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Teachers' views of Parental Involvement in the Schooling of Low Literacy Refugee and Migrant Children: An Australian Study

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Abstract

This article reports on a research project that aimed to explore teachers' perspectives on parental involvement at a Melbourne based primary school with a high number of refugee and migrant children. Despite the acknowledged value of parental involvement in a child's schooling, we have found that parents are not always viewed as a valuable resource in the education of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) students, especially in the case of refugee background students. In order to contextualise teacher perspectives, semi-structured interviews were used as the main source of qualitative data collection. In addition to the interviews, the school website and observations of the school context were qualitatively analysed, which allowed for a more wholistic understanding of the matter. The results indicate that evidence of parental involvement and links to the children's home lives was low due to teachers' work demands and also culturally specific mindsets common in the school. This continued lack of opportunity for participation resulted in the marginalisation of parents, which appears to be largely unapparent to the teachers. The findings of this research project, therefore, encourage teachers to involve themselves in reflection and training to value and ultimately establish balanced relationships between the school community and parents.

Keywords: *parental involvement, parental engagement, CALD students, refugee students*

Australian schools are diversifying at a rapid rate with an increasing number of students coming from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) backgrounds, including from refugee and humanitarian programs (Windle & Miller, 2012). Such diversities, which are vastly different from those traditionally found in many Australian schools, often result in teachers and schools misunderstanding the cultural backgrounds of the children and their families (Matthews, 2008), leading to a lack of parent-school partnerships and the exclusion of parents from the school community through the limited opportunities available for their participation and voice.

As parents are the first and prominent educators of their children and instrumental in making valuable contributions to their education, we see it as important that teachers and schools invest in, and value partnerships with parents. Along the same lines, research has established that parental engagement in children's schooling is positively associated with students' academic outcomes (Anicama, Zhou, & Ly, 2018; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995; St. Clair, Jackson, & Zweiback, 2012; Toldson & Lemmons, 2013), better schooling experiences (Christianakis, 2011), High School completion, and pursuing higher education (Cheung & Pomerantz, 2011; Hill & Diamond, 2013; Jeynes, 2012; Park, Stone, & Holloway, 2017; Wilder, 2014). Parents also develop confidence, literacy skills, and sense of community through the space granted by schools (Lowe, Martens, Hannett, & Tunks, 2009). However, they can be an undervalued and underutilised resource in the education of children despite parental engagement having many advantages for children, school professionals, and teachers (Leithwood, 2010; Linek, Rasiniski, & Harkins, 1997). The multitude of marginalising effects that such underuse may have on parents can be unapparent to teachers and schools and therefore become commonplace taken-for-granted and continue in the daily workings of even the most well-intentioned schools.

This article reports on a research project carried out to investigate teachers' understandings of parental engagement from diverse CALD families. The intention is to highlight the ways in which teacher perspectives of parental engagement can inform and shape how they perceive the role of refugee background parents in the schooling of their children.

Literature Review

We define parental engagement as parents' partnerships with schools in a "regular, two-way, and meaningful communication involving student learning and other school activities" (Jeynes, 2012) in order to benefit children's educational outcomes and future success (Hill & Diamond, 2013). More precisely, parental engagement involves parents, teachers, and schools working in a partnered relationship where there is mutual understanding and respect for one another's vision, goals, identity, and culture so that things can be done to benefit children in both short- and long-terms. This partnered relationship, which involves equitable distribution of power, differs from a one-way communication between teachers/school professionals and parents. In this paper, we call such one-way participation of parents in the schooling of children, 'parental involvement', as opposed to 'parental engagement' (Pushor & Amendt, 2018). Some examples of parental involvement include one-way parent-teacher interviews (teachers *tell* parents about their children rather than engage in a dialogue with parents), parents helping out on sports days, parent evening nights, and attending concerts. An important characteristic of these examples is that the school has complete control over the type and degree of parental participation as well as the flow of information (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014; Pushor & Amendt, 2018). As Bryk and Schneider (2002) argue, it appears the school and teachers would be reluctant to build a trusting relationship with parents when teachers and parents are socially distant and come from different backgrounds.

In the case of English Language Learners (ELL), in addition to the language barrier, there is likely to be some mismatches between teachers' and parents' expectations of schooling and how these expectations are represented in their interactions with students (Cremin, Mottram, Collins, Powell, & Drury, 2012). For example, some immigrant parents might hold a more instrumental view of school and have high expectations for the educational achievements of their children while the school and teachers might have different expectations from parents and their children. Added to this potential mismatch is the vast diversity that exists among immigrant parents who come from a wide range of backgrounds. If this complexity is not addressed through establishing mutual "links between home and school," (Cremin et al., 2012, p. 102), it can contribute to the underachievement of some minority groups. Parental engagement is, therefore, necessary to establish mutual and meaningful "links between home and school," (Cremin et al., 2012, p. 102) that build on the existing practices and understandings or "funds of knowledge" (Gonzalez et al., 1995, p. 445) in homes and communities to raise teacher perceptions of families' engagement practices, break the boundaries between communities and schools, and encourage the flow of cultural patterns (Heath, 1983).

The more recent cohort of refugees in Australian schools is mainly from Africa and the Middle East. The education of students from these areas is of concern because (some) Australian teachers might know little about their historical and cultural backgrounds and the effects of interrupted schooling, lack of previous schooling, and the traumas they may have faced (Matthews, 2008). Moreover, there is a wide range of experiences refugee children and their families bring when adjusting to their new country, community and school which significantly impacts on the child's emotional and social wellbeing and consequently their education (Cairo, Sunney, Blackman, & Joyner, 2012). Hence, creating a bridge between the home and school of these children through school and family partnerships can have positive effects on the education of all, irrespective of their backgrounds. An important implication of this is that parental engagement is a valuable resource (Lowe et al., 2009) that supports teachers and promotes positive teacher perceptions of parental engagement and not an added burden to the day to day work of teachers.

CALD parents could in some cases feel intimidated or threatened within the school context and may therefore appear as "invisible parents" (Lowe et al., 2009, p. 2), being perceived as not interested in their child's education or not having the ability to support their child's academic needs (Christianakis, 2011). On the contrary, many refugee background and low socioeconomic families hold great aspirations for their children to succeed (Hill & Diamond, 2013; Morrow & Young, 1997) as they see education the key to changing their status and improving their children's lives (Auerbach, 1989). A study by Jordan, Snow and Porche (2011) has shown that CALD background parents not only welcome opportunities to participate in supporting their children's school success but are willing to receive training in how to do this effectively. As the teacher narratives in Cremin et al.'s (2012) study imply, teachers are often unaware of the rich literacy experiences within family homes until parent-teacher relationships are built and communications develop.

Most teachers recognise the importance of families on a child's academic, social, and personal development (Leithwood, 2010; Linek et al., 1997) and believe that parents should be partners in their child's education (Mandel Morrow & Young, 1997); however, there continues to be a gap in the value teachers hold of parental engagement and their practices in school communities (Lowe et al., 2009). This inconsistency between teachers' values and practices may reflect lack

of teacher readiness to practice inclusive partnerships with parents from CALD backgrounds. Studies report on teachers' feelings of unpreparedness to deal with the social and emotional needs of children, being unfamiliar with adequate EAL teaching strategies, and effectively connecting with the parents of these children (Szente, Hoot, & Taylor, 2006).

These, in turn, cause the teachers to lament a perceived lack of available support children from low literacy migrant families receive from their parents. In their view, this restricts the activities teachers feel they are able to send home and the amount of regular practice and reinforcement of school-like activities that they can expect students to have outside school (Christianakis, 2011). Further obstacles affecting teachers' assumptions of parental engagement are teachers concerns regarding parents' lack of reading and writing skills and the recollection of previous negative experiences in actively involving families (Linek et al., 1997).

Some writers report teachers' lack of reflection on how they could "broaden their conceptions" of parental engagement (Christianakis, 2011, p. 173). This then reinforces stereotypes and teachers' subsequent reluctance to support parental engagement. Although this would not be true for all teachers, we believe that not questioning teachers' taken-for-granted understandings about parents and their potential for engagement can present a significant obstacle in creating partnerships with parents. This study revealed evidence of such understandings. It attempted to understand how teachers' current views impact the direction of a parental partnership program.

The questions we asked in this study were:

1. What are teachers' perspectives of parental involvement at a Melbourne based primary school with a high number of refugee and migrant children?
2. How did teachers' perspectives on the involvement of refugee and migrant parents impact the direction of a parental partnership program?

Research Design

The site and the teacher participants

The school, where the study was conducted, was a government primary school in South East Melbourne. Of the almost 600 students, 81% spoke languages other than English at home and 42% were in the bottom quarter on the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage scale (ACARA, 2013). The school also ran a comprehensive EAL program for those students who had low literacy skills in their home language and English.

The four interviewed teachers were all White monolingual English-speaking female teachers. As well as their willingness to participate on the study, these teachers were selected as they had a good understanding of how the school experienced parental engagement. More information on the teachers is provided in Table 1 below:

Table 1. Data on interviewees

Teacher	Age range	Role at the school	Work experience
Sally	Early thirties	Grade 2 teacher	Taught only at the school for 6 years
Charlotte	Early thirties	Prep teacher	Taught only at the school for 7 years
Rebecca	Early fifties	EAL Coordinator	Worked at the school for 2 years, previously taught at a language school for 17 years
Natasha	Early thirties	Grade 5 teacher & grades 5 and 6 area coordinator	Taught only at the school for 7 years

An email invitation was initially sent out to the teachers explaining the research process, highlighting that the interviews were not to be used as an evaluation of their teaching or opinions. Participants were also assured that confidentiality would be maintained through the use of pseudonyms for both the teachers and the school. To confirm that this information was clear, the teachers gave written consent to the written explanations.

Data collection and analysis

Interviews were chosen as the main method of data collection as interviews are an effective way to explore emotions, beliefs, problems and actions in qualitative research (Yin, 2015). Through revealing participants' emotions, beliefs, problems and actions, we were able to understand the participants' experiences and the meanings they attributed to those experiences (Eggenberger & Nelms, 2007). A flexible list of questions provided a guide of topics to be covered yet allowed the freedom to probe and explore arising issues, question spontaneously, and build conversations with the participants (Patton, 2015). This semi-structured approach made it possible to follow up on the teachers' answers to better understand the responses from their perspectives, especially the unexpected ones. The interviews were, hence, a social encounter where knowledge was jointly constructed through interactions of the researcher with the teachers (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003). The audio-recorded interviews were conducted at the school at a time that was convenient to the teachers.

Non-participant observation was used as another method of data collection. For example, the first author observed the extent to which and how parents were involved within the school life in the classrooms and the administration spaces. Analysis of the school website and the newsletters within it was carried out to further understand how the school communicated to parents (via this site) and to identify family programs they were offering.

The verbatim transcriptions from the interviews were analysed using Grounded theory coding (Charmaz, 2006). In doing so, lines and segments of each interview were coded into general categories, which helped highlight broad patterns of some of the fundamental processes and hidden assumptions (Charmaz, 2006) involved in the way parent involvement is practiced and perceived by teachers in the school. At the next stage, analysis focused on the meanings behind what and who the teacher participants perceived to be the cause of issues in parent involvement, the possible solutions to the issues, and how these affected the teachers' practice (Charmaz, 2006).

The themes and categories collected from interview transcripts were collated and compared across participants along with relevant materials from the school website analysis to portray the complex image of parental involvement under study (Creswell, 2007).

Findings

The school's structures and culture

The school, as a whole, experienced no parental engagement and only minimal parent involvement as part of their daily practice. The teachers explained that the school had developed programs and implemented staffing structures to counter this lack of involvement, but there was little evidence that measures were in place to evaluate the effectiveness of these programs that replaced parent involvement. As a result, connections between the children's home and the school were minimal and parents remained on the periphery of the school community. For example, the school had a strong ethos of employing a large number of aides within the classroom to support teachers. Although the hired aides also had further responsibilities, they were partly employed with the intention of replacing some of the work that parents in other schools or in the past were often seen to be doing, such as changing the students' readers and listening to children read. The availability of aide support within the classrooms created the assumption amongst teachers, students, and parents, that parents were no longer required or invited to support the children in the classroom setting.

Similarly, programs as the "Reading Factory" had been implemented by the school in response to perceived inadequate parent involvement at home. This daily program was developed to support nominated students from years Prep to Grade Three who were not meeting the required government standard benchmarks in their reading. The program was successful in improving children's reading attainment levels; however, it did not aim to connect the current literacy practices within a child's home to those practiced at school. As the program was run at school, parents were not invited to observe the program and learn reading support strategies to continue at home.

The school also ran a well-recognised and successful in-school EAL program, supporting newly arrived children's language acquisition needs. The teachers in this program aimed to find out some information from the students about their backgrounds and lived experiences once their English competence allowed them to do so. Nonetheless, the first author's observations revealed that links between the school practices and those at home were not emphasised during this program, nor were parents involved during this early stage of a child's new schooling experience.

There was a local community program housed in the school, which was the only one open to the parents from the school. The purpose of the program was to provide support for the mothers through English language education and well-being support. It was noted that the program was open specifically to the Dari^[1] speaking mothers in the school. As it was run externally to the school, the teachers, including the EAL coordinator, were not clear on the exact activities included in the sessions. The school's Dari "multicultural aide" and the EAL welfare staff member had some involvement in the program; however, little information was communicated to the teachers.

These attempts to compensate for lack of parental engagement at the school was attributed to it not being a part of the whole school's culture. Teachers were therefore "used to" the little involvement that occurred.

Parent involvement is just not a thing that's done here. I came to this school when I was younger, a letter was then sent home at the start of each year and parents were required to come up to the school and listen to the children read.... and then it just sort of died out. (Natasha)

The school environment

The school environment was very welcoming, and the children, staff and parents appeared to interact happily as part of a community. The teachers were friendly, considerate and polite in their relations with the parents; communication, nonetheless, became limited when language barriers were an issue. Apart from one Dari 'multicultural aide' there were no other regular interpreters employed on site to support the communication with speakers of other languages. Engaging in informal group conversations, it became clear to the first author that most teachers voiced some frustration or unease with this situation as they expressed concern about the lack of ability to communicate with the many other parents in the school.

Likewise, there was no translation of signs, flyers and other information around the school to include the variety of languages in the school community. Additionally, links to the many cultures of the children and families in the school were not explicitly made, through such things as festival celebrations, flags or multilingual work by the children being on display.

The school website, which intended to communicate with parents online, at the time of the study, was in its developmental stages so only some information could be translated through Google translator. This site shared newsletters and relevant information so parents could be informed about the school activities, such as excursions, sporting events, awards and administration needs from home. It did not, however, explicitly welcome parent involvement. The culture of minimal parental participation expressed by teachers was further confirmed by the information on this website where no indication of activities or groups specifically involving the parents was evident. Similarly, there was no evidence of opportunities for parents to have a voice in this school community, for example through parent volunteers, parent fundraising groups or parents as members on the school council.

Types of parent involvement

The teachers acknowledged that the culture and structures within the school caused minimal encouragement for parental participation. The few activities and school practices that were in place for parents to be involved, were dictated by the school.

One was through special events such as sports days, assemblies and concerts. As spectators of these activities, parents were engaged in the least participatory kind of involvement. Similarly, parents were able to observe the yearly two-week intensive swimming program. This program was optional, and some children did not take part for cultural and economic reasons. The parents of those students who did participate in the program were able to see the teaching and learning activities and were consequently slightly more involved. This allowed parents to understand the school's culture by observing how the children related to each other and the teachers in this particular activity.

Parents can get involved through sports days and things like that. I know we've had district sports in grades 5/6 and they would encourage the parents to come and watch. (Sally)

The once yearly "Open Afternoon" was another regular but infrequent event in which parents were able to participate. This event involved teachers providing a variety of academic activities in the classroom for parents to spend time with their child. Through such participation, parents were able to see inside the classroom setting, observe their child's work, see teachers' practice and potentially meet with other parents. This annual activity allowed active participation from the parents but did not provide opportunities for parental input into the teaching of the children or the sharing of some of their own home practices.

The open afternoon is quite a welcoming thing where we actually have activities set up and the parents sit down and play with their children... But that's not a regular thing that's like once a year. (Sally)

Once yearly parent-teacher interviews were another method for parents to be involved in the schooling of their children. This 15-minute interview time, usually run with the support of an interpreter, provided a small window for parents to learn about their children's academic, social and emotional development and needs as well as ask questions or make requests.

Most parents come to the parent-teacher interviews and some might need some help from an interpreter. But that's just one day. (Rebecca)

The daily pick up and drop off of children was a relatively more frequent and informal type of involvement allowing parents to make regular contact with their child's teacher to potentially provide a link between home and school.

I have a really good relationship with my parents, so I do keep them involved in what's going on. If I need to speak to them about something, I can do that at drop-off or pick-up times. They are happy to hear about what their children are doing and they really listen to you. (Charlotte)

Teachers expressed that this opportunity did not involve asking for parental input into the education of their child, nor were there sharing of home cultures, experiences and languages during these informal meetings. Such contacts and communications were more common in the early years of schooling, as parents were less often involved and appeared less interested in these events as the children grew older and more independent.

In junior school I think they get a lot more parents that show an interest but in upper school we don't have many parents that show an interest. (Natasha)

There was little evidence that teachers made substantial and effective attempts to actively involve parents in their classrooms. The teachers attributed all lack of involvement to the parents' shortcomings rather than a lack of invitation and encouragement from the teachers themselves.

Jennifer: Are you trying to involve them [the parents]?

Natasha: Trying? I probably haven't really tried [to involve the parents] ..., other than just writing in diaries. Because they don't show an interest and they don't have the English level of speaking grammatically, so it's hard to involve them. But I suppose you

could, if you asked them. Some of them might come up and listen to them [their children] read but I guess it just hasn't eventuated.

Clearly, the teachers of CALD students, in this study, did not question the conventionally established ways that their school practiced parental involvement, which contributed to having a deficit view of CALD parental engagement and hence marginalising them.

Challenges and Obstacles

In addition to the above, a significant challenge preventing parental involvement was that the White English speaking background teachers in this study based their understanding of parent involvement on memories from their own childhood or behaviours common within culturally, linguistically and socially similar circles as their own. The teachers all portrayed a picture of parent involvement that entailed parents volunteering their time to support classroom-based activities, such as listening to children read or raising funds for the school. Teachers also saw parent involvement as assisting the school in major events, such as concert preparation and costume making, joining on excursions or helping in school sporting activities with the younger grades. Similarly, the teachers' ideas of parent involvement in their child's out of school education mostly included the practice of academic subjects (such as reading, spelling and numeracy exercises) at home, as well as being involved in extracurricular activities that helped with the school's goals.

Well, I know when I was at school, growing up here, my mum would help and the mums helped. They'd go and they'd do PMP [Perceptual Motor Program] and they'd go and they'd volunteer and they'd do things. (Sally)

My friend [as a parent] organises fundraisers. They organised a fair day to fundraise for the school. And I thought that is so fantastic to have the parents. So, I think I would see it as that- the parents wanting to help the school. To fundraise and get the best they can. I'd like them to show an interest in the homework... get involved in our concert, sewing up stuff that we might need. (Charlotte)

Some of the teachers explained that many of the parents in their school evidence their keenness for their child to succeed and a supportive attitude, through their availability for communication when waiting at the classroom to drop off and pick up their child, and through attending parent teacher meetings, concerts, sports carnivals and assemblies.

The parents in our school show interest in helping and supporting their children. I guess this is why they are always available. (Charlotte)

However, teachers all agreed that low parental involvement and less explicit demonstration of this support was due to the parents' low English proficiency and awareness of the school system and culture. They also believed that some parents had low literacy skills in their own language and therefore were unable to support their child with schoolwork at home. The teachers did not suggest that their own cultural perceptions of parent involvement may need to alter in order to find mutual understandings that allow parents to feel more comfortable in coming forward.

Yeah some of it [not coming in to help in the classroom] has to do with confidence... They don't speak the language, they're a bit scared to come up... Because it is a new system to them and they don't understand what's right and what's wrong. (Rebecca)

Also, the teachers explained that some parents were dealing with emotional issues of their own as a result of traumatic experiences, which they believed created a barrier to their involvement as well as an effect on their children's discipline at home. Teachers did not suggest that greater connections with this group of parents may support both the family and the child to feel settled and secure during this particularly difficult time.

We had some parents who were really traumatised by their experiences. So they were depressed and had their own issues that they were dealing with. (Rebecca)

Furthermore, the teachers expressed that the parents' diverse cultures impacted their various needs and behaviours. For example, one cultural group placed a great deal of trust in the teachers to educate their child appropriately, while another valued regular practice of rote learning activities, tests, and homework.

The Afghani parents just trust us. They would trust us with their life. They just let us do, whatever we want because they know whatever we're doing is helping their child. So, if we asked them to do something, I'm sure that they would if they could. Whereas, the Indian and Sri Lankan ones want more homework all the time. (Natasha)

To the teachers, this diversity was somewhat problematic as it led to requests that they perceived to be culturally unacceptable to them.

I've had parents say, "Oh they won't clean their teeth" or, "They won't have showers. Can you tell them to have a shower?" ... It's like they're afraid to discipline their kids because they're worried about being too harsh on them. (Sally)

Sometimes children come to school with really bizarre eating things- a pack of biscuits. Parents would just give them a pack of sweet biscuits and that is their lunch. (Natasha)

The different cultural backgrounds of the families also appeared to add to the parents' lack of awareness of the school culture and practices, which teachers believed exacerbated their lack of confidence and left them feeling they had no right to intervene.

Parents are put off because they don't understand Australian schooling... I suppose that's how parents feel. They doubt their own capabilities in helping their children in the new system. They go, "Oh, but I don't want to cause trouble." and I go, "No, you've got a right to come up and say what you have to say about your child's education. (Sally)

Moreover, the teachers viewed communication with parents as a welfare responsibility, which did not fit into their job descriptions. Teachers explained that the initial contact with parents to find out about family backgrounds and histories was the responsibility of the administration staff during the enrolment process. This information was often minimal and not passed on to teachers unless there was a particular need. Some teachers reported difficulties in pursuing family involvement as they did not want to take on a role that was not their own. As a result of these factors, teachers did not expect or explicitly encourage anything more from their relationships with parents.

So that's something that I would like to do but I've got to be, careful that I don't step on toes, because I'm not welfare... Well every time that there's been some sort of involvement with the mothers coming in, it was seen as a welfare thing. (Rebecca)

This underlying understanding that parent involvement is not the teachers' responsibility but that of the parents not only created a barrier to the development of meaningful and balanced parent-teacher relations but also resulted in teachers having little understanding of the children's backgrounds, cultures and experiences. In order to appreciate and capitalise on the rich culture that CALD students and their parents bring into schools, the teachers needed to recognize that schooling and the one-way connections with parents support the norms, values, attitudes, and culture of the White, middle class parents and students (Ullucci, 2012). As McIntosh (1988, p. 3) asserts, "whites are taught to think of their lives as morally neutral, normative, and average, and also ideal, so that when we work to benefit others, this is seen as work that will allow "them" to be more like "us.""

Summary and Discussion

The school culture of working with the minimal involvement was not only explicitly accepted by teachers but evident in many of their practices such as the hiring of more aides, the implementation of the "Reading Factory" program, the minimal use of translation of signs and notices, few references to parents in the school website and newsletters, and a lack of requests for parental support through programs run within the school. Although a very welcoming and friendly atmosphere was established within the school, this culture of maintaining minimal parent participation practices could be interpreted in two ways.

Firstly, the school could be inadvertently harbouring the asymmetrical balance of power (Christianakis, 2011), which restricted teachers from building on the children's cultures and having opportunities for misunderstandings to be anticipated, as a parental engagement program would aim to do (Christianakis, 2011). The culture of replacing parent roles with staff implied that parents were not welcome, available, or capable to help within the school at an appropriate level. Although many parents put great trust in the school, the school did not reciprocate this trust in the parents. The school was in many ways taking the responsibility away from the parents since teachers did not ask for their support, making parents futile in the schooling of their children.

Secondly, the principal of the school was not part of this study. The principal may have deliberately shied away from encouraging family involvement due to reasons such as: the current climate of accountability, measured attainment levels and benchmarks (Hill & Diamond, 2013), past negative experiences with parents (Leithwood, 2010; Linek et al., 1997), administrative obstacles (e.g., insufficient resources, time or personnel) or beliefs that children from economically disadvantaged families, with limited English proficiency, have far fewer opportunities to engage in academic work at home (Lowe et al., 2009). These could be valid concerns that need to be considered when involving parents; however, the clear absence of parent engagement compared with similar schools highlights an area of this school's practice that requires attention if the needs of the children are to be more adequately met.

Teachers were aware of parents' low confidence and their reluctance to initiate contact; albeit, they had little awareness of how such practices did not provide parents with an adequate forum for meaningful and mutual interactions. In this way, historically set roles and positions of power within the home-school relationship were exacerbated (Cremin et al., 2012). In some instances, teachers tended to envisage an approach that transmitted school practices onto families (Auerbach, 1989) with the aim of improving parenting skills to ultimately support the goals of the school (for example, how to listen to and guide children with their readers or reading skills

being directly taught to parents because the school prioritised reading). As Auerbach (1989) explains, when teachers focus on such things as guided reading as a skill to be taught to parents, they are making assumptions about the families without first investigating the realities of the home environments. For example, the teachers and school assume that homes of language minority and low income families are “literacy impoverished” (Auerbach, 1989, p. 169) with limited access to reading materials and with parents who rarely read to the children or for themselves. This may possibly be the case, but teachers’ responses showed no evidence that they had explored the matter and instead implied such assumptions as, parents do not read to their child. This demonstrates that the teachers will remain unaware of the valuable literacy experiences possibly occurring in the homes of the children (Cremin et al., 2012) and continue to have a deficit view of their home practices (Auerbach, 1989; Jay & Rohl, 2005; Reyes & Torres, 2007), until communication develops in a two-way fashion between parents and the school. In other words, all practices at the school were envisaged with goals of *fixing* and *helping* families to align with the school rather than striving to build on existing practices and cultures to create stronger links between home and school (Cremin et al., 2012).

This deficit view (Reyes & Torres, 2007) continued in teachers’ recommendations for behaviour management strategies to be incorporated into the program. It is important that parents’ requests for support does not lead teachers to further impose the mainstream culture as a priority, at the expense of recognising other equally valid practices and viewpoints. Therefore, in such circumstances both parents and teachers need to understand the realities of their concerns and situations to take collective action in making changes necessary for improvement of the children’s development (Reyes & Torres, 2007).

Implications for Practice

This study reveals that parents were inadvertently being marginalised without teachers being aware that their traditional set-in-stone views of parental engagement was contributing to this marginalisation. That is, parents were being denied of opportunities to engage in partnership with the school as there were differences in the teachers’ (the school’s) and the parents’ cultural practices. Accordingly, we suggest that teachers need to be encouraged and supported to begin the process of developing their understandings of family learning programs and looking into other influencing factors such as resources and parental perspectives. This process must include and be carried out with the assistance from school management team so as not to overload teachers’ current heavy workloads and to ensure that there is a whole school, collaborative effort to reflect and improve. This should then lead to the development of an inclusive and mutual family learning curriculum as one step towards increasing the parental engagement occurring on the site. Implementing such a program would necessarily encourage parents to have input into the content of the curriculum so that their existing resources, diverse cultures and various needs and desires are reflected (Jay & Rohl, 2005). However, as the teachers suggested, additional strategies and information from the school and teachers would also be beneficial and important in building parents’ awareness of the school culture and practice. In this way, a collaborative program would develop, building respect, reciprocity and equality (Mandel Morrow & Young, 1997) in both the program and the ongoing relationships that should subsequently grow and continue.

Despite the considerable time, space and support necessary for a successful family learning program to be implemented at the initial stages, it would ultimately enhance students’ schooling experiences (Hill & Diamond, 2013). Teachers would have a better understanding of the

children and their families' backgrounds, parents would feel more confident and connected to the school (Christianakis, 2011; Lowe et al., 2009) and parents would be provided with affirmations of their important role as mentor of their child (Di Santo, 2012). This is an important goal for this school, where unequal positions of power are clearly evident in the parent-teacher relationships. It is only when these home-school links are made and equalised, that children from minority families can receive the quality of education they require and deserve.

Notes [i] The official language spoken in Afghanistan. [back]

About the Authors

Jennifer Bromley completed her Masters of Education with Monash University and is now embarking on her PHD candidature with Latrobe University. Her interests are in the early years of primary school education, with particular interest in the experiences of children from low literacy migrant backgrounds. Her teaching experiences are in primary and early childhood education in Melbourne, Australia and London, U.K.

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