Reaching Out from Tasmanian Schools: Understanding Approaches to Support Family and Community Engagement to Improve Reading

Journal: Leadership and Policy in Schools

8203 words (including references)

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Abstract

This research considers strategies used by school leaders to engage, involve, and support families and local communities to assist their children to become more able readers. It uses data collected from case study research to analyse the strategies used by schools and highlights the role that school leadership plays in supporting processes designed to lead to improved reading. The case studies were drawn from schools where participants had attended professional learning called the Principals as Literacy Leaders (PALL) program. The study shows that a range of strategies were used to reach out and involve families and the community with efforts made to build the capacity of both teachers and parents to form partnerships. However, the data also showed that one area identified for ongoing consideration is improving opportunities for parents to be included in decision-making about their children’s learning.

KEYWORDS: Principals as Literacy Leaders, learning to read, family engagement, community engagement, case study research, Tasmania
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Introduction

In Australia, the ideal of parent, family and community engagement with children’s school learning is not new. As far back as 1934, a General Course of Study from a Department of Education stated:

It is considered that the schools will do their most satisfactory work when they function as community centres and generally share in community life. To aid this it is suggested that the full co-operation of residents and all others interested in education should be sought…

(Education Department, Victoria, 1933)

This long-held position that family involvement will assist children to do better in school remains as an underlying principle across Australian education systems. In 2017, to put this principle into practice, the Tasmanian government introduced the Learning in Families Together (LIFT) program, to “encourage collaboration between home, school and the community to help lift the literacy and numeracy learning outcomes for all children”. The program, intended for parents of students from Kindergarten to Year 2, outlined that it value[s] families as their child’s first and continuing teacher; creates pathways for two-way communication between them and school; build[s] shared expectations about learning; focuses on ways to support children’s literacy and numeracy learning and connect learning at home and school; and involve[s] them in decisions about their children’s learning

(Department of Education, 2017).

This paper addresses the question, “How have school leaders engaged and involved families and the wider community in literacy learning?” and considers the way schools, led by school leaders, initiate, support and maintain family and community engagement.
Information about the content of the PALL program of professional learning is available in Chapters 1 and 2 of Dempster et al. (2017).

**Review of the Literature**

Seminal studies in the United States (Coleman et al., 1966; Jencks et al., 1972) argued that schools had little effect upon the success of students in comparison to the effects of students’ own ability and social backgrounds; the Coleman Report (1966, 325) concluded: “Schools bring little influence to bear on a child's achievement that is independent of his background and general social context” and this led to the belief that schools make no difference and that education cannot compensate for society (Bernstein, 1970). In their 40-year retrospective of Coleman’s work, Gamoran and Long (2006, 19) concluded:

> Forty years on, the findings of the Coleman report hold up remarkably well, in some ways distressingly so … the lessons of EEO and the research that followed in its wake leave little room for optimism about the power of schools and schooling to bring about equality of opportunity in the sense of equality of results, let alone equal participation.

Arising from this research three different improvement tracks emerged. The school effectiveness movement attempted to establish that schools by themselves can make a difference to the educational achievements of students, arguing that an effective school was one with no significant achievement gaps between students from various social classes (Lezotte and Snyder, 2011). The second track opposed the effectiveness research; for example, Gorard’s (2010, 745) paper “considers some of the reasons why SE [school effectiveness] has become dominant, outlines the damage this dominant model causes and begins to shape alternative ways of considering what schools do”. It is the inequalities of the community in which schools were located that need to be addressed if the inequalities inside of schools were to be overcome. Gorard and See (2013, 7), in a review of literature on parent involvement, concluded:
Overall, we found no evidence that primary-age interventions to enhance parental involvement are generally effective in increasing children’s attainment. In fact, the better studies suggest the interventions can be harmful.

These two positions suggest, one the one hand, that the impact of a child’s family and social background can be overcome by the school and, on the other, that schools couldn’t make much of a difference, unless wider social reform took place.

A third track of research that emerged from the Coleman Report took a much more proactive stance. It considered how schools and parents could work more closely together, reflecting the importance of the role of parents and what might be done to enhance this partnership. The desire that parents should be “real partners in education” (Duncan, 2010, in Mapp and Kuttner, 2013) has been a focus for some decades. However, one recent move is a shift in terminology from “parent” to “family” because the traditional view of “parent” no longer applies for many families, where other family members, non-married parents or same-sex parents might be the carers of students that schools serve.

There is now substantial international research confirming that parents’ engagement in children’s learning improves not only achievement but also children’s well-being and motivation to attend school, to learn, and to complete school (Henderson, 1987; Henderson and Lezotte, 1988; Hess and Hollaway, 1984; Muller, 2009). Zellman and Waterman (1998) found significant positive correlation between parental in-school involvement and student reading scores, even after controlling for socio-economic status, ethnicity and ability, with Torpor, Keane, Shelton, and Calkins (2010) also arguing that parental involvement was significantly related to academic performance, while Park and Holloway (2017, 12) maintain there is “strong empirical evidence concerning the effectiveness of school-based PI (parental involvement)”.

Fan and Chen (2001, 1) identify other empirical research that has shown a positive effect, but also some where little evidence has been found. One key element associated with
student achievement is “parental expectations [that] reflect parents’ beliefs and attitudes toward school, teachers, subjects, and education in general. As children are likely to harbor similar attitudes and beliefs as their parents, having high parental expectations appears vital for academic achievement of children” (Wilder, 2014, 392): a position also supported by Castro et al. (2015, 41) who concluded, “The strongest associations between type of parental involvement and academic achievement were found when parents have high academic expectations for their children, develop and maintain communication with them about school activities and schoolwork, and promote the development of reading habits”. However, good relations between home and schools may reflect other factors: “More able students coming from affluent families tend to get better grades and to have parents with greater expectations for them. At the same time, the other students tend to have lower grades and parents with lower expectations” (Castro et al., 2015, 44).

Despite this inconsistent evidence, the question for current education systems is not so much whether schools should involve families, but how to go about doing it. Epstein writes about the positive impact of parental involvement on student learning with her identifying four, then six, strategies to build school and community partnerships (Epstein, 1992, 1994; Epstein et al., 2009). These resonate with Australian research as well, for instance, “There is consistent evidence that parents’ encouragement, activities, interest at home, and participation at school affect their children’s achievement, even after students’ ability and family socio-economic status are taken into account” (Muller, 2009, 13). Emerson et al. (2012, 3) also confirmed that “positive parental engagement in learning improves academic achievement, wellbeing and productivity”.

However, definitions are important. Ferguson (2019) argues that parent involvement has traditionally meant coming to the school for meetings, providing other forms of in-school assistance, supporting school assignments at home, and making sure students are ready for
school, similar to the first four characteristics of the Epstein research. Ferguson argues that “involvement” has not been successful because it was narrowly defined, is a one-way approach and left too many families out (due to factors including language differences, work commitments, own experiences of school). Ferlazzo (2013) focuses on the differences between “involvement” and “engagement”. He argues that involvement is controlled by the school (doing to) whereas engagement is a partnership (doing with) and as schools, students and families are part of communities, these also impact on students’ learning.

The Australian Government’s Family-School Partnerships Framework: A Guide for Schools and Families (Australian Government, 2019) identifies communicating; connecting learning at home and at school; building community and identity; recognising the role of the family; consultative decision-making; collaborating beyond the school; and participating, as being the critical elements of engagement. Yet, despite substantial work in Australian schools, there still has only been moderate success. A consistent finding from a number of studies conducted as part of PALL is that parent and family engagement is seen as one of the more difficult tasks of school leaders as they try to improve literacy learning (Dempster, Lovett, and Flückiger, 2011; Townsend, Dempster, Johnson, Bayetto, and Stevens, 2015; Townsend, Wilkinson, and Stevens, 2015).

So, the first consideration for the current study is to investigate what school leaders actually do to promote family engagement and involvement in Tasmanian schools. Much of the leadership literature has been rife with what Mulford (2008, 38) calls “adjectival leadership”. He suggests that there are the accepted theories of school leadership – Instructional (Hallinger and Murphy, 1985), Transformational (Leithwood, Jantzi, and Dart, 1990) and Distributed (Spillane, 2006) – but there are many others as well. The common element of much of the research is the belief that it is school leaders (and teachers) alone that transform schools, and families are relegated to supporting roles.
Mapp and Kuttner (2013) argue that the issue of home-school relations is a two-way problem; that school staff lack the opportunity to build capacity for partnerships with the home, but also that families lack the opportunity to build capacity for partnerships with the school, and they argue that both are needed. Capacity encompasses the tools, resources and opportunities that can be drawn on to support school improvement. Cohen, Moffit, and Goldin (2007) argue that capacity must also be accompanied by will, which encompasses the attitudes, beliefs and desire to involve families at higher levels. This is supported by Berg, Melaville, and Blank (2006, 1):

Community engagement is a two-way street where the school, families, and the community actively work together, creating networks of shared responsibility for student success.

Leadership for Learning (Swaffield and MacBeath, 2008; Townsend and MacBeath, 2011; MacBeath et al., 2018) gained support in the past decade and it takes a broader view of building capacity through its focus on learning for everyone in the school community. This approach underpins the work of the PALL professional learning, where shared leadership is key: “Achieving improvements in learning and reading achievement requires shared leadership inside the school and partnerships reaching out into the community” (Dempster et al., 2017, 12). Such an approach is supported by Valli, Stefanski, and Jacobson (2018, 12) who argue:

Keys to partnership building are clarifying the power-sharing boundaries and responsibilities of school leadership as well as recognizing that more comprehensive forms of partnership require school leaders to undertake a far-reaching transformation of traditional school structures and norms.

Johnson et al. (2014, 39), in their study of indigenous communities, used the phrase “leadership both-ways”, defined as “a philosophy of education that combines traditional
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge and ways of learning with Western educational traditions”. If capacity building is to be successful, then the issues of two-way communication and involving families in decisions about their child’s education are brought into focus.

**The Current Study**

This study will investigate what school leaders actually do to engage families and communities. It will investigate how they communicate, build positive relations and share expectations, and link the work of school to home, to families, and to their school community. It also considers what school leaders do to build capacity and the will needed by both teachers and families to develop a partnership approach that will support improved student learning of reading.

**Methods**

The data being reported focus on building relationships between schools, families and their communities and are part of a broader database looking at how school leaders improve reading in their schools, from a 2017-2018 study funded by the Tasmanian Department of Education. It seeks to address the following questions:

- What specific activities do school leaders use to reach out to families and communities?
- What strategies are used to build the capacity of teachers and parents in ways that enable a partnership approach to the learning of reading?

Brooks and Normore (2015, 799) argue: When designing qualitative studies of educational leadership, it is important to choose an appropriate research design. They also argue: “A study of a semester, school year, classroom or school, might demand a case study design.”
Yin (1984, 23) defines the case study research method as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used”. The case study approach was selected to consider a broad but manageable variation of in-depth cases (Simons, 2015), as the intention was to study how school leaders implemented interventions in the subsequent year with data collected from five case study schools. The qualitative data were collected to explore participants’ experiences (Palinkas et al., 2011), in this case, of implementing family and community engagement strategies. As those involved in the interviews were “full-time school practitioners who are steeped in the everyday issues of schooling” (Bowers, 2017), the case study interviews were treated as instances of action research (Herr and Anderson, 2015) where “problems of practice” could be identified and considered.

**Participants and Data Collection**

In 2017, a PALL professional learning program was conducted in Tasmania. There were three groups, one of which was the Learning in Families Together (LIFT) program, with a specific focus on improving engagement with families and communities. Invitations were offered to PALL attendees to volunteer to be part of the case study research, with four primary schools and one district high school selected so as to identify any interconnected themes for comparison across cases (Simons, 2015). Two of the schools were LIFT schools (School 3 and School 5). In 2018, the case study schools were visited four times. Semi-structured interviews with school leaders (four times, \( n = 15 \) in total), and focus groups (Gower, 1994) of teachers (twice, \( n = 19 \)), and parents (once, \( n = 18 \)) were held, to identify experiences of stakeholders in the school population, as well as to evaluate questions and clarify definitions. In total, there were 37 interviews, and more than 30 hours of interview
material was collected. The interviews were transcribed and returned to those involved for their information and correction if necessary. On two occasions after the interviews in every school, the researchers reported back about their reflections and recommendations for schools to consider.

The Case Studies

Two schools were in the north of the state, two in the south, and one in the middle. Only one was a suburban school, with four being in smaller communities. Each of the schools was below average for the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) with a low of 60% and a high of 90% of families below the average socio-economic level of Australian families. The Indigenous population of the schools ranged between 10%-20% and only a few students were from a language background other than English (LBOTE).

There was no clear pattern related to student achievement as measured by NAPLAN (National Assessment of Progress in Literacy and Numeracy scores for 2012-2017), other than most of the schools were achieving at similar or slightly better levels than other Tasmanian “like” schools. The Year 3 reading scores in Schools 1 and 3 had been fluctuating but were similar to like schools. Schools 2 and 4 had been fairly stable and were slightly above other schools and School 5 had improved and was above other like schools. The Year 5 reading scores in Schools 1, 3 and 5 had been fairly stable and were about the same as other schools. School 2 had scores that fluctuated and were below other like schools and School 4 scores had slightly declined but were still better than other like schools. The reading scores of Year 7 students in the district high school had dropped over the past few years and were well below those of like schools.

Reading interventions identified by the primary schools showed similar trends towards whole-school consistency in approaches and the use of explicit teaching. For School
the intervention was “focusing mostly on comprehension”, “oral language”, on “the early childhood years” to be addressed through “guided reading” and “with explicit teaching”; for School 3, it was to develop “a consistent approach to reading instruction”, “having consistency across classes by having a shared instructional model” and focusing on “high impact teaching strategies”. For School 4, the intervention was “the development of a whole school approach to reading” around “guided reading, the running records, vocabulary, and phonics and phonological awareness” and for School 5, it was “explicit teaching, the K-6 reading and our wellbeing”. In the district high school, the reading intervention was “explicitly teaching the comprehension strategies from Prep to Grade 6, and … in the 7/8 and the 8/9”.

The data collected showed that all five case study schools were disadvantaged to a greater or lesser extent than the average Australian school community, and that this disadvantage created negative impacts for the schools. In some cases, difficulties were identified – *there’s huge barriers in this community … it is a big challenge* (School 5 principal) – that were significant social problems: *We have a lot of kids here with trauma and tricky lives* (School 1 principal). These, in turn, impacted on students’ ability to be engaged and to learn.

… we actually realised that those children that hadn’t made relative gain … were all kids that had experienced significant trauma … there’s probably, one in 10 of our children … mostly to do with family violence. (School 2 principal)

… a lot of our students across our schools have a trauma background. And it's really relevant in terms of their engagement and they are kids who are probably more disengaged than other students. (School 3 principal)

However, this can no longer be used as an excuse:

We can’t keep saying, “Oh, it’s because the parents don’t read” or “It’s because the parents don’t care” because the parents do care and we’ve got to connect with them and we’re the professionals. (School 5 principal)
From the information related to the case study schools it appeared that each of the school communities faces significant problems, so reaching out to the families and communities is both critical and a challenge. The data collected through the research try to shed some light on how school leaders attempt to do this in ways that will support improvements in student reading.

**Student and Parent Surveys**

Only School 2 and School 3 accepted an offer to conduct surveys with students and parents about reading. In total, 405 responses from students were received. The data indicated that 50% always enjoyed reading (4% never did), 53% felt they were always good at reading (6% never were), 34% indicated their teacher always talked about how to improve their reading (11% never) and 41% felt teachers always taught in interesting ways (13% never). However, when asked about reading at home, 36% indicated that their family always helped them with their reading (26% never) and 38% indicated that their family read for fun at home (18% never). There were 80 parent respondents and differences between Schools 2 and 3 became clearer. For School 2, 70% of parents indicated they always read with their child (2% never) and 61% always read themselves (4% never). However, in School 3, only 44% always read with their child (6% never) and 44% always read themselves (3% never).

**Data Analysis**

The case study research enabled the interview data from school leaders, teachers and parents to be used for a qualitative, explorative study (Boeckxstaens et al., 2012, 183) to explore and compare the dimensions of family and community engagement in the schools. The transcripts were loaded into NVivo 12, a Qualitative Data Analysis Software (QDAS) program (Leech and Onwuegbuzie, 2011) which was used for both data management and data analysis (Shelly and Sibert, 1986) to “substantiate and describe the findings” (Armour, Bradshaw, and
Roseborough, 2009, 606). From the interview transcripts, more than 2,500 separate references were entered into the NVivo 12 program. There were 265 references from the five case study schools related to issues associated with family and community engagement, with more than half specifically focusing on engaging parents and families. The researchers conducted an independent exploratory constant comparison analysis (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) to code the data (Creswell, 2013) and the text segments. Nodes and sub-nodes were established for each of the themes emerging from the coding of the transcripts to facilitate “retrieval of related quotations in order to examine patterns and trends in the data” (de Villiers, Koko-Mhlahlo, and Senekal, 2005, 523). Using a constant comparison analysis, two “parent” nodes were established: Engaging with Parents and Community, and Building Capacity and Will. Text segments that described the themes identified were attached to those nodes and further analysis identified a series of “child” nodes that considered communication, relationships, partnerships and capacity building. The nodes, and sections of text included within them, were further reviewed, compared and examined after the coding was completed, to establish any discrepancies for each transcript. Any discrepancies were discussed and allocated to one or more of the identified codes. The nodes were used to respond to the research questions:

- What specific activities did school leaders use to reach out to families and communities?
- What strategies were used to build the capacity of both teachers and parents in ways that enable a partnership approach to the learning of reading?
Results and Discussion

What specific activities did school leaders use to reach out to families and communities?

The Australian Government’s Framework (n.d.) approach to family engagement, and Epstein’s (1992) six forms of involvement, can be found in the Tasmanian Education Department’s goals for the LIFT program, namely: two-way communication, building shared expectations, supporting children’s literacy learning, connecting learning at home and school, and involving parents in decisions about their children’s learning (Tasmanian Department of Education, 2017).

Communication

Traditional forms of communication, such as newsletters and messages going home, were still present in the case study schools. We have written about our focus [on reading] in the school newsletter and in the class newsletters so they know it’s a focus of our school… (School 1 assistant principal). In addition, schools used social media in ways which now enabled parents to respond to the teacher or the school, but also to initiate communications. These new opportunities were welcomed by the parents who were interviewed.

… we use something called Class Dojo which is an online communication. (School 1 teacher)

… we have got a school Facebook page. (School 3 assistant principal)

… there’s a school Facebook page which is very well subscribed and there’s a school association Facebook page so they sort of complement one another and Facebook in this community is a really effective communication channel … it’s a trusted channel people take notice of. (School 2 parent)
A difficulty that arose in one school was that different social media programs were used to communicate in different classrooms, and parents might have had to use different avenues of communication for children in different grades. One teacher indicated, *I have all but one of my parents connected onto Class Dojo* (School 2 teacher), but then another said, *I’m on Seesaw, which is similar, I guess…* (School 2 teacher). What this did was flag the need for consistent approaches across the school, not only with issues related to teaching and learning, but for those related to communication as well. One principal identified the problem:

> We’ve asked the parents to tell us and they’ve actually said that their child in the Grade 2/3 gets regular communication, they know about what they’re learning … they know how they’re going … and the person who’s got a child right next door in 3/4 isn’t getting any of that. (School 5 principal)

The data suggest that there are multiple ways in which schools are communicating with parents, with traditional strategies such as newsletters, but also now through a range of technologies that allow for more immediate communication. These enable parents to respond and initiate communications when they need to, as suggested by Berg et al. (2006). However, the data also suggest that there is a need for schools to work through these issues further, to ensure that the communications emanating from the school are consistent, that they recognise that not all parents are equally able to use the new technologies (Castro et al., 2015) and that strategies for engagement, such as communications, need to be applied in a school-wide fashion. If parents have to deal with a multiplicity of processes, it may lead them to being less responsive to the school, which may have a negative effect on student progress (The Australian Parents Council, 2009).

*Relationships and Partnerships*

Teachers sought to build positive relationships with families:
I often have chats with parents in the morning, early childhood’s great for that. (School 2 teacher)

I actually think that the personal encounters with the teacher at drop off and pick up and see them as most useful. (School 2 parent)

Such conversations often focused attention on children’s progress.

When our staff are engaging, it's not just banter for the sake of banter. It's really important conversations around learning and students. (School 5 principal)

This allowed teachers to focus on building learning expectations, as expressed by both teachers and parents:

… parents do come in regularly to drop their children off, so I will make a point of talking to them if I feel that their child is making really good gains in reading or whatever they’re doing actually and let them know how they’re going. (School 5 teacher)

… our teacher speaks to us, like if she ever needs to speak to us about something, she'll pull us aside. (School 3 parent)

The value of using assemblies to build relationships and expectations was identified by a number of schools: … we know that if parents come to an assembly or they come to see their child, that if we participate in anything, that their commitment to the school, their regular contact with the school seems to grow, and they have that faith in that school (School 5 assistant principal).

Assemblies gave schools the opportunity to focus attention on student learning, and enabled them to reach out to other family members and community members:

… we’ve often done an assembly where it’s been a grandparent assembly, where grandparents bring their books. But also … we’ve done it with people that they know in the community that come along and bring a book that’s important to their job … children
see that no matter what job you do, there’s reading involved. (School 3 assistant principal)

Reaching out beyond the school to the home and the community was made easier because for many of the schools there was a defined community, in ways that schools in suburban areas do not have. The schools were small and students, and many of the teachers, lived locally:

… one of the strengths of this school is the community … it’s a nice small community school. There’s a lot of the teachers live in the community … It’s very community based, I like that. (School 2 principal)

Special events, such as Book Week, gave schools the opportunity to reach out to families and beyond:

… during Book Week, families and kids get dressed in their pyjamas and come back for supper and read stories together and then we have a couple of adult volunteers that read a story together. (School 5 principal)

Last year I think the Book Week focus was reading anywhere, anytime, so we focused on it didn’t have to be a book. There were lots of things you read, so I had a passport and there were street signs and reading something at the supermarket. (School 5 principal)

Schools recognised the value of making reading something that was happening not just in school and at home and how this supported students to become more engaged and involved in the process of learning to read:

… we had all this, that reading wasn’t just in a classroom, and we read all the time … the kids loved it and got really into it. And the feedback from the community was it was really nice to have students come in wanting to read and actually share in that experience with the community. (School 5 principal)

… what we did this year was went around and got photos of different people in the community that children would know like the library or the hospital or the supermarket and their favourite treasured book. … We had a treasure hunt where students had to go
and find different treasure books at different places around the community. (School 5 principal)

… our Prep/1s visited the hospital and read to the patients in the hospital and there was someone at the hospital reading to them. (School 5 principal)

The response from parents and the community was positive and affirming for what the teachers and the school were trying to do.

… they have fantastic staff who are expert in what they do … there’s the expertise, there’s the support and the kids love it. (School 5 parent)

I think I feel quite well supported. It’s hands-on, it’s definitely a hands-on, and I like it how there’s a lot of focus on getting back in the classroom. (School 5 parent)

The school has been brilliant … if I need to borrow anything for extra sessions and stuff instead of going out and buying stuff, I can borrow it from the school and stuff. (School 3 parent)

When schools sought support, it was forthcoming from both families and community:

… it’s just all volunteers. Everybody wanting to support because there’s, so there’s already that culture. (School 3 principal)

Our relationship with the community centre is continuing to grow and strengthen … each year they give each child a book in the LiL program. (School 2 principal)

… the local Rotary Club used to buy a book for every child from prep to grade two. (School 4 teacher)

However, as one principal confirmed, there is still some way to go: ... we’re still struggling to get parents to engage here on site (School 1 principal). Nevertheless, the data provided evidence that schools showed a willingness to build relations between home, community and school in ways to support student learning, promoting shared expectations and establishing partnerships with the community (Tasmanian Department of Education, 2017). There was
also evidence that schools were moving the activity from one of involvement towards one of engagement (Ferlazzo, 2013).

What strategies were used to build the capacity of teachers and parents in ways that enabled a partnership approach to the learning of reading?

In order to support improved engagement with families, schools showed that they were willing to provide learning opportunities for staff and families. It was clear that the LIFT schools (Schools 3 and 5) were in a better position to do this because of the support they received from government through the LIFT program.

… as a part of the work we did last year that stemmed from LIFT and communication, we developed a whole school communication protocol about what we would commit to, and these are linked documents to support people. (School 5 principal)

The research suggests (Epstein et al., 2009) that two of the main barriers to engaging with parents is that often, they don’t feel that they are welcome and, even if they do, they don’t feel that they have the skills to become involved. The LIFT schools were very aware of these issues:

… really aware through the LIFT parent engagement, that trying to make the school appear welcoming, because one of the things we did as a part of parent engagement is, quite often schools are not welcoming through the way things are set up. (School 3 principal)

I think everyone cares and loves and wants to do the best by their children, but whether they have the knowledge capacity or understanding, I think that’s a big barrier and it’s something that we’re trying to shift. (School 5 principal)

One principal summed up the reasoning for why the LIFT program should be expanded: We can’t keep saying, “Oh, it’s because the parents don’t read” or “It’s because the parents
don’t care” because the parents do care and we’ve got to connect with them and we’re the professionals (School 5 principal).

The LIFT schools also understood that to change this, a focus on students and how parents might help them learn was the key. Families were more likely to come to school events if they knew that doing so would support their child’s learning:

… there’s a definite correlation between attendance and whether it’s to do with children’s learning … if it’s about the children’s learning and learning with their children, the attendance is quite substantial. (School 5 principal)

… just having that level of community understanding of why we’re doing stuff and how we’re doing it and, and that, that’s been gold. (School 2 principal)

The LIFT schools used the additional resources for teacher learning and were able to provide both people and resources support, dedicated to improve reading, for parents:

We’ve tried to get lots of people trained in family partnerships across the K to 12 sector. (School 5 principal)

We have a home school liaison officer as well who makes the connections with the parents. (School 3 principal)

… they have a pack that they can take home and practice, and there have been a couple of families where that’s been hugely beneficial. (School 5 assistant principal)

However, a lack of resources did not stop the other schools from finding innovative ways to support parents to improve their capacity to help their children learn reading:

We’re engaging with some outside reading volunteers who are coming in and reading with students on a regular basis … one of our retired teachers has come in and trained those volunteers on effectively supporting young readers. (School 1 principal)
I sit in the office with the volunteers, and that's a really sort of rigorous process around training and monitoring the process, to make sure they're doing the right thing. (School 2 principal)

… we developed key rings for parents to support them to be able to support their children at home with reading … that we did for all the different levels … we kept it really simple … we gave them a book as well last year, so they got given a book and they got given [a key ring] … they get an envelope just to communicate that your child has moved to the next level, here is your next key ring. (School 4 assistant principal)

… the school has run Parent Sessions around the changes in the reading program. Newsletters, Facebook articles, with strategies on how to support your students in reading. (School 3 principal)

The data clearly show that families and communities were welcomed into the process of supporting student learning in reading and that schools had used a number of innovative strategies to build the capacity of both teachers and families (Mapp and Kuttner, 2013).

However, one notable absence in the data is clear evidence of parents becoming more actively engaged in decisions about their child’s education, despite it being one of the key elements of the LIFT program (Tasmanian Department of Education, 2017) and identified by both Epstein et al. (2009) and the Australian Government Framework (n.d.). Perhaps, given the fact that the LIFT program has only been recently initiated and is still only within a limited number of schools, this goal might be seen as being aspirational and more achievable over time.

Summary of Findings

Finding 1: Schools are using a range of strategies to improve family and community engagement

The data from the case study schools showed that schools were making substantial attempts to improve communication with parents, both electronically, through newsletters, and
through personal conversations, and that they are encouraging families and communities to be actively involved in reading initiatives in ways that are designed to engage students and help them see the importance of reading. There was also evidence that volunteering was happening, that schools were attempting to improve learning at home by providing parents with both knowledge and resources to use, and that communities were seen as active players in the process. In this sense the data support the findings of Epstein et al. (2009) and the aspirations of the LIFT program, even in schools that were not LIFT schools (Tasmanian Department of Education, 2017). There was evidence that there were now more diverse two-way channels of communication and activity (Berg et al., 2006).

**Finding 2: Schools are building their capacity for family and community engagement**

The data suggested that schools were trying to build the capacity of their staff to engage with families and communities and were also trying to boost the capacity of parents to support their child at home, endorsing the arguments of Mapp and Kuttner (2013). Teachers were now engaging parents in meaningful conversations about how they might support their child in reading and this was added to by providing families with specific knowledge and support (such as key rings and targeted workshops). The data suggest this not only increased parental involvement at the school, but also made families more aware and supportive of what the school was trying to do.

**Finding 3: LIFT provided significant support for improving family and community engagement**

The data suggest that schools that were involved in the LIFT initiative were receptive to the research and were feeling better placed to implement activities. LIFT-involved participants were increasingly positive about their improved leadership skills, they were more positive
about family and community engagement success and they provided a substantial range of options designed to engage, and build the capacity of, both teachers and families in ways that enabled a partnership approach to flourish.

**Finding 4: One element still missing is involving parents and community in decision-making about their child’s learning**

One area identified by the research as necessary, that was not evident in the current study, was the importance of involving parents in decision-making about their child’s learning. It is true that the communities that many of the PALL participants serve may have members that might be less willing to be involved in such activity, but on the other hand the data collected did not show a great deal of initiative on the part of the schools to encourage this either. Although PALL considers “shared leadership”, much of the conversation around this considers how school leaders might share leadership of the reading initiative across the school, and perhaps there is not sufficient reference to how this shared leadership might include parents and families. It is instructive that in the report *Principal as Literacy Leaders in Indigenous Communities - PALLIC* (Johnson et al., 2014), the researchers talk about the importance of leadership “both ways”, where, in Indigenous communities, it was important to have a community leader to ensure that progress was made. It may well be that schools might need to consider this approach, even in school communities that are non-Indigenous, if they are to be fully successful in their attempts to educate every student. This brings into focus the issues of power sharing (Valli et al., 2018) and the leadership responsibilities and attitudes that might need to change to enable this to happen.

**Conclusion**

The research has shown that connecting with families and communities continues to be an important element in school improvement. The data confirmed the importance of the various
elements identified in previous literature, but also identified that one element recommended, involving families and communities in decision-making about reading initiatives, is not perhaps happening at the level that is desired. The research has shown the importance of reaching out to families and communities to encourage high levels of student reading engagement and enjoyment, the need to maintain regular and varied communications with families to keep them informed, but also to provide them with the knowledge and resources they need to support their children to learn to read. Finally, the research has shown that schools are using many different strategies to engage teachers, families and the wider community in partnership approaches to school improvement and student learning, but also, that there is still some way to go.

References


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1 The data discussed in this article are from a larger research project funded by the Tasmanian Department of Education and managed by the Griffith Institute for Educational Research at Griffith University. The authors thank both organisations for their support.