Parent Involvement in Inclusive Primary Schools in New Zealand: Implications for Improving Practice and for Teacher Education

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Abstract

A critical factor in the success of inclusive schools is effective parent involvement in the education of children with special educational needs. This article reports the results of a survey of the practice of parent involvement in inclusive primary schools in a large city in New Zealand. Interviews were conducted with 21 primary school principals using a schedule which focused on eleven aspects of parent involvement. Analysis of data from the interviews identified several common weaknesses in provision for parent involvement in the schools. Implications for improving the practice of parent involvement in inclusive primary schools and for teacher education in parent involvement are discussed.

Introduction

New Zealand has one of the most inclusive school systems in the world, with less than 1% of children in schools or units for pupils with SEN. A critical factor in the success of inclusive schools is effective parental involvement (PI) in the education of their children, especially for those with SEN (Hornby, 1995). PI is defined as, "…parental participation in the educational processes and experiences of their children" (Jeynes, 2005, p. 245). The role of PI in improving educational outcomes for all children, including those with SEN, has recently been recognized by the New Zealand government through publication of the *Schooling Strategy* (MoE, 2005) in which improving PI is one of three priority areas.

Extensive evidence for the effectiveness of PI in facilitating children's academic achievement has been reported by reviews and meta–analyses of the international literature (Cox, 2005; Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Fan & Chen, 2001; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jeynes, 2005; Pomerantz, Moorman, & Litwack, 2007). For example, effect sizes, (which assess the size of changes brought about by interventions) for the impact of PI on children's academic achievement have been calculated to be 0.51 for all schools (Hattie, 2009) and from 0.70 to 0.74 for urban primary schools (Jeynes, 2005). Hattie (2009) reports that the average effect size for educational interventions is 0.4, which suggests that PI, with effect sizes estimated to be larger than this, can have a substantial impact on children's academic achievement.

Other merits of PI that emerge from these reviews and other literature encompass benefits for children, teachers and parents. For children, involvement of their parents is reported to lead to improvements in attitudes, behavior and attendance at school, as well as in their mental health (Christenson, 2004; Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007; Hornby, 2000). For teachers, effective PI is reported to improve parent–teacher relationships, teacher morale and the school climate (Grant & Ray, 2010; Hoover–Dempsey et al., 2005). For parents, involvement in their children's education has been linked to increased parental confidence in, and satisfaction with parenting, as well as increased interest in their own education (Epstein, 2001; Grant & Ray, 2010; Henderson et al., 2007). Other important findings from these reviews are that the effectiveness of PI in bringing about these changes applies across gender and various ethnic groups (Jeynes, 2003, 2005) and that this also applies to children of all ages, including children at primary, middle and secondary schools (Eccles & Harold, 1993).

Research on PI in New Zealand has so far only been available in the form of local reports and university theses. The findings of much of this research and that of selected international literature, was summarised in a major report commissioned by the Ministry of Education (Biddulph, Biddulph, & Biddulph, 2003). This influential report is often

referred to in the New Zealand educational literature as the source of the finding that effective partnerships between parents and schools result in improved outcomes for children. Following this report there have been two recent reviews of research on the practice of PI in New Zealand.

The first was a review of partnerships between parents and schools, conducted as part of a regular review (inspection) of schools (Education Review Office, 2008). Evidence was gathered from 233 schools, including primary, middle and secondary schools. Analysis of the reviews found that recommendations were made that nearly 75% of the schools should improve engagement with parents; about 25% should improve learning partnerships with parents; another 25% need to develop strategies to engage parents not actively involved; and a further 25% were advised to improve the quality of engagement with parents from a wide range of ethnic groups. Thus, the review concluded that the majority of schools needed to improve their PI practices in some way.

The second review of New Zealand research focused on home–school partnerships and was conducted by staff at the New Zealand Council for Educational Research (Bull, Brooking, & Campbell, 2008). Bull et al. (2008) drew evidence from seven New Zealand and seven international case studies as well as four New Zealand evaluations of home–school initiatives. The review concluded that there was little empirical support for the benefits of home–school partnerships, in contrast to the extensive literature supporting the beneficial effects of "naturally occurring or spontaneous PI in education" (p. 57).

This differential impact of specific forms of PI is supported by the recent synthesis of international research on educational interventions, conducted by a New Zealand academic (Hattie, 2009), which reported a low effect size of 0.16 for home–school programs but a moderate effect size of 0.51 for parental involvement. The difference is also supported by the finding from the international literature that the PI which schools organise themselves is more effective than new PI programs adopted by the school (Pomerantz et al., 2007).

Given the findings of the international literature and the two recent New Zealand reviews it was considered timely to investigate what PI activities are actually being used in New Zealand schools. The aim of this small–scale study was, therefore, to conduct an exploratory investigation of school–based parent involvement. That is, to find out which aspects of PI are widely used by schools, identify weaknesses or gaps in the organization of PI. and clarify implications for practice and for teacher education.

Method

This article reports the results of a survey of the practice of PI in 21 primary schools in Christchurch, a city of 400,000 people in the south island of New Zealand. Schools were randomly selected by choosing every fifth school on an alphabetical list of the 116 primary schools. The 22 schools selected were contacted in order to arrange interviews with the principals. One principal declined the invitation to be involved so 21 schools made up the final sample. Principals were interviewed by the second author, at their schools, with interviews lasting approximately one hour.

Participants

The 21 schools varied in size from 53 to 551 with a mean of 273 pupils. All schools were co–educational public (not private) schools. The SES of communities from which schools drew their pupils was estimated using the New Zealand Decile system which involves a ten point scale in which Decile one schools are the 10% of schools that have

most pupils from low SES families and Decile ten are the 10% of schools which have the most pupils from high SES families. Decile ratings of the 21 schools ranged from one to ten with a mean of 5.38, indicating that the schools were serving communities with a broad range of SES.

Measures

A structured interview schedule was employed to collect data on principals' views of eleven aspects of PI. It included a list of questions based on a framework adapted from Hornby (2000) and is similar to that used in comparable research conducted in the USA by Epstein and Salinas (2004). The interview included questions on four aspects of PI concerned with parents' potential contributions to the school that is policy formation acting as a resource, collaboration with teachers, and sharing information on children. It also included questions on four aspects of PI concerned with the needs of parents, that is, the need for channels of communication, liaison with school staff, parent education and parent support. Additional questions focused on three related aspects of PI, encouraging parents into school, involving diverse parents, and teacher professional learning.

<div align="center">Results and Discussion</div>

Key findings on each of the 11 aspects of PI surveyed are presented below. There is not space to present all responses so the examples of PI used by several schools are reported, with those used by only one school noted when these are particularly interesting. Implications for improving the practice of PI in inclusive primary schools and for teacher education are discussed in relation to each of the 11 aspects included in the survey.

Policy Formation

Only four out of the 21 schools had separate written policies on PI. Three of these reported that parents had input into their policies. Fourteen schools had a Parent–Teacher Association (PTA), six did not and three reported that their PTA was struggling for members. Parents were encouraged to become members of the PTA by school staff at 13 schools, through newsletters at 12 schools and through PTA member contacts at ten schools. Principals reported that parents' views on school policies were sought by surveys at nine schools, through school newsletters requesting feedback at ten schools, and via members of the school's PTA or Boards of Trustees (BoT) at five schools. When asked whether there was a room at the school set aside for parents' use, 13 principals said there was not, but ten said parents used the staffroom, and three said they used the school library when they needed a room.

The key finding here was that most schools did not have written school policies on PI. The finding that four schools did have written PI policies, however, shows that they saw the value in documenting their policies and having them available for teachers and parents to read. It is suggested in the literature that all schools should develop written policies for PI (Henderson et al., 2007; Hornby, 2000). These should set out the ways in which parents can be involved in their children's education as well as the procedures through which schools and teachers can help parents to accomplish this. Policies for PI should be developed in collaboration with parents to ensure that the activities included will meet the needs of the different communities in which schools are based. The value of having written school policies for PI, developed in collaboration with parents, should be clearly communicated in all teacher professional learning courses.

Acting as a Resource

Ways in which parents act as a resource included listening to pupils read (15 schools); other help in the classroom (11 schools); preparing teaching materials (five schools); helping on class trips (13 schools); helping on school camps (four schools); helping with sports coaching (nine schools); assisting with road crossing patrol before and after school (five schools); helping in the school library (three schools); helping in the school canteen (three schools); and, acting as guest speakers (three schools). Principals reported that parents were informed about possible ways of helping at school through school newsletters at 17 schools, through the school prospectus or parent handbook at 13 schools, by daily contact as parents dropped off pupils at six schools, and through notes sent home by teachers at four schools. When asked who coordinated voluntary parent help at their schools ten principals said this was left to individual teachers, eight said it was done by the principal or deputy principal and three said it was done by syndicate leaders. When asked who was responsible for identifying potential parent volunteers, 12 principals said this was up to teachers, eight said it was done by the principal and six said it was done by PTA or BoT members.

The wide range of activities in which parents were involved in at the schools is an indication that acting as a resource is an important role that parents can play. It is, therefore, important that teacher education courses prepare teachers to involve parents in these activities and guidelines for doing this are widely available (Epstein, 2001; Grant & Ray, 2010; Henderson et al., 2007).

Collaborating with Teachers

Results of pupil assessments were communicated to parents through pupil reports at 15 schools, by means of individual parent–teacher meetings at 14 schools, through portfolios of pupils' work at eight schools, by means of parent–teacher–child conferences at five schools, and by the use of learning stories at one school. Eight principals reported that input from parents on goals for their children was obtained at parent–teacher meetings, four said this happened at goal–setting interviews. Home–school notebooks were used to set goals at three schools and parent–teacher–child conferences involved goal–setting at two schools. When asked how parents reinforce school programs, 12 principals said this occurred through parents' homework participation and expectations, six said it was accomplished by parents working on reading and three said it was done by parents working on numeracy. Twelve principals reported that teachers exercised flexibility in expectations of PI in homework, whereas six said there was no flexibility and one said there was sometimes flexibility.

The wide diversity of practice of PI among the schools highlighted important aspects of collaboration that were in place at some schools but missing at others. The overall organization of PI in the schools appeared ad hoc and very much related to the views and experience of principals. As Epstein and Salinas (2004) suggest, what is needed in schools is a comprehensive system of PI that includes all key aspects. In order to achieve this it is suggested that primary schools need to have a PI coordinator who is an experienced teacher or member of the school's senior management team. The first job of the PI coordinator should be to conduct an audit of PI at the school and prepare a report for the school's principal and governing body in order to facilitate the development of a comprehensive system for PI at the school. One task of ITE and PL courses is, therefore, to produce teachers who have sufficient knowledge of PI to take up this role (Epstein, 2001).

Sharing Information on Children

Principals reported that information on children's special needs was obtained from parents at parent–teacher meetings at 20 schools, from feeder schools at 14 schools, at enrolment at 12 schools, from home visits at ten schools, from other agencies at six schools, from the SEN register at four schools, and at IEP meetings at one school. Dissemination of this information to teachers was achieved at staff meetings at nine schools, through access to student filing/computer systems at seven schools, by the principal talking directly with teachers concerned at three schools, by means of senior management team meetings at three schools, by placing photographs of children on the staff notice–board with the key information below it at three schools, via the special needs register at two schools, by staff emails at one school, and through the SENCO at one school. It is interesting that, in responding to this section of the interview, only one of the 21 principals mentioned sharing information through IEPs and another mentioned the role of SENCOs in this.

These findings highlight the lack of a specific focus on involving parents of children with SEN in inclusive primary schools. Similar to children with SEN, such parents have many needs in common with their peers, but there are some areas where their needs, and what they can contribute, do differ from those of other parents. For example, they need to be fully involved in their children's IEPs so they can contribute their in–depth knowledge of their children's difficulties and strengths, as well as discuss goals and priorities for the future (Hornby, 1995). Parents of children with SEN also need to have frequent and effective communication in place between school and home, such as through the use of home–school diaries, so that any issues or concerns that occur, either at school or at home, can be quickly addressed. In addition, many parents of children with SEN appreciate home visits made by their children's teachers, as they often find it easier to share important information about their children when in their home environment (Hornby, 2000). Therefore, ITE courses should include sufficient focus on training teachers to address the specific needs of parents and families of children with SEN (Hornby, 1994; Turnbull & Turnbull, 1986; Seligman & Darling, 2007).

Channels of Communication

Seventeen schools reported that they communicate with parents through school or class newsletters, 14 schools through the school prospectus or handbook, six schools via parent forums, five schools by means of new parents' evenings, five schools via the school website, and four schools through BoT meetings. Channels of communication open to parents were reported to be telephone calls (20 schools), parents dropping in to school (20 schools), notes sent by or to parents (19 schools), meetings by appointment (19 schools), email (six schools), newsletters (three schools), and home–school diaries (three schools). When asked about school policy for contacting teachers if parents have concerns, 15 principals reported that parents contacted teachers directly for appointments, 14 said that contacts were made through the principal or senior staff. Ten principals reported that their schools operated an open door policy and that parents 'dropping in' to school was encouraged, eight said that parents were made aware of the school's complaints procedure, and six said that school and class newsletters were used to explain the complaints procedure.

The wide range of ways of communicating with parents used by schools means that parents will be able to choose the channels of communication that they prefer, which

should lead to optimum overall home–school communication. This places high demands on teachers, though, because they must develop a wide range of skills for communicating with parents. It is therefore essential that these skills are taught to teachers as part of teacher education courses and that professional learning courses focusing on PI are available for practicing teachers.

Liaison with School Staff

Nine principals reported that parent–teacher meetings were held twice a year, four principals reported three times a year, two principals reported four times a year, and one principal reported once a year. Two principals reported that pupil–teacher–parent meetings were held twice a year. Home–school diaries were used for pupils with behavior problems at seven schools, used for children with SEN at six schools, used occasionally or as needed at five schools, and not used at all at three schools. There was a wide range of practice with regard to sending home reports on pupils' progress, with some schools using formal reports, some portfolios of children's work, and others using a combination of reports and portfolios. These were sent home: twice a year at 12 schools, three times a year at four schools, four times a year at two schools, and once a year at three schools. IEPs were reported to be used by three schools for pupils with SEN, those with exceptional gifts and talents, and those with behavior problems. All 21 principals noted that home visits were not routinely made to families of new pupils and 19 reported that home visits were not made at all by teachers. Two principals mentioned that home visits were made if there were issues of child safety and one principal said that home visits were made after hospitalization of pupils, These home visits were made by itinerant SEN resource teachers at six schools, by social workers at four schools, by public health nurses at four schools, and by truancy officers at one school.

The finding that there was minimal use of home visits by school staff indicates under–use of one aspect of PI which many parents of children with SEN appreciate. Home visits can be very helpful for teachers in building rapport with parents and gaining understanding of children's home circumstances (Hornby, 1995). It is therefore important for schools to attempt to overcome difficulties related to home visits such as time constraints, issues of personal safety and some teachers' diffidence in relating to parents, in order to make use of this aspect of involving parents when it is appropriate. Training teachers in the counseling and assertion skills necessary for working with parents will increase their confidence in carrying out home visits and other aspects of PI (Hornby, 1994; Seligman, 2000), so should be included in ITE and PL courses.

Parent Education

Principals reported that parents were informed about parent education opportunities in the community by means of school newsletters at 16 schools, via notice–boards at eight schools, through brochures at three schools, via adverts at two schools, through the PTA at two schools, via emails at two schools, and through the school website at one school. Parent education workshops were held at all except four schools. Topics focused on reading at ten schools, numeracy at six schools, behavioral issues at five schools, sexuality at five schools, use of the internet at two schools, bullying at one school, and supporting children's learning at one school. Teachers were reported to be available to provide guidance to parents at parent–teacher interviews at seven schools, before and after school at six schools, after school at three schools, any time at three schools, during lunchtime at one school, during weekly parent seminars at one school, and during IEP

meetings at one school. Fifteen principals reported that parents were invited to school to observe teaching, whereas three said they were not.

It is clear that parent education organized by schools varied widely between schools and referral of parents to parent education sessions available in the community was patchy. Without appropriate parent education parents may not fully appreciate the importance of getting involved with their children's schools and also fail to provide the kind of support at home that will optimize their children's academic achievements (Hoover–Dempsey et al., 2005). Initial teacher education needs to prepare teachers for their role in educating parents about what they can do optimize their children's academic achievements and overall development (Epstein, 2001).

Parent Support

Seventeen principals reported that opportunities for parents to obtain support from teachers were provided through parent–teachers meetings, 11 through informal meetings (e.g., before/after school), six through meetings with senior staff, six through parents 'dropping–in' to school, and two during IEP meetings. Teachers at 20 schools were reported to have gained knowledge of places to refer parents for support from specialists who visit the school (such as, social workers, nurses, itinerant SEN resource teachers, special education service staff, and speech therapists), from senior staff at ten schools, through SENCOs at five schools, and via the school's pastoral care team at two schools. When asked whether parents were encouraged to join support groups, nine principals said this was done through newsletters, seven through community groups, two via notice–boards, two via BoT and PTA members, and one via parent help–lines. Opportunities for parent–to–parent support were not provided at six schools but were provided at five schools through parent seminars, workshops or forums, at six schools through informal meetings, and at three schools via parent network meetings.

These findings reinforce the need for teachers to be able to provide support to parents in terms of basic counselling and guidance regarding their children's learning and behavior and to be able to refer parents who need more intensive help to appropriate sources of support that are available in their communities (Hornby, 2000). Teachers therefore need to learn basic counselling and guidance skills as part of their initial training or through ongoing professional learning courses (Hornby, 1994; Hornby, Hall, & Hall, 2003; Seligman, 2000).

Encouraging Parents into School

Principals reported that a range of activities was used to encourage parents to establish contact with the school. Twenty schools put on school performances such as plays or musicals involving many or all of the pupils. Nineteen schools invited parents and other family members to view exhibitions of pupils' work and the same number of schools invited parents to attend school or class lunches or barbeques. Sixteen schools held new parents' evenings and the same number had open days or open nights. Thirteen put on talks by invited speakers, twelve held school fairs, with the same number inviting parents to attend special assemblies to celebrate pupils' learning. Nine schools involved parents in sporting activities, the same number involved them in day trips and four schools involved parents in school camps.

The wide range of activities used by schools to bring about high levels of PI reflect the suggestions found in the now extensive international literature on working with parents (Epstein, 2001; Grant & Ray, 2010; Henderson et al., 2007; Hornby, 1995, 2000).

This suggests that most schools are aware of strategies for encouraging PI but that the use of these varies from school to school depending on the views of principals and teachers. More emphasis on PI in teacher education courses would help ensure that all teachers are aware of the wide range of activities available for encouraging parents into schools (Flanigan, 2007; Greenwood & Hickman, 1991).

Involving Diverse Parents

Adaptations reported for working with parents from diverse backgrounds were: using IEPs to involve parents of children with SEN (four schools); having family meetings (three schools); and, inviting parents to shared lunches (three schools). In fact, eight principals reported that parents of pupils with SEN attended IEP meetings and follow–ups, six reported that parents of pupils with SEN were fully involved in the IEP process, four said that parents discussed their children with SEN with outside specialists, three said that parents were invited to IEP meetings, and three said that parents supported IEP goals. Seven principals reported that involvement of parents of exceptionally gifted pupils was via extension activities, three reported that this was via parent–teacher meetings, and three said that parents were informed when their children were identified as gifted. Adaptations reported for working with parents with English as a second language (ESL) were: ESL teacher working with children and parents (six schools); using interpreters (five schools); translating newsletters (two schools); establishing links with local community groups (two schools); and, hosting cultural sharing days (two schools).

An important finding here was the lack of specific ideas to involve parents from ethnically diverse backgrounds. Schools in New Zealand, like in many other countries around the world, are becoming more ethnically diverse. Many parents have English as a second language and come from countries with traditional schooling systems in which PI is not emphasized and therefore have low levels of involvement with their children's schools. It is essential for schools to reach out to such parents so they appreciate the importance of their involvement in their children's education. Schools, therefore, need to work hard to develop innovative ways to involve these parents and teacher education courses need to introduce teachers to a range of strategies for involving parents from diverse backgrounds (Grant & Ray, 2010; Henderson et al., 2007).

Teacher professional learning

Twelve principals reported that there had been no training for teachers on working with parents, five said that they provided guidance to teachers before parent–teacher interviews, four said there had been some inservice training on PI, and one said that mentoring of teachers on PI was provided by senior staff. When asked whether parents were involved in professional learning sessions for teachers, 17 principals reported that this had not occurred, four said it had, one said it was done when pupils had allergic conditions, and one said that when parents came in to speak with teachers it was the best inservice training they had ever had.

<div align="center">Conclusion</div>

The finding that there was a lack of training for teachers on working with parents, both preservice and inservice, is alarming and suggests that the success of government initiatives on improving PI (e.g., MoE, 2005) may be limited until this situation changes. Teacher education programs need to include rigorous courses on working with parents for preservice teachers and ongoing professional learning should be provided for practicing teachers. Training needs to be focused on enabling teachers to be confident implementing

the wide range of aspects of PI which are found to be useful by schools. Despite the content of teacher education programs in New Zealand (as in other countries) being set by government education policies, which include those promoting PI, as noted above (MoE, 2005), there is still no requirement to include comprehensive courses on working with parents in teacher education programs. The importance of such courses for providing teachers with the skills to work effectively with parents has been internationally acknowledged (Epstein, 2001; Greenwood & Hickman, 1991; Hornby, 2000). As government policies do not require these courses they are typically not included or, as in the U.S.A. where accreditation standards do require them, are not considered rigorous enough to ensure that teachers are adequately prepared to work effectively with parents (Flanigan, 2007).

From the reports of these principals it appears that all of the 21 inclusive primary schools used a range of activities in which they involved parents. There was, though, a wide diversity of practice of PI in these schools. There were very few PI activities that all schools used and few types of PI that no schools were involved in. There were many examples of PI practice in individual schools that are recommended in the literature, but these were not consistent across all schools and the overall picture was patchy. The most notable weaknesses in PI provision were: a lack of written school policies on PI; minimal use of home visits; limited ideas to involve diverse parents; minimal parent education organized by schools; the ad hoc nature of the organization of PI; the minimal focus on involving parents of children with SEN; and limited training for teachers on working with parents.

This study has highlighted many areas of PI practice in this sample of inclusive primary schools that are in line with those suggested in the international literature. It has also identified several gaps and implications for improving the practice of PI in inclusive primary schools, as well as implications for improving teacher education on PI. This was, however, only a small–scale study involving 21 schools in one New Zealand city. Larger studies including representative samples of primary schools are needed before it can be concluded that these findings apply more widely. In addition to the views of principals, the views of teachers and parents on PI need to be investigated, particularly what they appreciate, what is not useful, and what they would like more of. This will help to ensure that the most effective procedures for PI are used by primary schools in order to bring about the best possible personal, social and academic outcomes for all children, including those with SEN.

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