Tensions in Home–School Partnerships: The Different Perspectives of Teachers and Parents of Students With Learning Barriers

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This paper presents the findings of a qualitative study of learning partnerships between teachers and parents of students with learning barriers. The aim was to investigate the beliefs and understandings of parents and teacher participants around roles in partnerships, so as to identify operational processes that support effective collaboration. The study was based on the premise that home–school partnerships have been established as a positive influence on the education of students with learning barriers but tensions exist within these partnerships in practice. In the study it was posited that some tensions stemmed from differences in role understandings between parent and teacher. Data revealed key themes emerging from the case studies. Findings indicated that parents and teachers believed that involvement and partnerships are integral to supporting the learning of students with learning barriers. However, differences emerged as to how teachers and parents constructed and interpreted involvement and operational processes supporting partnerships, and the significance each group placed on different aspects of collaboration between parent and teacher.

Keywords: home–school partnerships, learning barriers, tensions, perspectives

Introduction

Research has drawn attention to the correlation between increased parental involvement and positive achievement in literacy and numeracy outcomes, increased student retention, reduced absenteeism (Desforges, 2003; Deslandes, 2009a), and improvements in behaviour management in schools and classes (Slee, 1995; Smit & Driessen, 2009). There is consensus in North America, Europe and the United Kingdom regarding the impact of parental influences on the schooling of children, as evidenced by the research of Desforges (2003), Deslandes (2009a), Gartner, Lipsky, and Turnbull (1991), Leithwood (2009), Reay (2005) and Wolfendale (2000), amongst many others. Governments, schools and systems, both on a national and international level, have evolved models of partnerships designed to improve learning outcomes for all students, but particularly for students with learning barriers (Epstein, Sanders, & Simon, 2002;

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Porter, 2008; Turnbull & Turnbull, 1990). Nevertheless, tensions within partnerships between parents and teachers may detract from successful home–school collaboration for the student with learning barriers. From the perspective of the classroom teacher and the parent, there can often be a gap between the 'rhetoric' of partnership, as espoused by schools and systems, and actual practice.

This paper explores the issue of collaborative partnerships between school and family, parent and teacher, and the impact of such partnerships on the educational outcomes of the student with learning barriers. It highlights the differences in beliefs and perceptions between parents and teachers in their personal constructions of partnerships, effective collaboration and school operational processes. Within this study, 'learning barriers' describes students from a range of backgrounds, who may have a special educational need, disability or learning difficulty that is specifically experienced within the mainstream school setting and context. The term 'collaborative learning partnership' denotes a partnership between parents or caregivers and schools, but more specifically, parents and teachers, which is based on mutual effort, an acknowledgment of the differing roles of participants and a shared responsibility toward a productive outcome for the student (Wolfendale, 2006).

The paper discusses the findings of a qualitative case study undertaken at a secondary school in a regional city in Australia. The findings represent a focused exploration of the personal perspectives of parents and teachers of students with learning barriers.

Review of the Literature

Parental involvement in education has been a focus of research, policy and programs within North America, Europe and the UK for the last 30 years (Delgado-Gaitan, 1990; Desforges, 2003; Deslandes, 2009a; Gartner et al., 1991; Reay, 2005). As Bastiani (2000) observes:

> There is . . . abundant evidence that when schools can develop a practical working relationship with the families of the children they teach, there are tangible and lasting benefits in terms of pupil progress and school development. (Bastiani, 2000, p. 35)

Thus, research findings consistently support the benefits of collaboration for all actors in the educational partnership — schools, families and students alike. Within the rhetoric of policy documents, collaborative partnerships between parent and teacher emerge as easily achieved, benign relationships. However, in the last two decades, home–school partnerships have become increasingly politicised in practice.

> Unlike the harmonious anodyne relationships presented in many of the parental involvement texts, in reality parent-teacher relationships are characterised by the struggle for control and definition. (Reay, 2009, p. 53)

The body of research outlining what it is that schools actually do to encourage parental involvement, and home–school partnerships, is significantly smaller than the research on policy and programs (Dhillon, 2009). Furthermore, many partnerships between parents and teachers continue to exhibit tensions in practice (Constantino, 2003; Reay, 2009). These tensions may occur even in those cases where schools recognise and celebrate the significance of home–school partnerships. Additionally, as Delgado-Gaitan (1990), Porter (2008), Reay (2009) and others note, the construction of partnerships between home and school has not always been inclusive of different cultures, beliefs and parenting styles. Thus the push behind parental involvement and partnerships appears to have represented a variety of agendas stemming from political and social forces that have shaped the cultural

and educational context in specific countries or regions (Desforges, 2003; Reay, 2005; Smit & Driessen, 2009).

Australian Trends and Developments

Policies prevalent in Australian state education systems in the 1980s generally focused on school discipline issues, where home–school interaction appeared as an adjunct to the remediation of behavioural concerns. This theme had also been apparent in the home–school partnership rhetoric in the UK (Vincent & Tomlinson, 1997). Notwithstanding these uncertain beginnings in Australia, policy analyst Alison Rich was commissioned to research parental influence on children's education for the Centre for Independent Studies (CIS) in 2000 (Rich, 2000). Many professional and parent bodies in Australia were calling for support for home–school partnerships (Macgregor, 2005; Saulwick Muller Social Research, 2006). In the last decade, publications outlining elements of best practice in home–school partnerships have become more prolific on government and educational websites. Publications such as the 'Family-School Partnerships Project' (Saulwick Muller Social Research, 2006) and the Australian Government's 'Family-School Partnerships Framework' (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2008) outline the principles, supporting structures and key elements of home–school partnerships and parental involvement in education (Thomson, 2002). They also continue to acknowledge the challenges of working in partnership and the cultural changes and adjustments that both teachers and parents might need to make in order to support effective collaboration:

> Valuable though the partnership ideal is, it requires considerable cultural change. There is a need for principals and teachers to readily acknowledge and appreciate the role of the parents, not only as "first educators" but as "continuing educators", and to see a place for them in the educational life of the school. There is a need for parents to recognise and appreciate the power and importance of their educative role, and to see the value of the attributes they can bring to the educative process. (Saulwick Muller Social Research, 2006, p. 15)

These documents endorse the growing recognition, nationally, of the value of collaboration between parents and teachers (Porter, 2008; Prendergast, Renshaw, & Harris, 2010). Nevertheless, comments such as the one previously expressed also indicate that these cultural changes have not always been readily achieved within Australian schools (Macgregor, 2005; Saulwick Muller Social Research, 2006).

Significance of Study for Students With Learning Barriers

Whilst creating more effective collaborative learning partnerships between parents and teachers is a significant outcome for all stakeholders, there have been specific benefits for the families of students with learning barriers, where parent–teacher collaboration can help ensure that the individual learning needs of the student are addressed (Ollison Floyd & Vernon-Dotson, 2009; Porter, 2008; Williams & Pritchard, 2006). In the US, the introduction of acts such as Individuals with a Disability in Education Improvement Act (Lake & Billingsley, 2000) and No Child Left Behind (U.S. Department of Education, 2002) formalised the nature of parental involvement and collaboration for schools and parents of students with learning barriers. Indeed, the partnership between parent, school and teacher to support students with learning barriers had been a requirement of the educational world for some time (Blue-Banning, Summers, Frankland, Nelson, & Beegle, 2004; Minke & Scott, 1993).

An aspect of this home–school collaboration has been the completion by teachers of the individual education plan (IEP), as mandated in special education policy and programs for students with identified learning barriers in the US and the UK. While not necessarily legislated through government policy, Australian schools also use the IEP to support students with learning barriers, although its usage varies across different states and educational systems[1] (Elkins, 2009). In planning and implementing the IEP or similar processes to support students with disabilities, parents, teachers, and support staff create an individualised learning program through differentiating the curriculum (Lawrence-Brown, 2004), setting appropriate goals and outcomes, or providing suitable accommodations and adjustments (Harry, 2008; Williams & Pritchard, 2006). However, understanding of what constitutes partnership, collaboration and parental involvement has varied considerably among the individuals and groups concerned (Desforges, 2003; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). In the case of IEPs or similar processes, tensions stemming from unresolved ambiguities around roles and ineffective communications between home and school can have a significant impact on the student's learning (Lake & Billingsley, 2000; Porter, 2008). Furthermore, operational processes[2] that schools use to implement and facilitate supportive programs such as the IEP can either support or detract from the effectiveness of the collaboration (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Minke & Scott, 1993). For the student with learning barriers, effective home–school collaboration may have a profound influence on the student's learning program and progress (Minke & Scott, 1993; Ollison Floyd & Vernon-Dotson, 2009; Porter, 2008).

Further Factors Impacting on Home–School Collaboration

A range of variables, including cultural, linguistic, socioeconomic and historical factors (Tomlinson, 1996; Wolfendale, 2000), that impact on home–school partnerships have been identified in the research (Christenson, Godber, & Anderson, 2005; Dhillon, 2009). Porter (2008) and Todd (2003) have noted that schools may construct a view of parents as a 'homogenous group' with similar values, whereas in reality parents are diverse individuals. They vary in beliefs, values (Brassett-Grundy, 2004; Bynner, 2004), ethnicity, linguistic (Harry, 2008), cultural (de Carvalho, 2001), educational and socioeconomic background (Reay, 2009) and individual life experiences. Additionally, among the broader group of parents, further differences arise between parents of students who have no perceived special needs and parents of students with learning barriers (Ollison Floyd & Vernon-Dotson, 2009; Porter, 2008). Parents of students with learning barriers will have faced challenges relating specifically to their child's individual disability or barrier (Lake & Billingsley, 2000; Turnbull & Turnbull, 1990; Williams & Pritchard, 2006). Moreover, there can be a distinct difference to the relationships of parents of students with learning barriers and their teachers and the partnerships that follow:

> Many parents of children with special educational needs are required, by the need to liase [sic] with teachers over the assessment and education of their child, to have a relationship with schools that is different to that of other parents, and one which they may not wish to have. (Todd, 2003, p. 284)

Thus the factors outlined above may complicate a common understanding of partnership (Porter, 2008).

The Role of Parents in Collaborative Partnerships

An additional factor that also impacts on home–school partnerships includes the role of parents (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Parental involvement and home–school

partnerships between the parents of children with special needs and school personnel has had a complex history (Todd, 2003). The parents of students with learning barriers may face extra challenges around role expectations and home–school partnerships. Many parents will have been presented with a variety of professional perspectives from educators, specialists and practitioners on exactly what comprises their educative role since their child first entered formal education (see Gartner et al., 1991; Tomlinson, 1996; Turnbull & Turnbull, 1990). These perspectives sometimes represent professional opinions and specialised knowledge relating back to earlier historical and medical models used by both medical professionals and schools (Porter, 2008). Educators influenced by these beliefs may adopt a 'deficit model' regarding the family's values and practices, structuring and controlling the way parents participate and engage with their child's education according to these beliefs (Porter, 2008). Thus conceptions of the parental role for the child with learning barriers may be both more complex and less consistent than the roles usually attributed to parents through social and educational norms and views (Harry, 2008; Tomlinson, 1996).

Teacher Values and Beliefs: How These May Influence Home–School Partnerships

Research indicates that teacher values may also be significantly different from those of parents (de Carvalho, 2001; Desforges, 2003; Slee 1995). While teachers will vary as individuals in their perspectives, they also represent a professional culture and work within specific environments and backgrounds that promote or support explicit professional values and behaviours (de Carvalho, 2001; Patrick, 2007; Porter, 2008). Institutional cultures and professional discourses can privilege the views of dominant groups (Connell, Ashendon, Kessler, & Dowsett, 1982; Reay, 2009), consequently representing specific political and social agendas that do not necessarily support equality in partnerships or a broad perspective on what constitutes involvement (Porter, 2008; Slee, 1995).

Boundaries Between Home and School

Boundary setting is required in any distinct role construction or partnership (Biddle, 1979). Establishing boundaries between school and home may present complications due to the particular challenges that impact on the daily lives of the families of students with learning barriers (Harry, 2008; Lake & Billingsley, 2000). As both McCarthy and Kirkpatrick (2005) and Reay (2005) report in their study of private and public negotiations in home–school interactions, there are considerable variations in parental interpretation regarding boundaries between home and school. However, once home is viewed as an extension of the school, or part of the range of the medical or the therapists' professional advice, then home, it could be argued, becomes a 'public' site and subject to professional scrutiny. This blurring of boundaries is not an uncommon feature, past and present, of partnerships between professionals and the parents of students with learning barriers (de Carvalho, 2001; Fylling & Sandvin, 1999; Todd, 2003; Tomlinson, 1996; Turnbull & Turnbull, 1990). Parents may be especially sensitive to being categorised or labelled from a 'deficit perspective' by the teacher or other school personnel (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Porter, 2008) and reluctant to subject themselves or their child to potential disapproval or judgment (de Carvalho, 2001; Fylling & Sandvin, 1999; Reay, 2009; Vincent & Tomlinson, 1997).

An example of this can be seen when schools and teachers seek to mandate specific approaches to homework management for students. Parents may interpret this homework obligation as an external control imposed on the family by the school: one that attempts to control how the family manage and utilise their private time and resources (McCarthy &

Kirkpatrick, 2005; Porter, 2008). Other impositions can occur when teachers seek to advise parents on the management of their child in the home, seeing this as a legitimate extension of their role as educators (Porter, 2008; Reay, 2005). Thus complications to home–school partnerships may occur when teachers and parents fail to establish guidelines regarding role expectations (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005), or to adopt a suitable model for their collaboration together (Porter, 2008).

The Need to Identify Processes That Will Support Collaborative Partnerships

Given all of these factors, identifying what both parties recognise as suitable processes to assist with the development of a collaborative partnership, and clarifying the specific teacher and parent roles within this, may enable both parents and teachers to play a more active and empowered role in the student's education (Desforges, 2003; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Porter, 2008). Improved processes that define and support good communication practices between home and school, with clear boundaries and protocols for collaboration, may contribute positively to the wellbeing of the child and enhance overall learning outcomes (Brassett-Grundy, 2004; Delgado-Gaitan, 1990; Desforges, 2003; Porter, 2008).

Methodology

This study explored the topic using qualitative research methodologies within an interpretative research paradigm (Bassey, 1999). A multiple instrumental case study design (Creswell, 2005) was selected for this study, which focused on participants' beliefs and personal understandings using a central line of inquiry: identifying parent and teacher roles as they are experienced by individual participants. This aligned with the aims of the study, which centred on how participants construct and enact their roles in partnerships (Siedman, 1991). This was a focused study over a small and defined population within a specific research site. Nevertheless, the research design enabled the exploration of participant beliefs around roles and home–school partnerships in some depth (Lichtman, 2010), offering insights into parent and teacher perceptions of the research problem (Aspland, 2003; Bassey, 1999; Tuettemann, 2003). The research site selected was a Catholic secondary school located in a regional city in Australia. The school serviced a mixed demographic within the community, including students from a range of socioeconomic groups. The school's status on the Index for Socio-Economic Advantage (ICSEA) was valued at 1033, placing it in the median range for Catholic Schools in Australia (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2010).

Sample Groups

Data were obtained from two sample groups. Group 1 included parents and primary caregivers; a total of four sets of parents participated in this group. The ages of parent participants ranged from 40 to 60 years. The other relevant criterion for this group stipulated that participants had a background of interactions and collaboration with teachers working within the Catholic Education System for at least one year prior to participation. These characteristics were deemed relevant, as the study focused on parents of students with learning barriers as representing groups who have a background of collaborative partnerships with teachers in the Catholic system. As it happened, parent participant data included references to a variety of schools their children had attended and were not restricted to their interactions with the specific research site.

Teacher participants were recruited from a large range of teachers working at the research site who had taught a student with learning barriers. Sixty-five teachers were sent an expression of interest letter. Groups excluded from recruitment included new teachers, those who had reported directly to the researcher and teachers who held a position of senior leadership within the research site. These groups were excluded in order to minimise any potential conflicts of interest or imbalance of power relationships between researcher and teachers. Three teachers of five years or more experience, participated in the study, with ages ranging between 28 years to 55 years. As a key aim of the study was to review the perspectives of teachers working with students and families over a period of time, the research design specified that teachers participating needed to be fully registered, thus operating within a base level of professional competency and standards.[3]

All participants were invited to participate in the project through letters circulated to a wider sample group. Participants, who responded to expression of interest letters and who met the sample criteria previously listed, were contacted by phone and e-mail, and then sent an information package including a plain language statement and formal consent forms. The ethics application specified that participation in the study was voluntary and outlined that participants could withdraw from the process at any time. Two of the three teacher participants had worked specifically with the children of parents participating in the study. However, this factor was not revealed or made apparent to any participants in accordance with privacy and ethical requirements. The Deakin University Ethics Committee, through the School of Education Subcommittee, approved the research project.

Data Collection

Parent and teacher participants were given semistructured, open-ended interviews (Yin, 2009) based on a 'shared understanding' paradigm (Ryan, 2006) using interview protocols. The protocols reflected the initial research questions and were used as a guide to encourage discussion, rather than as a survey designed to contain all information within specific parameters (Yin, 2009). Thus protocols were used in the manner suggested by Seidman (1991), providing a structure to the interviews that ensured that key themes within the research questions were addressed. The interview questions in the protocols focused on unpacking and expanding on the three main research questions posed in the study (although protocol questions were composed in 'plain language' for participants):

1. How do parents and teachers understand and construct their roles in collaborative partnerships?
2. What practices contribute to effective partnerships for parents and teachers of students with learning barriers?
3. What operational processes can schools use to develop effective partnerships?

Initially, recommendations from Aspland (2003), Lichtman (2010) and Tuettemann (2003) on minimising the use of structure in interviews had been followed. However, it became clear that using the interview protocols helped to develop participants' views, as well as refocusing the direction of interviews when appropriate. Employing the qualitative research methodologies of multiple instrumental case studies, interpretative paradigms and 'shared understanding' enhanced the generation of 'rich data' (Bui, 2009; Lichtman, 2010; Ryan, 2006). All participants were encouraged to explore responses beyond the protocol questions, where appropriate (Biddle, 1979; Yin 2009).

After interviews had been conducted, audio-recorded and transcribed, validity through triangulation was established by crosschecking data for repetition of key themes and

comparing data from primary data, including participant recordings, transcriptions and interview notes, with secondary data, which included research findings and theories (Creswell, 2005; Delgado-Gaitan, 1990; Ryan, 2006; Tuettemann, 2003). As recommended by Bassey (1999) and Phillips (1990), this process enabled the researcher to establish some critical distance from the data. Six major themes and patterns emerged from these sets of data. These included (a) beliefs and attributions (Biddle, 1979; Pajares, 1992), (b) shared knowledge (Lake & Billingsley, 2000; Pajares, 1992), (c) barriers (Reay, 2009), (d) transitions (DEEWR, 2008), (e) communications (Epstein, Sanders, & Simon, 2002; Leithwood, 2009), and (f) involvement (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Smit & Driessen, 2009).

The majority of data could be categorised into these themes and patterns, which overlapped to some extent in a manner similar to the 'theory of overlapping spheres of influence' presented in Epstein's six types model (Epstein et al., 2002, p. 1). A data chart was created for each participant interview, which coded and categorised data from transcripts in order to preserve the anonymity of participants. The interview protocols and prompts had been structured around the three research questions, so the researcher was able to record participant responses to the research questions. Reflecting on the topics outlined in the protocols enabled participants to clarify their beliefs and understanding regarding individual parent–teacher roles and the partnerships that had been formed. A primary objective of the interviews was to enable participants to comment on personal experiences (Aspland, 2003; Phillips, 1990; Tuettemann, 2003). Thus the case study design allowed the researcher to include 'thick descriptions' so that participants' experiences could be included holistically in results and discussion chapters (Bui, 2009; Phillips, 1990). By reflecting on and testing personal interpretations and assumptions during interviews, and through coding and categorising processes used after transcribing the data, the researcher attempted to reduce personal biases that could influence the study's results (Bassey, 1999; Tuettemann, 2003). Charted data were then compared to previous research findings to assist with triangulation and validation of the research findings (Bassey, 1999; Lichtman, 2010; Ryan, 2006). An analysis and interpretation of the data was then constructed using subheadings that reflected the primary research concerns. These focused on the beliefs, understandings and practices outlined by parent and teacher participants. Examples, taken from participant responses, were included in the results and analysis sections of the study to support and validate overall findings.

Findings and Discussion

How do Teachers and Parents Understand, Construct and Interpret Parental Involvement?

From the data findings outlined above, analysis revealed that both parents and teachers understood and acknowledged that parental involvement was a significant factor in achieving sound educational outcomes for children with learning barriers. They also identified involvement as an integral aspect of the parent's role in the home–school partnership. However, differences emerged as to the nature and expression of parental involvement between the parent and teacher groups in the study. These differences centred on how participants construed parental roles and responsibilities (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005) and the beliefs and practices that underpinned these constructions (Pajares, 1992).

Overall, the data supported Biddle's (1979) finding that roles in successful partnerships need to be 'context' not 'person' oriented. When discussing roles, all participants focused on the practices, processes and activities related to involvement, rather than on the

specific qualities of individuals. When participants discussed individuals they found either particularly helpful or those who they believed contributed to tensions in the partnership, they described the level of involvement of the individual and their ability and willingness to communicate effectively, and to listen to and to act on the knowledge shared in order to support the learning of the child in question.

Parent Beliefs and Understandings of Involvement and How it Influences Roles and Partnerships

Parents viewed themselves as highly involved in their child's education in a variety of ways, using activities listed below as key strategies to enhance their child's progress. Parental understanding of involvement included supervision of homework or 'home learning' (extracurricular activities not connected with school), attendance at meetings, and other formal parent–teacher events and communications (Epstein et al., 2002). Their understanding of involvement did not include extensive participation in school events and activities such as volunteering or attendance at extracurricular activities, as defined by Smit and Driessen (2009). Nor did they indicate that they believed that these participatory practices supported the development of learning partnerships (Deslandes, 2009a). However, parents did believe that involvement, as it related to their role in a learning partnership, included initiating contact with the school, communication with the teacher regarding their child's needs, participating in meetings, and sharing knowledge. Parents made comments such as:

> I just think the best way to resolve and help these children is simply communication. Try to understand the problem and communication and the willingness of both parties to listen to the other. (Parent W)

> I was constantly going back to the new teacher, sitting down and having to explain things over and over again just to get him settled. And it was . . . very difficult. (Parent W)

> I suppose . . . [with] the academic and pastoral participation of her learning . . . [to] communicate with the people about Jenny's involvement and hopefully, they will return that communication and exchange ideas. (Parent X)

> I spoke to the teachers right . . . and I gave them some ideas on how you could deal with Daniel . . . And they picked it [up] and I could hear them picking it up and writing it down, you know, oh yeah that's a good idea you know . . . I'll keep that in mind next time I do that. (Parent Z)

The parents cited above used practices such as monitoring processes and communication with the teacher as strategies to support their child (Deslandes, 2009b) through assisting the teacher to differentiate the curriculum and manage other aspects of the child's learning program (Lawrence-Brown, 2004).

Teacher Beliefs and Understandings of Involvement and How it Influences Roles and Partnerships

Teacher participants believed that successful parental roles in partnerships were fulfilled by those parents who assisted with the student's organisation for school, communicated promptly about homework and behavioural concerns or classroom learning, provided information regarding the student's needs and history and who participated in school events, thus increasing their involvement with the school. Their beliefs and understandings around types of parental involvement focused more on the participatory aspects of school–family partnership models, including elements such as volunteering, communications, community involvement, homework support, participating on councils, and in parenting

skills workshops (Epstein et al., 2002). These findings are also supported by the research (Chavkin, 2005; Deslandes, 2009a; Leithwood, 2009; Smit & Driessen, 2009). Teacher expectations for parents therefore focused on participatory activities and practices that parents engaged in primarily to support their own child. However, these practices quite clearly also supported the whole school community.

Differences Between Parent and Teacher Constructions of Parental Role

Key factors that differentiated parent and teacher perspectives on parental role fulfilment were the differing beliefs between parents and teachers around the practices of communicating, sharing knowledge and information, and developing strategies to support the child's learning. It is important to note at this point that the small group of parents and teachers who volunteered to participate in this study were a relatively homogenous group representing White, Anglo-Celtic Australian backgrounds with occupations in the small business, services or educational sectors. Issues of diversity from perspectives other than that of disability or learning barriers did not appear to be a factor that impacted on participants. Therefore, in this study, these differences cannot be necessarily attributed to differences in class and education (Reay, 2009), ethnicity (Delgado-Gaitan, 1990; Harry, 2008), or other expectations related to diversity and background (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). Nevertheless, there remained small differences in how parents and teachers interpreted the role of the parent and of the teacher in learning partnerships and what they believed constituted effective collaboration. These small differences appeared to contribute to tensions within partnerships.

Teacher Beliefs Regarding Barriers to Effective Collaboration and Participation

Teachers described barriers that included school and system procedures, physical barriers of access to the site (and resources) and advocated processes that expedited effective transmission of information and communications, such as use of technology. They also discussed ineffective communications between parents and teachers, but did not attribute these to personal behaviours and actions carried out by teachers or to teacher participation, tending instead to blame ineffective operational processes within the school. Teachers believed that communication and transmission of information could be a problem when particular concerns with the child's learning, organisation or behaviour arose in the classroom. However, overall they believed that the teacher's role was to access expert information relating to the child's barriers or disability and participate in the school's IEP meetings and subsequent program. The teacher participants preferred to access background information on the specific learning barrier(s) from relevant staff, before communicating with parents; practices that appear to be common to many teachers (Lake & Billingsley, 2000).

> *I don't just assume I know the background of the child . . . of that child, and so being informed is really important to me. My first step will be what has gone on in the background of the child. (Teacher 1)*

> *I think firstly, it's probably not got so much to do with parents but firstly I need to understand what their needs are . . . For example if they have, um a syndrome, or if they have special literacy needs or whatever it may be . . . I think I need to understand what that is first and strategies I could use to help and after that I think it's important that I keep in contact with the parents through the IEP process that we have at school. (Teacher 2)*

They discussed the need to access background information to assist in the management of behavioural as well as learning concerns. This might include an account of the child or family's previous difficulties that might be perceived to impact on the child's current

circumstances. However, teachers did not explicitly indicate that they believed disclosure of personal information might infringe boundaries between school and home, be overly intrusive or contribute to further tensions in the partnerships, as discussed by de Carvalho (2001), McCarthy and Kirkpatrick (2005), or Reay (2005).[4]

Parent Beliefs Regarding Barriers to Effective Collaboration and Participation

On the other hand, parent participants held different beliefs around barriers to partnerships and outlined strategies to address these. In many respects their beliefs supported the broad findings outlined by Bastiani (2000) on parental expectations. Bastiani noted that parental beliefs around improving collaborative partnerships and operational processes centred mainly on effective communication processes between home and school. These processes included sharing knowledge about the student's learning, and the development of useful strategies to reduce learning barriers, particularly those around key transitions in the student's schooling. Parents viewed this process as a two-way communication flow, a factor supported by Porter's findings (2008), and attributed some barriers to effective operational processes stemming from teachers receiving information from home, professional agencies or previous teachers, but not passing this information on to appropriate personnel working with the child. Parents also believed that teachers did not always reciprocate with information or share their professional knowledge and expertise with parents. The comments below illustrate the perspectives of two parents on school operational processes and teacher communications.

> We ah, still have issues every year with Janice and the individual teachers not knowing exactly what Janice has and a requirement in the classroom situation. Every year that is the same issue. (Parent Y)

> And I'm thinking why didn't this teacher, third or fourth week back, pick up the phone and say this isn't working. How can I connect with Daniel? Or just find something out by speaking to us, not like, by sending a piece of paper home. You know it's very sterile — that piece of paper! (Parent Z)

Parent and Teacher Beliefs and Understandings Regarding Operational Processes to Support Effective Partnerships

Parents and teachers held similar perspectives endorsing the value of schools changing or implementing alternative operational processes to support more effective partnerships. Such operational processes included, for example, the use of technology to communicate more effectively and different ways of instituting and following up on IEP meetings and programs, especially with regard to the student's transition from one year level or group of teachers to another. However, once again, there were some key differences between both groups.

Teacher participants discussed different processes or strategies that schools and systems might implement to reduce barriers around information and communications. These consisted of developing processes for the transmission of information through technology and reviewing current processes for transmission of school-based information regarding student needs.

> I think email has been fantastic for me with parents. You just click and it's very easy and immediate. So yeah, it would be good if the school started to look at how we can ... and certainly we are, at our school using SMS for [assignments] and email as well. But I definitely think that's the way to go. (Teacher B)

They also believed that the school could provide increased opportunities for parents to participate informally in school events (Deslandes, 2009a) and increased opportunities to access information and support to assist them to fulfil their roles as parents (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005).

> There would be that support group for parents, who get together and come in and . . . just talk about what issues they are having . . . not always, but if there is an issue then there is someone to listen to and someone else to talk to, how did you go about this and how did you get ready for camp? (Teacher A)

> I would like to have an on-school website . . . A section for different needs groups and one of which would be parents . . . and there might be information, links to resources . . . Just tips on how they might engage with their young people. (Teacher C)

On the whole, teacher beliefs around suitable operational processes and provisions for effective home–school partnerships affirm the systemic recommendations found in policy documents such as the Australian Government's 'Family-Schools Partnerships Framework' (DEEWR, 2008), recommending whole-school processes and programs which provide specific opportunities to encourage parental participation in school activities and supportive processes for interactions between teachers and parents.

The practices that parents believed would assist in reducing these barriers included schools and teachers communicating relevant information about the child in a timely fashion, providing information on their learning needs, and, ensuring that useful strategies were exchanged between schools, teachers and parents at the beginning and end of each school year. These are noted as key factors contributing to tensions in communications, as outlined in Leithwood's (2009) meta-analysis examining parental involvement and home–school communications, and in the findings of Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2005) and Lake and Billingsley (2000). Parents attributed successful transmission of such information as an effective strategy in redressing learning barriers and assisting the transition process. Parents did not appear to attribute barriers to communications and knowledge sharing to school control mechanisms or power struggles, such as those outlined by McCarthy and Kirkpatrick (2005) or Reay (2009). Nevertheless, their comments revealed that such concerns between home and school still caused parents considerable frustration at times (Lake & Billingsley, 2000; McCarthy & Kirkpatrick, 2005). For parent participants, improvement in the processes outlined above would ensure that the successful education of their child did not rely solely on individual teacher quality, which varied considerably, and, as one parent pointed out, was impossible to control.

> The personnel can come and go but the actual program or intent of the [program] should always be to . . . [support]. You just get to know somebody and to rely on them and then suddenly they're not there anymore. (Parent Y)

Limitations of the Study

There are limitations to this study that need to be taken into account when reviewing results and making recommendations. These include the size and scope of the study and the lack of diversity in the sample. Participants had been initially sourced from a broad sample of parents and teachers. However, the participants who volunteered to participate represented a small and homogenous group. Thus, tensions in home–school relations connected to ethnicity, socioeconomic status or class (Harry, 2008; Reay, 2009), or cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Delgado-Gaitan, 1990) did not form part of the study's focus. While the use of qualitative research methods allowed the exploration of aspects of participants' beliefs in some depth (Aspland, 2003; Bassey, 1999), the size and scale of the study

imposed restrictions on how far findings could be generalised and applied to a wider population or more diverse sample (Lichtman, 2010). Additionally, a future study that utilised a variety of measurement instruments involving both qualitative and quantitative methodologies would assist in identifying more specifically how collaborative learning partnerships influence student learning outcomes. In particular, an extended study over a broader population could evaluate the impact of improved operational processes on home–school partnerships, highlighting whether these processes helped to resolve tensions between parents and teachers. Research questions for a future study might include: What models of partnership could schools use to improve outcomes for students? How do partnerships impact on student learning outcomes in the long term? Do teachers and schools recognise and value parent perceptions of their child's learning style? A practical focus could also explore whether the processes that schools implement to support such partnerships are sustainable and equitable in the long term for both parents and teachers.

Conclusion

This study on the ways in which teachers and parents construct parent roles found that parents and teachers valued the idea of improving school operational processes to support transitions in the child's education and the communication of information concerning the child's learning needs. However, the study also identified ongoing partnership tensions experienced by parents and teachers of students with learning barriers.

There were key differences to how parents and teachers both defined and envisioned solutions to current barriers. For example, parents and teachers expressed different beliefs and understandings about the types of information shared between home and school, as well as how and when the information was communicated. Parents and teachers also held differing beliefs about which operational processes needed improvement and how these processes could be improved.

Teachers explicitly subscribed to the belief of the significance of parental involvement to individual student outcomes and valued opportunities to collaborate with parents. However, they believed that parents needed more opportunities to become involved in school events and that schools could implement more processes to increase such opportunities. Their understanding supported practices recommended for increased parental participation in positive home–school partnerships found in models such as Epstein's six types (Epstein et al., 2002) and the Australian Government's 'Family-School Partnerships Framework' (DEEWR, 2008). Yet despite subscribing to best-practice rhetoric, teacher participants did not appear to place an explicit value on parents as a significant source of knowledge regarding the child's access to the learning program or the child's learning style.

Parents, however, perceived barriers in collaborative partnerships occurred due to individual teacher effectiveness regarding communication and a lack of preparedness to work with parents to share and develop knowledge around practices to support the child in order to develop an appropriate individualised learning program. Furthermore, parents did not explicitly subscribe to the belief that increased involvement or participation with the school in the ways outlined by teachers in the study, or those presented in family–school partnership literature, would affect or reduce the barriers they experienced. For parent participants the problems appeared to be both personalised and operational in their scope. Teachers did not appear to listen or mutually form what parents understood as a 'partnership' that was grounded in established practice and shared knowledge. Furthermore, school operational processes, at times, fell short of stated expectations.

Teacher participants also appeared to value and prioritise parental participation in school activities such as homework monitoring, organisation, volunteering and attendance at events. However, parent participants placed more value on involvement in educational practices that provided information to assist individualised curriculum differentiation, through attendance and participation in parent–teacher interviews, IEP and other meetings.

The size and scope of this study, as discussed in the limitations section, means that findings are tentative and to some extent raise more questions than provide answers. However, results do highlight that while schools and teachers certainly understand the need for, and enthusiastically espouse the rhetoric of, collaboration, parents are still waiting to further progress such partnerships. Furthermore, while both parties in partnerships differ in their definition, their beliefs, understandings and processes underpinning the different aspects of home–school partnerships, it will be difficult for schools to address issues of tensions productively, or to provide concrete solutions in practice. It would appear that there is still work to be done between teachers and parents, family and school, for collaborative partnerships to result in positive educational outcomes for the student with learning barriers.

Author note

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Endnotes

1   The Queensland Department of Education, for example, only mandates IEPs for those students with disabilities who access an early childhood program or service (Queensland Government, Department of Education, 2011).
2   For example, the creation of an IEP through meetings, creation of formalised goals, plans and strategies, implementation in the classroom and then formal periodic review from the IEP committee, including parents, teachers and supporting professionals, would form one of the operational processes many schools use to support students with learning barriers.
3   These standards were taken from the Tasmanian Teachers Registration Board's website document outlining standards for competent teachers (http://www.trb.tas.gov.au/Web%20Pages/Teaching%20Standards.aspx).
4   See also Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Epstein, 2002; Hoover Dempsey et al., 2005; and Leithwood, 2009.

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