork. As well as their values affecting whether they take on this role (as already discussed), there are three additional constraints on parents' abilities to do this. First, their children's characteristics can influence this choice. For example, when children have behavioural difficulties, their parents are less willing to incite outbursts by attempting formal tutoring or supervising their homework (Coots 1998). Second, some parents may want to assist their children's learning at home but they themselves received little education and therefore need additional information from teachers to guide them (Hill et al. 2004; Kohl et al. 2000). A third group of parents are immigrants. Those with little proficiency in English are often reluctant to be present at school and may lack knowledge about the local education system and curriculum (having been educated in their homeland). This can limit their practical support for their children's learning at home, although these constraints will not limit their educational aspirations or emotional support for their children (Wood & Baker 1999).

Direct engagement at school

A second, more visible, form of parent engagement in their children's education is direct involvement at school. This can occur through attending parent–teacher meetings, being an audience at their children's school performances, assisting in the classroom, collaborating with teachers to make educational decisions for their child, volunteering on fundraising activities or staffing the canteen and contributing to the development of school policies. However, many parents experience a range of practical impediments to becoming directly involved or present at school. The most significant of these is the competing demands posed by their employment status, having a young baby and moving home (Castro et al. 2004; Lamb-Parker et al. 2001). Next, family stress, impoverishment and single parenting (Grolnick et al. 1997; McWayne et al. 2004b), inflexible working hours and purely practical issues such as problems with transport, babysitting and shift work, all limit the flexibility and resources available to support parents' involvement, particularly of parents with low incomes. Nevertheless, these impediments may limit only their presence, not their educational aspirations for their children or emotional investment and personal interest in their education (Grolnick et al. 1997; Ho & Willms 1996).

Parents' direct engagement in their children's education seems particularly beneficial during the early childhood years. As well as the indirect instruction that they provide at home, engagement in their child's care or educational setting can provide parents with information and guidance about child development and parenting dilemmas. This information contributes to more responsive parenting which, in turn, enhances children's educational outcomes. However, by the late primary and high school years, parents' direct engagement at school has no discernible effect on their children academically (Singh et al. 1995).

Conclusion: Dimensions of parental involvement

The conclusion from an abundant body of research is clear: *whether* parents engage with their child's schooling is actually less relevant than *how* they do so. Their overall parenting style, rather than parents' school engagement as such, most influences children's educational outcomes (Hill et al. 2004). Controlling parental involvement actually diminishes young people's academic achievements (Deslandes et al. 1997; Grolnick & Ryan 1989; Hong & Ho 2005; Singh et al. 1995; Steinberg et al. 1992; Taylor, Hinton & Wilson 1995). Intrusive control in the form of authoritarian surveillance by parents of their children's homework and their delivery of rewards for high grades generates in children less initiative and persistence (Baumrind 1967, 1971; Grolnick, Frodi & Bridges 1984), declining intrinsic motivation (Deci et al. 1993; Leung & Kwan 1998), less engagement in learning (de Kruif et al. 2000; Kim & Mahoney 2004) and greater negativity towards schoolwork (Dornbusch et al. 1987; Ginsberg & Bronstein 1993; Gonzalez-DeHass et al. 2005; Gottfried, Fleming & Gottfried 1994; Grolnick & Ryan 1989; Maccoby & Martin 1983; Parker et al. 1999; Paulson, Marchant & Rothlisberg 1998; Ratelle et al. 2004; Steinberg, Elmen & Mounts 1989; Steinberg et al. 1992, 1994). In turn, these negative learning styles lead to declining academic and social performances (Aunola & Nurmi 2004; Chen, Dong & Zhou 1997; Mattanah 2001).

These findings are paralleled in the early childhood years, where one study found that egalitarian discipline and parents' responsiveness to their children's interests during play improved the children's school readiness, whereas demanding or didactic parental instruction produced in children poorer task orientation and greater negativity towards school work (Parker et al. 1999). Similar conclusions apply to children's extracurricular activities: young people benefit when their parents facilitate and support their recreational endeavours (Jodl et al. 2001), but when parents pressure or control children's sporting engagement, the children become less motivated, more anxious, enjoy the activities less, develop less proficiency and are more likely to cease participating (Anderson et al. 2003).

In contrast are parents who take an interest in their children's schooling, without attempting to direct or control it. The benefits of this style of engagement have been demonstrated in studies showing that, while the literacy skills of children whose mothers have little education are typically behind their peers', when these mothers become responsively involved in their children's schooling, the gaps in both the children's skills and their self-appraisals dissipate (Dearing et al. 2006a).

Thus, parents' interest and emotional support – both in education and beyond – helps young people, whereas parental control is detrimental emotionally and to students' performances. This is explained by self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan 2000, Ryan & Deci 2000), which holds that being self-governed (that is, autonomous) is an innate human need. Therefore, young people will be well adjusted emotionally when their parents allow them to steer their own course in life based on their personal values (Soenens et al. 2007). In reverse, they will resist and rebel against imposed controls as these violate their need for personal autonomy (Porter 2007a, 2007b, 2008).

A rationale for collaboration

Guided by both a parent-driven model and the research reported so far on the effects of parents' involvement in their children's schooling, three conclusions can be drawn about the reasons to collaborate with parents. The first is that parents employ you to educate their children and, therefore, you are accountable to them for your performance of this task. It is your job to collaborate with your employers. Not only is that common courtesy, but it reflects the true lines of accountability.

Second, parents' interest in – but not control of – their children's schooling enhances students' progress, especially at young ages and particularly for disadvantaged students (Dearing et al. 2006a). Even those parents with previous negative experiences or attitudes to education can come to endorse their child's school when they have increased contact with their child's teachers (Kohl et al. 2000). Therefore, you will need to invite and support their engagement. Third, when problems arise at school, parents are your best source of information about their child and how they have solved similar problems in the past. This third rationale for collaborating with parents in schools, then, is not that your relationships with them will inform, impel, encourage or even empower them to help you to teach their children – but simply that you need their advice and support to allow you to teach well.

Measures for supporting parents' interest in their children's education

Comparing children who were similarly disadvantaged, one study found that those whose parents demonstrated interest in their schooling achieved 24 percentage points better on academic ability tests than similarly disadvantaged young people whose parents were disengaged (Feinstein & Symons 1999). The clear conclusion from this finding is that, beyond the early childhood years, when early stimulation and responsive parenting teach the specific skills of self-regulation, benefits of parental engagement in schooling accrue when parents take an interest in their children's academic progress. To support parental interest, schools require sustained administrative commitment to establishing proactive relationships with parents (Raffaele & Knoff 1999).

Collective efficacy

In the increasingly interdependent profession that is modern teaching, all individuals within a school need a sense that as a whole it has the capacity to operate collectively to achieve its mission (Caprara et al. 2003). This capacity is referred to as 'collective efficacy', which is individuals' belief in their capacity individually and as a group to influence their work circumstances and students' learning and behaviour (Friedman 2003). A sense of collective efficacy contributes to a school's prestige and is a potent source of teachers' job satisfaction (Caprara et al. 2003). It requires strong leadership from the principal and a well-qualified teaching team who individually and collectively fulfil their role obligations (Caprara et al. 2003).

An inviting school climate

The most crucial practical measure influencing parents' involvement in their child's schooling is their perception of the school's receptivity to them (Christenson 2004; Overstreet et al. 2005; Raffaele & Knoff 1999). Teachers' attitudes and collaborative practices have a considerable influence on parents' level of school engagement (Kohl et al. 2000), with one study finding that school practices accounted for just over 22 per cent of the differences in parental participation rates between schools (Ho & Willms 1996). When teachers invite parents to the school, they are more likely to come (Simon 2001).

Typically, however, parents' contact with teachers declines progressively from children's first year of school (Adams & Christenson 2000; Izzo et al. 1999; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta 1999). This is partly because older children are more reliable informants about events at school and therefore parents do not need to approach their children's teachers directly for feedback about their daily activities, as is the case during the years prior to school. In addition, parents are attempting to give their older sons and daughters increasing independence. However, it also reflects diminishing invitations by the school. In one study, for example, 60 per cent of parents reported that their child's school had not requested from them information about their child, 65 per cent reported that they had not been given information about their child's progress at school and 70 per cent had not been invited to volunteer at school (Spera 2005).

At the first contact, schools can communicate in writing their intention to collaborate with parents. A statement of intent, such as illustrated in Box 1.1, could be posted at the school office or included in the package of documents given to parents at enrolment. Such statements, of course, would be meaningless and even damaging unless followed up by specific and practical efforts to engage parents.

Box 1.1: Sample statement of philosophy about parent engagement

Dear parent
Our school is honoured that you have entrusted us with your child's education. While our teachers have considerable knowledge and skills about children and teaching, we are also eager to learn from your expertise and knowledge about your particular child, family and culture. We invite your voice, your perspective and your participation as an advocate for your child and family as well as for our community of students and families. Our school is fortunate to include a diverse group of families, students and staff whose range of life experiences enriches the entire school community and each one of us individually. We believe that every family deserves support in its efforts to raise healthy and skilled children, and we work to build and encourage this support among families, school staff and the larger community.

Source: Keyser (2006, pp. 85–86)

Maintain high expectations for students

While parents' aspirations have a modest effect on their children's educational outcomes (as already reported), the quality of schooling their children receive is actually more influential. School quality accounts for between 20 and 25 per cent of differences between schools in student outcomes, with family and neighbourhood factors explaining only 15 per cent and students' qualities just 10 per cent of their educational attainment (Boyle et al. 2007; Mortimore et al. 1988; Osterman 2000; Rutter 1983; Rutter & Maughan 2002; Sylva 1994). The quality of each classroom may be even more influential than the quality of the school overall (Sylva 1994), if only because classrooms vary so much more than do schools. Therefore, your students' parents depend on you far more than you depend on them to equip their children to learn.

A core influence on student attainment is teacher expectation. As is the case for parents, these in large part reflect the students' actual abilities (Hauser-Cram et al. 2003). However, when teachers expect less of their students, they subsequently employ less effective teaching strategies that actually lower student achievement (Rubie-Davies 2007). In fact, teacher expectations are so potent that they can be only partially offset by parents' higher ambitions for their children (Benner & Mistry 2007).

Promote teachers' self-efficacy

Like parents, teachers need to be able to translate their high expectations into behaviours that support student learning, for which they require a sense of personal and professional self-efficacy (that is, a sense that they can control student outcomes). Teachers with low professional efficacy are more likely to become overwhelmed by their work, stressed by disruptions (Martin, Linfoot & Stephenson 1999) and more concerned with promoting order than with meeting students' needs. They experience less job satisfaction and perceive colleagues, students and parents more negatively (Caprara et al. 2003).

In contrast, those with high self-efficacy not only become less stressed but, when faced with challenges, take action to resolve problems rather than avoiding them or venting emotion inappropriately (Friedman 2003). Confident of their ability to generate solutions, rather than feeling helpless, teachers with high self-efficacy exhibit high levels of planning and organisation, are open to new ideas and willing to experiment with new approaches, implement varied programs, modify tasks to attract students' engagement, create a supportive climate to maintain student involvement and foster mastery and students' personal progress, rather than encouraging students to outperform each other (Caprara et al. 2006; Tollefson 2000; Wolters & Daugherty 2007). They are also more willing to collaborate with parents (Caprara et al. 2003). This is because, although few teachers receive any specific training for collaborating with parents, those who are confident of their expertise as teachers tend to be more open to collaboration, in all likelihood because they feel less threatened about having others scrutinise their work (Abbott-Shim, Lambert & McCarty 2000; Castro et al. 2004; Ghazvini & Readdick 1994).

Communicate regularly

Mutual trust between parents and educators cannot develop in a vacuum, and is even more difficult to establish during crises, when emotions are likely to be running high. Instead, you must engender parents' trust through frequent, ongoing, everyday responsive communication with them (Adams & Christenson 2000). There are many occasions when you can exchange information with parents, including orientation visits before their child starts at the school or in a new classroom; during everyday informal contacts; in brochures about the school's policies and procedures; at meetings to review students' progress; in newsletters; on bulletin boards; by asking parents about their priorities for their child's education; and writing a letter to parents and students at the beginning of the school year to introduce yourself, your philosophy about education, the curriculum at that grade level and your aims for the year. As the year progresses, personal contact with parents over positive events at school is a powerful communication both for them and for students (Miller 2003; Miller, Ferguson & Moore 2002). Regular communication with parents about classroom learning activities, their child's progress and ideas for supporting their child academically contribute to students' intrinsic motivation (Gonzalez-DeHass et al. 2005) and can cement cooperation between parents and teachers by helping familiarise them with each other (Raffaele & Knoff 1999).

With very young children in early childhood centres, parents want daily feedback so that they can vicariously experience their child's day, discuss with their child his or her activities and, perhaps, follow these up at home for continuity (Elliott 2003). By school age, parents seldom need such a high frequency of communication, although those whose children have learning difficulties require more than school reports at the end of term, instead needing weekly updates (Bennett, Lee & Lueke 1998).

Foster parents' self-efficacy

Parents' self-efficacy – their belief in their own capacity to influence their child's schooling – is crucial for them to be willing to become involved (Coots 1998; Deslandes et al. 1999; Pelletier & Brent 2002; Seefeldt et al. 1999). Parents with high self-efficacy will be able to harness the family's internal resources and secure any necessary support from outside the family in order to promote their children's achievements (Thompson et al. 1997). They provide support in ways that contribute to their children's academic self-efficacy and, in turn, their educational success (Seefeldt et al. 1999). As well as improving children's outcomes, parents' sense of self-control increases their satisfaction with their relationships with their children's teachers (Turnbull et al. 2006).

In contrast, parents with low self-efficacy will doubt their ability to solve their children's problems or to influence their educational outcomes, even if they were to become involved (Grolnick et al. 1997). This can be particularly the case for parents of high school students with disabilities (Deslandes et al. 1999), parents who have little education themselves (Seefeldt et al. 1999) and parents who present with depression, which signals that they feel unable to influence their circumstances (Reyno & McGrath 2006). Parents' self-efficacy combines with their values about education and beliefs about teachers' and parents' respective roles to produce four styles of interaction in schools, as given in Table 1.2.

Table 1.2: Effects of parents' self-efficacy on their style of involvement in schools

	Low self-efficacy	**High self-efficacy**
Negative view of education in general or of current school provisions	Resistant Withdrawn Isolated	Public complaints Destructive criticism
Positive view of education	Emotionally supportive of children High educational aspirations	High involvement, e.g.: • attending meetings • audience at school • assistance with schoolwork • guiding students' educational or career plans • child advocacy

Source: adapted from Raffaele & Knoff (1999, p. 455)

Although you are not responsible for parents' personal self-efficacy, you can create an environment for it to flourish in parents' interactions with you (Keyser 2006). Two key measures are to convey your respect for their role as leaders in their family and to give them relevant information that will enable them to have control over decisions about their child's education.

Provide information

In order for parents to translate their high educational aspirations into behaviours that support their children's learning both indirectly at home and directly at school (as relevant), they need high-quality information (Coots 1998; Halle et al. 1997; Hill & Taylor 2004). In order to give parents the confidence to become involved, the information you provide must be responsive to their needs, rather than imparting information that you want to convey (Elliott 2003); be accurate and comprehensive so that parents can make informed decisions (Osher & Osher 2002); and be accessible to parents. On this last aspect, some may be comfortable receiving knowledge from books and articles, which you can amass in a parent resource library, while others may prefer verbal communication (Jacobson & Engelbrecht 2000).

One group with particular information needs are parents of young children. First-time parents often request information to help them understand their child (Elliott 2003) and guide them to parent responsively. Topics of particular interest may include building children's self-esteem, helping them to have good relationships, using effective discipline and developing appropriate expectations of children at different ages (Jacobson & Engelbrecht 2000). By the middle school years, parents may need information about curricula and how they can guide their children's learning at home; by the time young people are nearing the end of schooling, their parents often benefit from information about school subject choices, employment options and university admission criteria.

One group that may need specific information about how to support children's learning are those parents with little education themselves (Pelletier & Brent 2002). Even when these parents have high educational aspirations for their sons and daughters, the young people's actual academic achievements may not improve, perhaps because their parents are not able to assist them with academic learning (Hill et al. 2004). Therefore, disadvantaged parents may need practical information about how they can support their children's attainments.

Outreach

In contrast to the critical and distancing attitudes towards parents characterised by the professional-driven or family-allied models, within a family-driven model, schools reach out to parents to support them. Some practical measures include establishing a lending library to help disadvantaged parents who lack the resources to purchase books, which can cause a decline in their children's literacy skills, on which all other learning relies (Halle et al. 1997). Schools can also be a hub of family and community services, these being determined in response to surveyed parent needs. This will not necessarily entail attracting more resources but may include the provision of a parents' lounge or drop-in centre to promote informal contacts between parents; structured parent support groups; or bringing in community health specialists to deliver some services at the school so that their efforts and the school's can be coordinated (Raffaele & Knoff 1999). Such activities can accustom parents to attending their child's school, on which further contact can be built.

Conclusion

The scarcity of family-centred practices, even in those children's services that aspire to them, attests to the lack of utility of this approach. Under this and the other two models that give professionals ultimate power, the paradox is that, if as a teacher you attempt to use that power, you will lose influence over both your parent group and your students. When parents do not comply with the solutions imposed on them, the resulting despondency and failure will disempower all of you. Instead, when problems arise, the respect inherent in a parent-driven stance allows you to recruit parents' advice and harness their expertise at solving problems for their own family and its members. This will increase the likelihood of finding workable solutions that parents are willing to enact. Given that increases in parental involvement produce improvements in children's academic skills, particularly in those most at risk of academic failure (Dearing et al. 2006a), a parent-driven approach has the best chance of achieving what you and your parent group both want: engaged and successful students.