

Linking To Learn And Learning To Link:

Building Integrated Systems of School-Based Support for Children and Families in a Disadvantaged Community

Aims and Background

The central goal of the *Linking to Learn-Learning to Link* project is to implement and evaluate changed institutional practices within primary schools and the family welfare agency Mission Australia to enhance children's school performance and behaviour. These institutional changes are designed to build bridges between the two critical developmental domains of family and school, by providing resources to schools to support families and children with difficulties and to assist families to become more meaningfully involved in their children's schooling¹.

This is being achieved by (a) locating family support professionals within schools (rarely part of routine welfare agency or school practices); (b) preparing teachers to promote home-school relationships, to act on the understanding that families are crucial partners in children's learning, and to work collaboratively with parents to achieve a better fit between home and school experiences; and (c) transferring skills from specialist educators to classroom teachers to ensure that children with special needs in terms of cultural background, language, social skills and behaviour are supported within the school environment with less need for exclusion.

These concrete strategies will help put into practice what is now acknowledged mainly in rhetoric: the need to create an integrated system of comprehensive support for children. This represents a shift in institutional thinking and the adoption of a culture of collaboration where independent systems (school and welfare agency) work together and with families to achieve their common goal (promoting positive outcomes for children) in recognition of the fact that children's home and school lives cannot be separated.

The project is being conducted in the community of Inala where, over the past six years, the *Pathways to Prevention* project has been developed, piloted and implemented. *Pathways* is a collaborative project between the Key Centre and Mission Australia that has the support of the Queensland government and engages local schools and community groups as partners (Homel et al., 2001). Inala is a long-established 'outer-fringe' suburb that has recently been caught up in Brisbane's urban sprawl. Census and other indicators identify it as the poorest urban area in Queensland. Median weekly family income (\$500-599) falls well below that for the wider Brisbane area (\$800-999). Fewer than 24% of the adult population in the district have completed a high school education (Brisbane 43%). Culturally and linguistically diverse, 32% of households have home languages other than English (Brisbane 10%). It is a community with a high percentage of young people (32.7% are 18 years or younger vs. 27% across Brisbane), and higher than average rates of single parent families (23.2% vs. 11.6%) and unemployment (20.1% vs. 7.8%). (For a vivid qualitative picture of life in Inala, see Peel, 2003).

The *Pathways* project was first fully implemented in 2002, and in its first phase (till 2005) was focused on supporting preschool children's transition to school. It incorporated preschool-based training for children in communication and social skills and (through Mission Australia) community-based support for local families with children in the preschool age-range. Benefits of

¹ Our definitions of 'parent' and 'family' in this study are very broad, referring to the primary carer or primary care group for the child, whatever forms they take. In Inala traditional nuclear families with two parents are common, but so also are extended, blended, sole parent and other types of families.

children's participation in preschool-based programs included improved language, behaviour and social skills². Parents' rate of participation in the *Pathways* Family Independence Program also influenced outcomes for children: children of families who made frequent use of family support were rated more highly by teachers in terms of their readiness for school at the end of the preschool year than children whose parents had made little or no use of the family programs. However, our data do not include some needy families who did not access the family support programs for reasons related to poverty.

Poverty and (more generally) socio-economic status (SES) are known to be associated with a wide range of cognitive, social, emotional and health outcomes for children (Keating & Hertzman, 1999). The impact of SES for children occurs at multiple levels, including family and school and is thought to be mediated in part by children's access to material and social resources – the lack of which has the potential to place children at risk for developmental problems (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997), school failure (Bradley et al., 2001) and conduct problems (Battin Pearson et al., 2000). Differences between low and high SES children's access to resources comes in the form of variation in their level of exposure to cognitively stimulating recreational and learning experiences and materials (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002), socialisation patterns that emphasise verbal skills (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000), positive parenting strategies that include high involvement, warm responsive relationships, adequate monitoring of children and avoidance of the use of negative control techniques (Bolger et al., 1995; McCoy et al., 1999). There is little schools can do to affect directly a child's SES. However, they can influence social capital and improve outcomes for children by working in partnership with families and service agencies to increase social resources and reduce the level of socio-emotional hardship and family social isolation.

The beneficial impact of positive home-school relationships (Adams & Christenson, 1998; 2000), parent involvement (Grolnick et al., 1997) and parent socialisation practices (Hill, 2001) on children's academic achievement is now well documented. However, this relationship is less well understood for primary children than for adolescent students. Even though school entry is a critical time for young children and their families, few studies have systematically examined the relationship between parenting behaviour and school performance in the preschool and primary years (Hill, 2001). Those that have (e.g., Marcon, 1999) demonstrate that, as is the case with older children, increased parent involvement in school is associated with more positive development and enhanced acquisition of basic school skills. Marcon (1999) found that this relationship between parent involvement and positive child outcomes was especially strong for preschool boys, suggesting that parent involvement may be a particularly important factor contributing to boys' academic achievement in the early school years.

Significantly, our understanding of the mechanisms that account for the association between parent involvement and children's school performance is undeveloped (Hill & Craft, 2003). These gaps in our understanding have the potential to limit the effectiveness of schools' efforts to engage parents in their children's education. The current project add to understanding in this area, with the ways in which parent involvement impact on child outcomes the specific focus of a PhD project being undertaken by Ms Samantha Batchelor. We need to know more about the conditions that facilitate parent involvement and the role of parent involvement in children's early school achievement for a number of reasons:

1. As the early school years mark a time when patterns of behaviour and attitudes relating to ongoing performance are being established, it is important to understand how to foster the type

² 2003 post-intervention data were collected in December so recent results are not yet published. For analyses of earlier data see Hay et al. (2003) and Homel et al. (2003). Freiberg & Homel (2004) contains preliminary results for 2003 and 2004, including data on the effects of parental involvement in their children's learning and in family support activities. See www.gu.edu.au/centre/kceljag (under 'publications') for working papers.

of home-school relationships that contribute to the establishment and maintenance of positive attachment and adjustment to school at this critical time to set the scene for continued success.

2. Academic self-concepts develop in response to early learning experiences (e.g., Helmke & van Aken, 1995). Once formed, it is believed that these self-perceptions have an on-going impact on achievement through their effect on motivation (e.g., Schunk, 1991). Therefore, if parent involvement has a facilitating effect on attainment during the early school years at a time when academic self-concept is being set, then encouraging parent involvement offers a strategic way to exert an enduring influence on children's school success.
3. When demographic factors such as SES and parent education levels are controlled, indicators of parent engagement such as parent expectations and satisfaction with the quality of their children's education are the most consistent predictors of academic achievement (Kohl et al., 2000; Reynolds & Gill, 1994)
4. Unlike factors such as SES, the quality of home-school collaboration and parent involvement are factors that potentially can be influenced by sensitive and competent intervention and school practices. However:-
5. The development of effective parent engagement programs depends on our understanding of the processes via which parent involvement has its effect on children's achievement.

To build a higher degree of connectedness between schools and families, the project aims to incorporate a range of activities designed to enable parents and teachers to work together to foster children's positive development. It includes the combination of:

- (i) A school-based family support service that enhances family-school links and makes it easier for families who need support to access suitable services.
- (ii) A program of professional development and support for teachers to build their capacity to engage parents as partners in enriching children's education and to cater more effectively to the individual needs of children.

The rationale for this intervention model is based on the insights we have gained from our previous work within the *Pathways to Prevention* project as well as research that shows that engaging parents with schools and supporting families is difficult, takes a number of years, and requires dedicated resources.

Justification for making family support more accessible by locating services in schools:

- Families who are supported in their parenting role by strong networks of practical and emotional support are better able to cope in stressful situations, better able to make effective and positive parenting decisions, less likely to abuse their children, and tend to be warmer and more affectionate towards their children (Cochran & Niego, 1995).
- Parents with strong social networks tend to be more involved in their children's education, facilitating children's development and performance (Sheldon, 2000). They are also likely to have a better understanding of child development, and parents who accurately judge their children's developmental capacities are able to stimulate their children in developmentally appropriate ways to promote child competence.
- Our work in *Pathways* has demonstrated that even among disenfranchised groups of parents who fail to access mainstream services, social networks can be developed through the provision of sensitive and culturally appropriate family support services.
- Locating this service directly in the school setting should establish an efficient, effective, equitable and non-stigmatising process for ensuring that parents have good access to a range of

social support services. This is preferable to the current ad-hoc ‘charitable assistance’ provided by principals and teachers that although very well intentioned subjects them to stresses and risks for which they are not trained or resourced

- As part of the *Pathways Project* we have successfully piloted a program in which a family support worker spends time in the preschool classroom with teachers during periods when there is a good chance of contacting parents.

Justification for teacher professional development and support:

- Although schools’ efforts to build equitable relationships among parents and teachers can increase parent engagement and help families to feel more connected to their children’s school and confident in their capacity to support their children’s learning (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997), there are many barriers to parent engagement including school factors such as (a) biased teacher perceptions and attitudes that parents are disinterested; (b) lack of resources, and (c) insufficient teacher training on how to collaborate with parents (Daniels & Shumow, 2003).
- Family factors such as poor socio-emotional functioning, chaotic lifestyles, and personal histories of school failure can also act as barriers to parent engagement and influence children’s school performance (Raffaele & Knoff, 1999; Grolnick et al., 1997) making the school’s job of engaging families even harder.
- Therefore, teachers need to be supported by professional development activities that provide strategies for engaging parents in consequential ways and addressing the individual needs of children without recourse to exclusion (Goldenburg, 2001). Our experience in Inala is that this need is heightened for families and children from low SES and non-mainstream cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

Significance and Innovation

The project is *significant* for the new knowledge it will provide about developmental prevention/ early intervention in disadvantaged communities (a current federal government priority), and for the new light it will shine on the causes of and remedies for the enormous gulf that exists between families and local schools in disadvantaged areas. The project is *innovative* because of its focus on changing institutional practices to build better connections between the key developmental settings of home and school, and because of its basis in a university-schools-welfare agency partnership that is designed to support families and improve child outcomes.

Developmental prevention did not become prominent in policy thinking in this country until the late 1990s, when a range of influences, including the publication of *Pathways to Prevention* (Homel et al., 1999) and the funding of large-scale overseas experiments such as *Sure Start* in the UK, drew attention to the potential of this approach to bring about long-term improvements in child outcomes. However, the local knowledge-base on what works and why is still limited. The *Pathways to Prevention Project* in Inala is an attempt to operationalise the recommendations in the report concerned with ‘doing developmental prevention’ in disadvantaged areas. The report and the project have had an extensive influence on policy and practice, most recently through the new \$400 million federal *Communities for Children program*, which aims to replicate *Pathways* in more than 40 needy areas (http://www.pm.gov.au/news/media_releases/media_Release780.html).

A significant feature of the *Pathways Project* is the way it brings together and underpins with research both welfare practices (community development and family support) and developmental programs (e.g., parent education and child social skills programs). This innovative linking of two approaches that reflect the methods of different disciplines is being extended in the *Linking to Learn Project*. Importantly, this goes beyond what can be accomplished through *Communities for Children*, in that this program is focused almost exclusively on the 0-5 age range and so can throw

only limited light on one of the key challenges to emerge from the *Pathways Project* in Inala: how to bridge the gulf between disadvantaged families and the school system.

Meaningful parent engagement is hard to do well and rarely achieved. *Learning to Link* is testing methods for mobilising resources from two institutions, a welfare agency and the local school system, to better understand why the gulf between families and schools exists, how it affects children, and how it can be bridged. Thus the project's broad intellectual significance lies in the light it is shedding on *how to build connections between key developmental settings, in this case family and school*. The project is innovative because it focuses on the power of building these connections, based on cross-sectoral partnerships, as a way of enhancing the quality of the developmental environment in each setting. It is also innovative because it locates family support in schools, which should influence school culture and practices and increase the chances that services will reach those who most need them.

Linking to Learn also builds on the *Pathways Project* by permitting a follow-up through the primary years of children who were in one of the *Pathways* preschool programs in 2002 and 2003. The research significance of this is that the medium-term effects of these interventions on behaviour and academic performance can be assessed, and compared with the outcomes for Grade 1 and 3 children of the new school-based initiatives. This is important because we currently possess little Australian data on anything beyond short-term outcomes of developmental interventions.

Approach and Training

The project is designed to address the following research questions:

1. Does enhanced family engagement with schools improve academic outcomes for primary school children?
2. Does the intervention enhance parent involvement with their children's learning, family-school connectedness and the quality of home-school relationships?
3. What are the processes whereby parental involvement produces better outcomes for children during the primary school years? (The main focus of the APAI project).
4. Does locating family support at schools increase accessibility to and use of supportive services and reduce the level of family adversity within the school community?
5. Does professional development (a) increase teachers' use of inclusive techniques for managing student difficulties? (b) increase teachers' confidence and ability to include parents as participants in their children's education? (c) reduce teacher stress?
6. Is the effectiveness of Mission Australia's *Pathways* family support program enhanced by integration of the service within the school system? For example, do Mission Australia staff spend more time undertaking quality program work and less time recruiting; are resources better matched to family needs?
7. Does the project lead to measurable signs of culture change within participating institutions and new capacities and enthusiasm for engaging families?

Participants are children, parents and teachers from 6 Inala primary schools. Data is being collected for (i) about 2000 children in the 6 schools each year, (ii) a representative sample of 300 parents per year, (iii) school principals, (iv) classroom teachers (Grade 1 teachers in 2005-2006 and all classroom teachers in subsequent years), and (v) Mission Australia staff.

Intervention program description: The intervention model provides a plan for an on-going process of school and welfare practice reform. This is a major challenge that involves new ways of

thinking and operating, especially for schools, and therefore take time and much effort. In a meta-analysis of the effect of “comprehensive school reform” programs in the USA, Borman et al. (2002) report that strong outcome effects of reforms were only found in schools that had implemented reforms for 5 years or more. The project, therefore, is being implemented over a 5-year period, in multiple phases involving, first, Grade 1 interventions in two groups of schools and then Grade 3 boosters in the next phase, supplemented by preliminary school-wide dissemination efforts which will be capped off in Year 5 by year-long whole-school intervention that builds on the learnings and impetus from the previous phases. The 5-year period ensures the reform process has time to become embedded in institutional practice.

Project components include:

A. Placing family support services in school settings to increase parents’ direct access to a range of social support services designed to help families overcome a range of problems that adversely affect children’s development. This involves dual strategies: (i) Specialist family support workers from the Mission Australia *Pathways* team who share the cultural and linguistic background of parents at the school spend a proportion of their time working alongside classroom teachers during periods that provide prime opportunities to meet with and engage parents of children in the class. This process facilitates relationship building between teachers, family support staff and parents, supports teachers in their communications with parents, and helps them to better understand the factors that could affect the success of their work with families from diverse social and cultural backgrounds; (ii) A family centre has been created within each of the intervention schools to serve as a welcoming space for parents and a base from which family support workers can meet with parents, run parent groups and, for parents with special needs, arrange appointments to attend other more intensive programs offered by the *Pathways* Family Independence Program or other agencies (such as counselling and advocacy in areas like substance abuse, domestic violence, child neglect, housing and welfare issues). Locating a satellite of the service agency on site means that there is a place within schools focused specifically on the needs of families.

B. Involving teachers in professional development activities that promote their capacity to respond to children with special needs within the classroom and to create opportunities for meaningful parent involvement in their children’s learning. Within this program classroom teachers work with specialist advisory teachers, university staff, the PhD student, and other experts who conduct training to generate an active program of parent involvement in learning activities that supports teachers’ core curriculum. Components of the professional development program include: the value of parent involvement; strategies and techniques for involving parents in a broad range of meaningful ways (recognising that different approaches are required to engage different parents); skills for handling difficult behaviours; skills for identifying and responding to children with poor communication skills; cultural awareness training (understanding the way culture interacts with the learning context and recognising and responding to individual learning styles); communicating with parents (especially non-English-speaking); building trusting and respectful relationships; and using parent involvement activities to support specific content areas within the curriculum (with particular emphasis on literacy and social skills).

Design: The intervention is being implemented in 6 schools over a period of 5 years. The 5-year time frame is essential to successful implementation in recognition of the scope of the program and the operational changes it will introduce within participating institutions. The intervention is being implemented progressively, initially establishing procedures in Grade 1 cohorts then expanding to include all grade levels. There will be a staggered introduction of the program across two groups of three schools in two successive Grade 1 cohorts (2005 and 2006) with a booster intervention when the children are in Grade 3, and gradual expansion of the professional development program working towards school-wide dissemination of concepts. Each school in the first group has been

matched to a school in the second group on the basis of the cultural and linguistic makeup of the school population. The focus of direct intervention activities alternates between the two groups of schools in successive years. After the first wave of intervention within each group, program elements will operate at a maintenance level during ‘non-intervention’ years compared to the more intensive level operating during intervention years. The group of three schools that receive the Grade 1 intervention in 2005 (Group A) will receive the Grade 3 booster in 2007. The remaining three schools received the Grade 1 intervention in 2006 (Group B) and will receive the Grade 3 booster in 2008. During 2007- 2009, increasing emphasis will be placed on developing strategies to enhance family support and parent engagement at a whole school level across all grades.

The *Linking to Learn Project* implementation and data collection design:

	Group A	Group B
2005	Grade 1 Intervention (n = 135) Data collection: Child measures: n = 800 Grades 1-3, 5, 7 Teacher Survey: n = 11 (Gr1 + principals) Parent Survey n = 150 (Grade 1 + random sample across whole school)	No intervention program Data collection: Child measures: n = 800 Gr 1-3, 5, 7 Teacher Survey: n = 11 (Gr1 + principals) Parent Survey n = 150 (Grade 1 + random sample across whole school)
2006	No intervention (maintenance support) Data collection: Child measures: n = 800 Grades 1-3, 5, 7 Teacher Survey: n = 11 Parent Survey n = 150	Grade 1 Intervention (n = 135) Data collection: Child measures: n = 800 Grades 1-3, 5, 7 Teacher Survey: n = 11 Parent Survey n = 150
2007	Intervention - Grade 3 booster + dissemination of professional development materials to all interested teachers Data Collection: Child measures: n = 800 Grades 1-3, 5, 7 Teacher Survey: n = 50 (all teachers) Parent Survey n = 150	No intervention (maintenance support) Data collection Child measures: n = 800 Grades 1-3, 5, 7 Teacher Survey: n = 50 (all teachers) Parent Survey n = 150
2008	Continued professional support of all interested teachers via distribution of materials Data collection (as above)	Intervention - Grade 3 booster + dissemination of professional development materials to all interested teachers Data Collection (as above)
2009	Intervention - school-wide program Data collection: (as above)	Intervention - school-wide program Data collection (as above)

The design allows for cross-sectional comparisons to be made across intervention and non-intervention school groups within the same year (e.g., Grade 1 children in Group A vs. Group B in 2005) as well as longitudinal tracking incorporating comparison of different cohorts within the same schools (e.g., Grade 1 children at Group B schools in 2005 [no intervention] vs. 2006 [intervention]; Grade 5 children at Group A schools in 2005 [pre-intervention historical baseline] vs. 2009 [post-intervention follow-up of initial intervention group]). Even though schools are matched on demographic variables this ability to compare intervention and non-intervention groups within schools across consecutive cohorts is an important design feature that controls for the possibility of school effects such as differences in climate and organisation. Intervention effects can also be tested by monitoring, over successive years, the performance of intervention and non-intervention groups relative to average state-wide performance on a set of measures that includes the Year 2 Net and Grade 3, 5 and 7 state tests. The use of these measures facilitates longitudinal evaluation because they are affected minimally by sample attrition. Since these centralised tests are conducted with all children attending every state and many independent primary schools, even if

children leave the participating schools data can be obtained by tracking changes of enrolment across the Queensland state and Catholic school systems. In addition, as evidence shows that parent involvement tends to decline over time, the longitudinal design over 5 years will also provide an opportunity to investigate whether the intervention increases the likelihood of parent involvement being sustained over time. Finally, the longitudinal design will permit assessment of the medium-term effects of the *Pathways* preschool interventions implemented in 2002 and 2003.

Measures: Quantitative data relating to outcomes for children, families and staff is being collected annually. Evaluation of program effects in relation to the core research questions under investigation utilises data collected using the following measurement instruments:

Research Question 1: Data relating to student achievement in core school skills (literacy, numeracy, social skills) is derived from Grade 1 teacher reports of children's performance and the results of standardised measures conducted at state level in Grades 2, 3, 5 and 7. Data relating to student behaviour, attachment to school, task engagement, and reduced need for special educational services is derived from sources such as school records showing student attendance rates, referral to remedial education programs, school discipline reports, and from teachers' completion of the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (Goodman, 1997).

Research Question 2: Data relating to parents' level of involvement and attitude to supporting their children's education (both at school and at home), their perception of school climate and satisfaction with home-school relationships is derived from records of participation in parent engagement activities offered at the school and parent surveys incorporating the *Parents As A Teacher Scale* (Strom, 1995), the *Parent-Teacher Involvement Questionnaire* (Kohl et al., 2000) and *Family-school relationship survey* (Adams & Christenson, 1998).

Research Question 3: Data relating to potential factors that mediate the effect of parent involvement on children's achievement (such as value placed on education, alignment of home and school goals for children's development, parent familiarity with school curriculum and practice, and sense of confidence for supporting their children's learning) is derived from parent surveys and is the special focus of the PhD project.

Research Question 4: Data relating to family function, level of coping, stability and ability to provide for children's needs, as well as the type and level of support networks used by parents and level of unmet need for social services among families is derived from the *Family Empowerment Scale* (Koren et al. 1992) and interviews with key staff such as school principals and Mission Australia staff as well as level of uptake of different types of family support activities within the *Pathways* school-based family support program.

Research Question 5: Data relating to teacher practice, attitude and motivation in relation to parent involvement is derived from teacher's diaries of parent involvement activities and attendance at professional development activities, and teacher surveys incorporating the *Teacher Attitudes and Behavior Questionnaire* (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997), the *Family-school relationship survey* and the *Parent-Teacher Involvement Questionnaire*. Surveys also help tap teacher morale, job satisfaction and level of stress, as well as innovations in teaching, curriculum and instructional strategies employed by teachers.

Research Questions 6 & 7: Data relating to changing practice and improved effectiveness of services is derived from: interviews with key staff at schools and the family support team; records of the number and types of parent involvement and family support opportunities offered at school; parents' level of uptake of parent involvement opportunities (provided by teachers and family support service staff); monitoring of growth in staff and family level of enthusiasm for family

involvement activities; and the degree to which schools begin to generate their own innovative activities in this area.

National Benefit

There is growing interest nationally in early intervention and developmental prevention, and – as illustrated by the new federal *Communities for Children Program* - an increased willingness by governments to learn from the results of research. The *Linking to Learn Project* has the potential to influence policy, and hence outcomes for children and for institutional practices, because it is so closely aligned with key goals of National Research Priority 2 Promoting and Maintaining Good Health. *A healthy start to life: Counteracting the impact of genetic, social and environmental factors which predispose infants and children to ill health and reduce their well-being and life potential.* Poverty has a major impact on family stability and wellbeing – contributing to dysfunction, conflict, stress and other factors that combine to undermine children's development. School success offers one of the best opportunities for redressing some of the disadvantage associated with socio-economic hardship. This project provides children with the opportunity to make a better start at school (one of the strongest predictors of continued success). It is a creative preventive intervention that integrates school initiatives and family services to support vulnerable children. *Strengthening Australia's social and economic fabric: Understanding and strengthening key elements of Australia's social and economic fabric to help families and individuals live healthy, productive and fulfilling lives:* In an era when schools and welfare agencies must cope with restricted resources, increasing numbers of children are suffering family hardship that can impact negatively on their development. Therefore the demonstration of a model for integrating family support and children's learning through school and social welfare reform would be an important contribution to solving a major national problem. If it is possible to 'get in early' and influence for the better the direction of pathways leading to welfare dependency, crime and substance abuse, not only will our most disadvantaged citizens benefit, Australia as a whole will be a healthier, more inclusive society.

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