



Getting to know parents

Dennis Sleigh

A friend who was employed in a large retail store for almost 20 years told me that the first lesson she learned from her manager when she started was “A lot of customers are sometimes right.” This realisation, she said, made her able to deal effectively with the difficult customers, the impatient customers, the angry customers – as well as with the lovely ones. She said that anyone who believes that every customer is always right will soon find themselves looking for a new job. The manager cautioned the new employee: “It is fine to have high ideals and great expectations, but the trouble with these is that there is always a gap between dreams and reality.” I think that the manager’s wisdom should be passed on to educators as it will help them deal more effectively with students and their families.

The real world is not made up exclusively

of saints and well-balanced people. While such people do exist, their qualities stand out simply because they are so rare. If everyone was like them, life might be more peaceful, friendlier, more bearable – but it might also be more boring. Whoever said “Vive la difference” had a point; we can say “Long live difference” simply because we are able to *deal with difference* without too much trouble. It might be challenging, but it is not crippling, at least for most of us. Indeed, one of the hallmarks of current schooling is the universal recognition among educators that everyone is different and needs to be treated accordingly.

We know this about our students because we face their differences daily; we see that some children are quiet, others are boisterous; some are mathematically gifted, others excel in artistic fields; some have benefitted from a balanced

social upbringing, while others seem to lack even the most basic of social skills. We also recognise marked differences among our colleagues, our superiors and our own family – but somehow, a lot of us seem to think that parents and carers are not like that. We assume they can be labelled in the most simplistic terms or perhaps dismissed in a few snide remarks in the staffroom. It helps, of course, if their children are included among the ones we don’t particularly like because then we can glibly assume that “the fruit doesn’t fall from the tree”. On the other hand, we can also attribute universal positives to some parents or carers, and this select group will be henceforth safeguarded from making any errors. It is like the idea that the customer is always right, and common sense should warn us that such generalisations rarely survive even the most superficial of assessments.

In earlier generations it might not have mattered so much what we thought of parents or carers because a school's direct involvement with them was often limited. Since then, we have come to recognise them as the primary educators of the children with whom we work. If half the parents in a school population were enthusiastic about the education of their children, what a huge difference it would make – though not all of the differences would be for the better. As it is, we are not really sure just how much interest there is in most homes, apart from realising most parents comply with the relevant *Education Act* to ensure the education of their children. Sometimes it is suggested that parents who pay fees to send their children to private schools have proved their interest in their child's progress, but this is not necessarily the case. The choice of a school type is not an infallible indication of the parent's on-going support. Over the years, parental support for schools has waxed and waned, if you can believe the more reputable writers, and certainly there has been a change in emphasis about our expectations of such participation. No longer are we satisfied to see parent support limited to serving on canteens or attending working bees. Most schools seem to have effective Parent bodies (P&C, P&F) and School Boards or Councils and their contributions have been appreciated.

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However, there is another level of parental support that seems to rise or fall and that is the involvement of parents in helping their children with homework.

Recently I spoke with someone whose son had been sick for two weeks and during his enforced absence from school, the parents had helped him avoid falling too far back in his work. When the child returned to school, a lot of his missed work now completed, a teacher complained that his parents must have done the work for him. What cheek! Common sense says the student had not done the work by himself but to suggest some sort of 'cheating' by his parents was a gratuitous insult. The work was the student's, but the support came from the parents. What did the teacher prefer: that the child should approach the end of term assessment several weeks behind his peers? I thought the comment was not only insulting but also ignorant. We should be grateful for parents who want to help their children maintain their rate of performance, in so far as this is ever possible when a student is unwell. I applaud such parents and wish that their numbers would increase.

If then we can see a value in maintaining and increasing the proportion of interested parents, it follows that we should go out of our way to nurture this interest. I would like to offer some suggestions about doing this, while also warning teachers that parental interest can be a mixed blessing.

The first thing to realise is that if more parents are going to be involved in their children's schooling, they are going to need help and encouragement. This will involve teachers working out their own priorities and then communicating these to parents.

What we can expect from parents depends on the age and the ability of the student. For early childhood students, parents might like to help their child, either for homework or for prolonged absences, by reading stories to them, or playing some number games. For those in senior primary or junior secondary, the support might involve trying to make sense of the text book or the various on-line materials available to their children, to reduce the gap that would emerge during an absence. For older students,

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where the level of complexity of the work might be beyond the current ability of the parents, it makes sense to have their child contact a classmate to see if help can be offered from that direction – and the apparent time-wasting that this option might involve (while the classmates discuss lots of seemingly irrelevant issues!) should not cause too much angst.

The goal is not to do the work for your off-spring but to help them to see what they can learn from these available resources. This also applies when it comes to ordinary homework; if a parent thinks that their contribution should involve actually doing the work for the child, this is a big error. Help, advise, guide, by all means – but the work is the student's and this is the only way they will benefit from the effort.

This obvious aspect of parents helping children is a very important issue. The options are to ignore the homework entirely (not a good thing), to do the work for the child (even worse) or to make time to discuss the work and offer support that does not take ownership from the student. The last is the solution that I find most desirable. However, this discussion has so far only looked at what might be described as 'first aid solutions' – a parental response to a particular crisis that will emerge from time to time in a child's life. More important are the attitudes that need to permeate the entire schooling process of each child. There are other issues that need to be communicated to parents, perhaps as a reminder, so that the parents will be able to generate an environment in which the students will learn effectively. If this could be achieved, our work as teachers, and the concerns of parents, would be greatly simplified. The list of such issues is huge, but I would like to suggest five as starters.

Make sure that parents understand that their attitudes really count

Some parents had miserable experiences at school and they can easily pass on the negativity to their own children. If, on the other hand, parents can see schools as places

that will make a real difference to the future life of their off-spring, this will impact on their future. I worked in a school where there were a lot of Asian students and I was constantly amazed by their high performance. At first I suspected that these people were simply intellectually endowed but I eventually realised that even the less talented students were still achieving highly – and I started to understand the importance of parental attitudes. Even if children were struggling, they were encouraged to see education as a positive life-changer, and this attitude inspired everyone.

Learning parents help children learn

If your children seem bored with learning, perhaps they see it as the price of youth – and this is particularly the case when they realise that their parents never seem to put any effort into their own learning. On the other hand, if mum is learning a language, dad is learning how to grow bonsai plants, and grandad is doing a welding course, this is a family where learning is prized – and the younger members will see that learning is a life-long reality. Encourage parents to share their learning with their children, even if it is as simple as learning how to make better scones or how to send a text message, and they might see the importance of learning.

Read to or with your child.

Reading is a vital part of education, but it is also an essential aspect of daily life. If we want to be well-informed about what is happening around us, it is essential that we read. It might be the instructions on a bottle of medicine, the details about last week's Grand Final, or the reasons for the recent rates hike in your Shire, but if we cannot read, we suffer. Not all parents enjoy reading; indeed, not all of them can pretend to be literate at all. However, it is the challenged parents whose help we need most in this area, because they are living testaments to the challenges of not being able to read. If we can encourage these people to see the value of reading, it might make a real difference to the

literacy of future generations. Surely schools can be more proactive in helping illiterate or semi-literate adults overcome their deficiency.

Limit your child's out-of-school activities

It has been said the only time some children have unstructured playtime is during recess. Their lunch times are devoted to team work, student activities, organised training and so on, and their after-school time is a series of highly structured training sessions. Less emphasis on some of these activities and a bit longer playing in the mud or socialising with friends might reduce the tension in the life of our young people.

Attend parent-teacher interviews

A final thought: please urge all parents to come along to parent-teacher conferences, so that they can understand the educational progress of their children. If this means running sessions at more convenient times, or making them less like sheep-dips where the parents are herded into cold halls and told that they have 10 minutes per teacher, then give this some thought. We often blame parents for their non-attendance; I wonder whether we examine our own role in making these events such a scary event.

Parents are a very important part of the educational program. Let us keep trying to involve them, never giving up just because the challenge is formidable. After all, if we were looking for an easy way of life, would we have taken up teaching in the first place?

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