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Principal Leadership for Parent-School-Community Engagement in Disadvantaged Schools Project

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Associated Keywords:
- Engagement
- Leadership
- Parent participation

Abstract

Research Questions

Research Question

What gives some Principals in educationally-disadvantaged schools the edge on parent-school-community engagement?

Research Sub-Questions

What knowledge of students, teachers, and curriculum does the Principal possess that helped him/her engage effectively with parents and community members?

How does the Principal’s knowledge of milieus (schools, classrooms, parents, community, and technology) inform his/her engagement strategies and practices?

Research Methodology

Previous research (Phase I Parent Engagement in Schools [PES] project 2014) (see Povey et al., 2018) that used Principal and P&C President data revealed that some educationally-disadvantaged schools performed highly in the area of parent-school-community engagement which is contrary to what might otherwise be expected. In this research (Phase II Horizon 2016-2017), four Queensland State primary schools were identified as research sites based on their high performance in parent-school-community engagement and Index of Community Social-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) value (below Australian average of 1000). The sampling procedure was informed by parent engagement measures such as the Principal’s relationship with parents captured using 2014 data from the Phase I PES project and School Opinion Survey (SOS). (The School Opinion Survey comprises five individual surveys given annually to parents, students, students in Special schools, staff, and Principals to seek their views on aspects of their school that are working well and areas that can be improved.)

Design-based research (DBR) was used to answer the research question and sub-questions. DBR blends empirical educational research methods with theory-driven designs of learning environments. DBR entails an iterative research process that not only evaluates but systematically attempts to refine the processes of research while also producing design principles that can guide similar research endeavours. DBR can be implemented in different contexts to understand how, when, and why educational initiatives work in practice (Bell, 2004).

The research (Phase II Horizon 2016-2017) used Schwab’s (1973) framework to inform data collection, analysis, conceptualisation, findings, conclusions, and recommendations for future research. The framework has four interconnected dimensions: students, teachers, curriculum (subject matter), and milieus where milieus include knowledge of schools, classrooms, parents, and communities. As a result of the research findings, a further milieu, technology, was added. A mixed-methods approach that involved collecting multiple data for analysis using quantitative and qualitative techniques (Brown, 1992) was employed to examine each Principal’s parent-school-community engagement strategies and practices.

The four Principals were approached by email to participate in the project and provide consent for their school to participate. In addition, P&Cs Queensland facilitated access to each P&C President and buy-in for their participation. This support included encouraging parents to participate in the focus groups. Each Principal supported the project by encouraging teachers, students, and parents to participate and making available suitable venues for the interviews and focus groups.
Over two- to four-day site visits at each school, the research team conducted: separate semi-structured interviews with the Principal, P&C President, and key members of the school’s leadership team; focus groups with teachers, parents and students; and documented and photographed evidence of parent-school-community engagement strategies and practices at the school. Each interview and focus group took approximately one hour. In total, 12 interviews and 16 focus groups were conducted and involved 123 participants. Interview and focus group data were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analysed with NVivo computer software. Informed by Schwab’s four-dimensional framework, the team developed a comprehensive coding structure to thematically analyse the data to produce the research findings.

Quantitative data were also collected from teachers and parents using an online or hard-copy survey. Across the four schools, the surveys were answered by 72 parents and 45 teachers respectively. Descriptive analyses, such as cross tabulations and frequencies were applied, using the statistical software Stata.

Research Findings

Schwab’s (1973) framework provided four interconnected dimensions: students, teachers, curriculum (subject matter), and milieus where milieus include knowledge of schools, classrooms, parents, and communities through which to examine how each of the four Principals in the research developed knowledge of and for parent-school-community engagement which in turn informed the strategies and practices they adopted. At the heart of their parent-school-community engagement work was student learning and wellbeing. The Principals each developed their knowledge of parent-school-community engagement through their different professional experiences as teachers and school leaders during their careers as well as through their personal experiences as parents and active citizens in their communities. Based on their experiences, they each recognised the value of: building personal, respectful relationships with others; connecting positively with individuals and organisations (school and community); being open to learning from, with and alongside students, parents, and teachers; and pursuing professional learning opportunities for themselves, teachers, and parents. They were purposeful, proactive, anticipatory, and futures-focused, creating opportunities for parent-school-community engagement in continual, expansive, collaborative ways to benefit students, parents, and teachers in their schools as well as stakeholders in the broader community.

The main findings as seen through each lens of Schwab’s framework are summarised below:

The Principals possessed detailed knowledge of students which they built by connecting personally with them and their families. The Principals’ knowledge of students enabled parent-school-community engagement by building respectful relationships; creating reciprocal connections between home and school learning; and aligning student needs and interests with opportunities that enhanced their learning and wellbeing.

The Principals developed knowledge of teachers through conversations and working alongside them in ways that engendered open, supportive relationships. They recognised and developed each teacher’s strengths. The Principals led by example and drew on their own teaching experiences to articulate clear expectations for parent-teacher engagement. They encouraged teachers to see families through a contextual lens and to build on the strengths of diversity. They offered professional development opportunities to cultivate teachers’ skills for connecting with families.

The Principals developed contemporary curriculum knowledge through personal and professional development opportunities. This knowledge allowed them to purposefully connect student learning and curriculum learning areas. They regularly shared curriculum news with the school community and P&C. They used specific strategies to overcome challenges to engagement (e.g., Liaison Officer to co-develop curriculum activities using teacher, parent, and community knowledge).

The Principals developed knowledge of schools from working in different contexts throughout their careers. Each subscribed to the philosophy, ‘It takes a village to raise a child’. In cultivating a welcoming, inclusive school climate, they garnered knowledge about families and the community and showed genuine interest in each student’s learning and wellbeing. The Principals’ use of visibility (e.g., drop-offs/pick-ups) communicated to parents and students they were accessible and approachable.

The Principals drew on their knowledge of classrooms from teaching and working in schools to enact and support practices that made parents feel welcomed, respected, and valued. Regular visits and contact with teachers heightened their awareness of what was happening in classrooms. The Principals used different strategies to enhance student learning and parent-school-community engagement opportunities that included employing teacher aides with particular knowledge and skills and supporting innovative classroom practices (e.g., co-teaching).

The Principals developed knowledge of parents from their personal experiences and careers. They viewed parents as their child’s first teacher, the keepers of intimate knowledge of their child, and important partners in their child’s education. Principals valued being an initial point of contact (e.g., personally conducting enrolment interviews), advocated face-to-face contact, extended personal invitations, and communicated regularly with parents. They built parents’ capacities to participate in their child’s learning by providing workshops, preparation for school entry, and certification courses.
By participating in local activities, organisations, and events, the Principals developed knowledge of their community’s families, languages, cultures, and histories, affording them understanding and respect for engaging with parents and community members. They demonstrated agility in connecting the work of external and internal stakeholders to advocate for opportunities and resources to benefit students.

The Principals developed knowledge of technology by using different platforms (e.g., school website, Facebook, electronic newsletters, Goschools app) to communicate with the school community. They also supported teachers to use technology (e.g., email, sms, ClassDojo) to engage parents in student learning.

Research Limitations

- Generalisability of this research to all schools will depend on the extent to which readers of the research recognise possibilities for transfer and applicability of the findings to their particular contexts and situations.

- Limitations relate to the research focus and characteristics of each school. For example:
  - Four primary schools participated
  - Identification of schools as disadvantaged relied on their Index of Community Social-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) score. The ICSEA of each participating school was below the Australian average of 1000. However, three schools had ICSEA scores around 900 while one was 990.
  - Student populations ranged from 200 to 600

Relationship to Other Relevant Research

There are strong links between parent-school-community engagement and children’s learning academically, socially, and emotionally (Fox & Olsen, 2014; Misty, Benner, Biesanz, & Clark, 2010). It has been widely argued that optimal student learning outcomes occur when the key educators in a child’s life, namely parents and schools/teachers, form respectful and collaborative relationships with one another and work towards common goals (Emerson, Fear, Fox, & Sanders, 2012; Epstein, 2011; Fox & Olsen, 2014; Goodall & Montgomery, 2014; Harris & Goodall, 2007; Pushor, 2013; Pushor & Reutenburg, 2006; Willis, 2013).

Principals play a key role in parent-school-community engagement through their leadership style, communication, attitudes, and expectations (Barr & Saltmarsh, 2014; Drysdale, Goode, & Gurr, 2009; Giles, 2006; Gordon & Louis, 2009; Mieczko & Kington, 2013). The phenomenon of turnover schools since the 1990s in the United States of America has been driven by high-need low-performing schools (Barnett & Stevenson, 2016). School leadership has emerged as critical in these schools with evidence of success in some instances connecting school and student improvement with the prioritisation of parent involvement (e.g., Tennes, 2017). However, the number of studies of turnover leadership which focus on the strategies and practices of school leaders is few (Barnett & Stevenson, 2016). Just as rare is Australian research on the mechanisms through which successful Principals in disadvantaged schools foster high levels of parent-school-community engagement.

The published research and related education documents that are available however are consistent with the findings of this study. Tomlinson (2017), for example, compares highly effective Principals with those regarded as less effective and offers three distinctions: 1) a sense of opportunity and obligation as an overriding vision of leadership; 2) attention to creating a school culture that communicates dignity in word and deed, institutes carefully-planned routines, offers students meaningful, motivational content, and values conversations with individuals over textbook learning; and 3) subscription to a servant leadership approach which entails a sense of care and ethics towards working and learning with others. The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership’s [AITSL] (2015) leadership profiles outline similar characteristics of effective educational leaders. According to these documents, effective leaders: understand their impact; recognise the inseparability of leadership and context; distribute their leadership and collaborate with others; change and improve their practices throughout their careers; and almost all draw on a core repertoire of practices and behaviours although particular qualities and capabilities distinguish the level of effectiveness of each Principal (AITSL, 2015).

What is distinctive about this research is the data-driven selection of Principals and use of multiple sources to triangulate information, ensuring rigour in the research process and strengthening the reliability of the findings. What is also distinctive is the level of detailed information that has been gathered to represent the strategies and practices of each of the four Principals in their different contexts. The four case studies go further than describing the characteristics and qualities of effective leadership but provide contextualised examples of what these look like in practice informed through the perspectives of each school Principal and other participants in the study. The use of Schwab’s (1973) framework as an organising heuristic is also unique. Although the framework’s dimensions overlap and interconnect, taking each dimension as a lens to look at Principal leadership for parent-school-community engagement: brought into focus areas where Principal leadership was successful across the schools; sharpened attention to possible areas for improvement; and provided insights into emerging opportunities (e.g., use of social media and apps) and potential new threats (e.g., curriculum reform and standardised testing) to parent-school-community engagement.

References

Additional Research Needed

A two-year extension of this research (Phase III Horizon 2017-2019) will investigate eight additional schools - six schools identified from the original data-driven research (Phase I PES 2014) and two recommended by the team’s partner organisation, P&Cs Qld. These additional schools represent a broader cross-section of Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) bands. Data collection will involve one-hour telephone interviews with each school’s Principal and P&C President. Following initial analysis of these interviews, the team will approach the six identified schools to conduct one focus group with parents, teachers, or students, and/or to video a key parent-school/community engagement strategy (e.g., a parent community meeting). A Professional Development Online Module and Parent Engagement Toolkit (PET) for use by school leaders, teachers, preservice teachers, P&Cs, and parents will subsequently be developed. The PET will contain representations of strategies identified during the 2016 and 2017 case studies using, for example, videos, photographs, tipsheets, case studies, infographics, summaries, vignettes, and publications. Using a waitlist control group pre-post design, eight schools representing a cross-section of ICSEAs will pilot the PET to identify the most useful information and resources and to refine the PET for broader school use.

Value
Alignment with 2016 and 2017 DET Research Priorities

Effective Principal leadership for parent engagement practices in low SES Queensland State schools

Phase II Horizon 2016-2017 research provided examples of how Principal leadership facilitated parent-school-community engagement in four educationally disadvantaged schools. The focus on Principal leadership that included teacher, parent, and student voices extended previous parent engagement research (Phase I PES 2014) that used Principal and P&C President survey data. From the latest data, a varied collection of richly-detailed contemporary case studies provides information and insights about the parent-school-community engagement journeys of the Principals/schools and their learnings over time about effective engagement strategies. The findings have facilitated the development of a short measure of 11 proposed items of parent-school-community engagement for DET’s use in SOS instruments. The findings will also yield strategies for the Parent Engagement Toolkit (PET), which is a focus of research in Phase III Horizon 2017-2019.

Community Connections and Integration

Phase II Horizon 2016-2017 research provided insights into enablers and impediments of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parent and community engagement. Additional data in Phase III Horizon 2017-2019 will facilitate the development of resources to improve engagement between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and schools.

Research Publication

Early key research findings were presented at, The Australian Parent Engagement Conference1 Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) in Melbourne, 6-8 June, 2017 (see https://espace.library.uq.edu.au/view/UQ:674466). The presentation was entitled, Innovative parent engagement leadership practices across diverse school contexts.

An initial poster of this 2016-2017 research was presented at the DET Showcase of Research on 21 November, 2016. An updated version of this initial poster and a second poster which detailed preliminary findings of the 2016-2017 research was presented at the DET Showcase of Research on 14 November, 2017.

Early key research findings were presented by Dr Jenny Povey to the P&C Qld Area Coordinators on 15 July, 2017.

Your own prior relevant research

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