

At home at school

Dennis Sleigh

Years ago, one of my sons seemed to be visiting the casualty department of our local hospital so frequently that I feared I might be reported as an abusive parent. Even more frequently, where students hurt themselves at school, I found myself carrying them off to the same hospital if their injuries didn't seem to warrant using an overworked ambulance service. In short, my visits to the hospital were frequent.

Despite this familiarity, and despite the warmth and friendliness of the hospital staff, I never felt comfortable when I walked through those huge sliding doors. As I sat there, waiting for the medical staff to work their magic, I always felt that, like Moses, I was "a stranger in a strange land". I recall taking deep breaths of fresh air as I left the hospital grounds, grateful I didn't have to stay around longer than necessary.

These negative thoughts, I repeat, were no reflection on the people with whom I dealt inside the hospital. They were always kind, gracious, helpful – but somehow their environment scared me. Could I suggest that there are many parents who feel exactly the same way about coming into our schools?

The gift of parent involvement

Over recent decades, we have come a long way in welcoming parents into our school and it would be fair to say that their presence is now widely regarded as a significant blessing. Long gone are the days when a principal would post a sign "No parent is to enter these grounds without my specific permission" and then rush back to his office in case anyone actually sought this permission.

Despite our best efforts, however, there are still many parents who never accept our invitation to visit the school. They skip parent-teacher meetings, they avoid the canteen, they are absent from prize-giving ceremonies, they boycott working bees. We might occasionally be forgiven for thinking their children are orphans – and yet many of these same people are strong supporters of local sporting groups or service clubs. They are not selfish – they simply don't like being in school. They have "school phobia".

We must remember that school phobia is not limited to children – it can affect their parents just as severely, and as we will see, it might be treated in some parallel ways. In a later article I will address the issue of parents who never become involved in anything, but for now I want to look at those whose non-appearance is a school-related mystery.



As teachers, we know that some children are afraid of school, although their fear might be directed not at the school but at some event that is associated with going to school. It could be separation anxiety – to go to school, they have to leave mum at home. It might be fear for their safety – they are being bullied. The cause might be related to their academic prowess – they might hate the idea of having to read aloud or to admit they couldn't finish their homework.

The reasons are many and the solutions must be directed to the individual cause. Perhaps the same advice applies to reluctant parents.

I suggest there are five very common reasons why parents don't come into our schools, and you might be able to think of some more. (If you do, I would love to hear from you because I want to look at the implications of this issue during the coming year.) Not all of these reasons constitute school phobia, by any means.

The reasons that spring to my mind are:

- a Time constraints
- b Social barriers
- c Their own 'school story'
- d Their children's attitudes
- e Feeling unwelcome.

Time constraints

Clearly, some people are simply too busy to come to school during normal school hours. They hold down full-time jobs that make it impossible to attend school in work hours. While their jobs might not prevent them from attending evening meetings, there is another factor: they are simply too tired. If we want to see these parents, we have to make sure that what we are asking them to attend is worthwhile. They are not inclined to come along to meetings where people are arguing over canteen prices or to information evenings where they are harangued by teachers who haven't mastered the principles of adult learning. Some increased awareness on our part might win them over.

Social barriers

Some parents don't come to school because they feel they lack the social skills needed in this environment. They might think their clothes are not good enough or that their manner of speaking is too crude for the ethos of a school. If they come from another culture they might be reluctant to enter a situation where they speak freely with teachers, especially male teachers. They might be shy or they might have a negative self-image that makes them feel somehow unworthy. There are myriad reasons, and we can add to this list, if only we take the time to put ourselves in the shoes of those absent parents.

In addition to recognising valid reasons, we need to take steps to compensate for these factors. This is a bigger challenge and it requires a thorough examination of current conditions in our school. We must ask ourselves: are we really a welcoming school, or do our structures act as a barrier for certain groups in our society? I have visited many schools in Australia and overseas, and not all of them have been places I would like to revisit. A detailed "image audit" of your school – asking "How would a visitor perceive this school on first entering it?" – is a worthwhile venture.

Their own "school story"

Not everyone who passes through school finds the experience pleasant. For some, school is a never-ending series of mini-disasters, interspersed with a few major crises, and their memories of this stage of their life will be understandably negative. When these people in turn become parents, we can hardly expect them to come flocking to our schools. They might feel threatened by the emphasis on academic success or by what they

Changing their views represents a major challenge

see as unpleasant regimentation or perhaps they might know personally a lot of the people who work in the school, and might choose to spend their time elsewhere. Their reluctance to come to school is logical – but this is probably the group about whom we should be most concerned.

After all, if their views of school are poor, won't they pass these on to their children? If this happens, our task in educating their children will be much more difficult. Changing their views represents a major challenge, and I will address it later in this series about parents and schools. In the meantime, it might be worth reviewing our own attitude towards these people and asking whether their apparent antipathy towards our school is really hard to understand. If we can be more tolerant of their attitude, we might one day help change it.

Their children's attitudes

Parents, by nature, are intensely defensive of their children. If their children's safety or happiness is threatened in some way, most respond fiercely to protect their offspring – and that is just how it should be. If a child develops negative attitudes towards school, it is possible to react in two ways: to rush down to the school to fight for justice or to totally switch off, advising the child that school is only a temporary interruption to life and to "grin and bear it". I am not sure which response is more damaging, but having experienced both, I think I am more worried by the "switch off" because it allows no hope of dialogue.

If we see a link between a child's negative attitude and a parent's constant absence from school events, the lesson is simple: tackle the problems of the child. It might not win the parent over, but at least it will reduce the pressure on everyone concerned.

Feeling unwelcome

The fifth reason some people stay away from schools is that they find the school unwelcoming. This impression is created by a combination of factors, some of which are unavoidable. On a recent trip to the UK, I visited a school not far from London where security was a major concern. To get into the school was quite a complex procedure, involving passing through two security screens and conversing via an intercom with a disembodied voice.

Accustomed to the freedom of most Australian schools, I was somewhat daunted by this. However, when I did eventually get in, the spirit of the school was marvellous, no reflection at all of the hurdles I had to leap to gain admission. I am not critical of the procedures – the school needed security, given its location – but I couldn't help wondering

how a shy parent would feel about trying to gain entry.

Most schools in this country are more welcoming, but there are still barriers in some of them, even though they are less obvious. A simple problem like inadequate signage; a receptionist who seems to ignore visitors because she is dealing with a serious issue on the phone; a deserted front office; a curt response to a greeting – all of these and more can have a negative impact.

If you are not sure how welcoming your school is, get someone to test it for you. This would probably be someone unknown to the front office staff. Their assessment might be a very useful indicator of how welcoming your school is. It might help you to bring about much-needed change and it might make a huge difference to your future visitors. It is certainly worth a trial.

Can we be "at home" at school?

This article and others in this series are based on a commitment to including parents in the education process. Working on the belief that parents are the primary educators of their children, I am convinced that an effective education system is one that recognises and encourages parents in their role. If we believe that this is part of the work of the school, we must ask: do parents really want this sort of involvement?

We might have to face the fact that some parents are no more interested in being involved in school than they are in being involved in the local hospital when their spouse is sick or in being involved in the local supermarket when they buy groceries. For such people, education is simply another service for which they pay, directly or indirectly, and they don't want any more involvement than that. I suspect we have to accept this level of involvement from some parents. However, for many others, being directly involved in their child's education through the school is something that appeals to them, and we should respect that wish and support it, if we really want to offer children a full education program.

Parent-teacher co-operation can greatly enhance the prospects of a successful program, and as far as possible, we should encourage such a pact. The beneficiaries are the children, the parents and ourselves as teachers. Our challenge is to see how well we can bring about such a link.

If you would like to contribute to a dialogue on this topic of parents and school, please email me on dennis_sleigh@stannestemora.nsw.edu.au.



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