Chapter 5
'Everybody Has Got Their Own Story': Urban Aboriginal Families and the Transition to School

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5.1 Introduction

Music blares over the loudspeaker. The school playground becomes a hive of activity as children rush to grab their schoolbags, gulp down the last of breakfast, stow handballs or dash to the toilets before heading to class lines. Final goodbyes are exchanged with parents, some taking this opportunity to leave, already thinking of what needs to be done before it is time for the afternoon pick up. A few

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S. Dockett et al. (eds.), *Families and Transition to School*,
International Perspectives on Early Childhood Education and Development 21,
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-58329-7_5

'parent-helpers' have already started on the lunch orders at the canteen. Several parents, scattered in groups around the playground, are chatting about the weekend or upcoming sports carnival. One parent is trying unsuccessfully to pacify a school-aged child who is reluctant to line up. Near the staff room door two parents wait expectantly, hoping to intercept 'the teacher' for a quick word, or to determine when they are needed for reading groups today. The screech of feedback echoes as a disembodied voice offers a cheery 'good morning', and summons everyone to silence… the school day officially begins!

Throughout Australia this scenario plays out regularly on school days. Parent involvement in schools is not something new (Henderson and Berla 1994). Parents[1] continue to play a significant role in children's school learning (LaRocque et al. 2011). Developing family-school partnerships has been part of school policies and community development for some time, and remains a major challenge and an area for targeted growth despite considerable investment of time and resources (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) 2008). In this chapter, we define parent involvement and its role in children's learning and in family-school partnerships. A model of parent involvement is described and the reader is introduced to the rhetoric-reality gap. Three case studies, developed from parent and teacher interviews, are used to show the range of experiences of parent involvement and relationships that exist between families and schools for participants of the Gudaga Goes to School Study, a study of urban Aboriginal children's and families' transition to school (Kaplun et al. 2016).

5.2 What Is Parent Involvement in Schools?

Parent involvement is participation by parents in activities that promote children's educational processes and their academic and social well-being (Fishel and Ramirez 2005). Factors influencing parent involvement include ethnicity, family composition, income, education level, and parental work status (LaRocque et al. 2011). Parent involvement is a shared responsibility of families, schools and communities to support children's learning 'from birth to young adulthood' (Weiss et al. 2010, p. 6).

A plethora of literature exists on the effectiveness and value of parent involvement (Hornby and Lafaele 2011; LaRocque et al. 2011), with reported benefits varying depending on the way parent involvement is defined (Chenhall et al. 2011). Parent involvement can facilitate partnerships between parents and schools, even before children start school (Centre for Community Child Health (CCCH) 2008), and provide a major source of support once children attend school (Henderson and Mapp 2002). A growing body of multidisciplinary research upholds the assertion that 'parents' attitudes, behaviours, and actions in relation to their children's education have a substantial impact on student learning and educational attainment'

[1] The term 'parent' is used to signify the person most responsible for the primary care of the child which may be the biological parent, grandparent, foster carer or guardian.

(Emerson et al. 2012, p. 9). Utilizing strength-based views of families helps to promote positive, ongoing parent involvement and formulates strong relationships between home, school, and community (Armstrong et al. 2012). These relationships can help to reduce families' vulnerabilities (Dockett et al. 2011) and develop resilience in young people (Smart et al. 2008).

5.3 A Framework of Parent Involvement in Schools

Several theoretical models and guides, developed to understand parent involvement (Hornby and Lafaele 2011), support the notion that a range of parent involvement exists (Higgins and Morley 2014), with considerable variations in the ways parents are involved, types of activities, and changes that occur in parent involvement over the child's school life. Epstein's (1992, 2006) framework of parent involvement draws on Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1986) bioecological theory and was influenced by works regarding families as educators (Koonce and Harper 2005), social connections between families-schools-communities (Jackson and Remillard 2005) and shared responsibilities in education (Ryan et al. 2006). It continues to provide a useful understanding of parent involvement and the connections that underlie family-school partnerships. In Epstein's (2006) model, six categories define parent involvement in schools:

1. *Parenting*: establishing home contexts that support children's school learning;
2. *Communicating*: between home and school about children's progress/school programs;
3. *Volunteering*: parent help and support;
4. *Learning at home*: provide material/concepts about how to support students at home with school work and other curricular decisions;
5. *Decision-making*: involved in school decision-making; parent leaders/representatives; and
6. *Collaborating with the community*: identify/incorporate resources and services from community to grow school programs, family practices, student learning and development.

Overlapping spheres of family-school-community form collaborative partnerships that develop "social capital" – 'the informational, attitudinal, and behavioural norms and skills that individuals can spend or invest to improve their chances for success in societal institutions, such as schools' (Sanders and Epstein 1998, p. 3). The School-Family-Partnership Framework, based on Epstein's model, is used in Australian schools to support parent involvement (DEEWR 2008). It encourages schools and parents to contextualize the framework 'to fit particular conditions of family demographics, student developmental needs, school structures, and community resources' (Moore and Lasky 1999, p. 18).

Epstein's model has been criticized for its individualistic, school-centric view of parent involvement, emphasising school priorities, goals and views of the parent role that fail to acknowledge and support the diverse ways parents, particularly

those from cultural minority groups, are involved in their child's learning and education (Baquedano-López et al. 2013). This criticism is particularly pertinent in multicultural Australia where socio-economic inequality is a well-recognized problem in Australian school education, particularly regarding Aboriginal students in low-income families (Kenway 2013). Globally, educational inequity raises concern with a need to combine 'quality with equity' (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) 2012, p. 170). Building inclusive contexts for all children and parents may help to reduce inequities and inequalities in education and may provide benefits to both individuals and society.

5.4 Parent Involvement in Schools for Families of Aboriginal Children

Parents are significant role models for their children, with children more likely to adopt positive attitudes about school when parents have high expectations of achievement and school commitment (Hoover-Dempsey et al. 2005). Children's early experiences in the home and community influence their transition to school. For example, attending high quality early childhood services can develop the skills and attributes children need to assist a positive transition to school (Magnuson and Shager 2010). In contrast, experiences of disadvantage can restrict children's access to resources and experiences, impacting interactions that foster learning and development, and leading to problematic and challenging school transitions (Smart et al. 2008). Families from disadvantaged or minority cultural backgrounds also report lower rates of parent involvement (Hornby and Lafaele 2011).

Not all Australian Aboriginal families experience disadvantage, but they are over-represented amongst the most disadvantaged and marginalised families in Australia (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service (SCRGSP 2014). Historically, educational policy and practices have not supported the school engagement or educational attainment of Aboriginal Australians. A persistent, well-documented gap exists between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students' school performance (SCRGSP 2014). The achievement of positive educational pathways for Aboriginal children remains a key strategy and a pathway to empower their communities (Mason-White 2013). Instilling confidence and empowering parents to negotiate the school context by developing parent's knowledge, skills and familiarity with the school system are important undertakings for supporting all children's learning (DEEWR 2011). 'Interactions between families and schools set the scene for ongoing engagement in education' (Dockett et al. 2011, p. 1).

Schools present different environments from home and prior-to-school services; environments that may lack understanding and provisioning for Aboriginal ways of learning and culturally specific knowledge (Hutchins et al. 2007). Parents of Australian Aboriginal children were reported to expect these differences to exist between home and school environments and realised the need to negotiate this space (Chenhall et al. 2011). Perceived power imbalances between teachers and parents were reported to inhibit parents of Aboriginal children from participating and com-

municating regularly with schools (Dockett et al. 2006). These parents see teachers as professionals and expect them to make contact if and when problems arise with their child (Lea et al. 2011). Similar to other cultural minority groups, parents may support Aboriginal children's learning at home in ways that are not "visible" at school (Jackson and Remillard 2005). When parents' "hidden" support is not recognised, important insights about their children's learning are dismissed and they may withdraw further from their advocacy role (Koonce and Harper 2005). Other factors that may hamper levels of parent involvement include teachers' beliefs, and the opportunities they provide for parent involvement (Berthelsen and Walker 2008), parental employment or care of younger children (LaRocque et al. 2011).

Programs developed and targeted to remediate inequities that exist for Aboriginal families, and to improve parent involvement in children's education, have shown some effectiveness in building parent involvement (Higgins and Morley 2014). Programs such as: FAST™, an eight-week, early intervention and prevention program designed to strengthen family functioning and build resilience in school aged children (Sanders and Epstein 1998) and the Indigenous Parent Factor (IPF), designed to empower parents to understand how their children learn and improve parents' self-confidence, also created a flow-on effect to parent involvement and self-learning (Muller 2009). Research in different political and cultural contexts, such as with Canadian Indigenous communities, has determined barriers to developing effective family-school partnerships, which may be pertinent in the Australian context. These factors include negative associations with school, communication issues and unintentional 'segregation' through support offered to Aboriginal students (Dockett et al. 2006; Mason-White 2013).

5.5 The Rhetoric-Reality Gap

Despite growing understandings and information about parent involvement, a gap remains between what is understood from the literature (rhetoric) and what is implemented in schools (reality) – 'the rhetoric-reality gap' (Hornby and Lafaele 2011, p. 50). Barriers contributing to this gap include: 'parents' beliefs' and perceptions about parent involvement; 'current life contexts'; differences in goals, agendas, attitudes and language; economic, political, historical and demographic factors; and children's age, behaviour, learning and development (Hornby and Lafaele 2011, p. 39). Schools can lead the development of effective and successful parent involvement when partnerships incorporate the values of 'democratic collaboration; student, family and community empowerment; social justice; and strengths focus' (Bryan and Henry 2012, p. 409). However, schools must reach out to parents whose voices are seemingly 'invisible' in the school context (Chenhall et al. 2011; Lea et al. 2011). Many schools establish partnerships with parents that are 'well-intentioned', but fall short in effectively assisting students to build the strengths and resilience that can enhance their personal and educational outcomes (Bryan and Henry 2012, p 409). School leaders must re-envision 'the involvement of parents, families, and communities from the current dominant deficit narrative to one of collaboration, promise and

hope' (Boutte and Johnson 2014, p. 167). Gaining an understanding of beliefs and perceptions about parent involvement held by all parents (Hornby and Lafaele 2011) may provide a gateway to making schools more inclusive environments to support every child's learning (Block et al. 2014; McDonald et al. 2015).

5.6 The Gudaga Study

The Gudaga Goes to School Study (Gudaga-GtS) (Kaplun et al. 2016) explored the early educational experiences and transition to school for 117 urban Aboriginal children and their families attending schools in southwest Sydney, Australia; the Gudaga-GtS study was part of the Gudaga Study, a continuing longitudinal study of the health, development and service use of a birth cohort of Aboriginal children and their families (Comino et al. 2010). Three case studies are presented, summarised from semi-structured interviews with parents and teachers of Gudaga-GtS children. Parent interviews occurred on five occasions: prior to school start; in the first year of school which is named Kindergarten (beginning and end), Year 1 (beginning) and Year 2 (end). Teacher interviews occurred on three occasions: Kindergarten (beginning), Year 1 (end) and Year 2 (end). Interview questions focused on: children's social, behavioural and academic progress at school; views of expectations of the roles of parents, teachers, and schools in children's learning; parent-teacher interactions; parental involvement with children's learning; and aspirations for children. The case studies describe a range of parent involvement. The development of parent involvement and partnerships between home and school is discussed, focusing on supports and challenges to involvement. In each of the following case studies, the names of respondents are replaced by pseudonyms.

5.6.1 Case Study 1

Danni is the single mother of three children, including Jameira who is presently in Year Two at a local public school. Jamiera's Aboriginality comes from her father. Danni left school when she was 15 years old to have Jameira, and has since felt uncomfortable interacting with teachers or being in the school setting, avoiding visits to school whenever she can. Jamiera's aunty takes Jamiera to school and picks her up afterwards. Danni works full time, arriving home at 3:30pm. Danni has not formally met Jameira's teachers and never attends parent-teacher nights. However, she does attend special events such as the Easter Hat parade or Christmas concerts where she can observe without having to engage in one-to-one interactions with the teacher. Danni offered the following view of volunteering at the school:

> So there are parents that, like, get up there – … and do it, and I am not really…a very sociable person, so I am not going to really get involved because that is not me. So I am not going to go up there and get involved and feel uncomfortable… I'd be too embarrassed.

Danni is not fully aware of what happens during Jamiera’s school day. For example, she remembered that Jameira was going on an excursion but couldn’t remember where or when, and she was not sure whether Jameira participated in the Aboriginal program at school. Danni was confident that the school would contact her if there was anything she needed to know about Jameira’s learning or behaviour.

Jameira’s teachers were happy with her progress and praised her. She was described as an *animated*, *bubbly little thing* and a *kind girl* with particularly strong reading skills. Only one teacher, in Year 2, has attempted to contact Danni using a letter sent home to inform her that Jamiera was reading well and asking her to continue to encourage Jamiera’s home reading. Danni returned a short note saying that the readers being sent home were too hard. The teacher was confused as she had heard Jameira read these same books confidently in class, and made no further contact with Danni to follow-up. The teacher felt that Jameira was doing well –*she does her home reading at home, she does her homework at home; it reflects in her class work…you can tell she’s had some sort of help at home* and there was no need to continue to engage Danni if she felt reluctant. Despite her reluctance to engage with the school, Danni described wanting Jameira to have a good education so she could *have a good life, not the life I have had*. Danni is thinking about returning to college to complete her own schooling to Year 10. While she sees education as a stepping stone for her daughter towards securing a job and financial security, Danni points out how pretty Jameira is and says that Jameira’s best chance in life is to be a hip hop dancer *or something like that, that can get her famous*.

Supports to Danni’s Involvement

- Established a home context that supported Jamiera’s school learning including homework routines.
- Recognised school would make contact if required about Jamiera’s learning and behaviour. Willingness to respond when contact made.
- Attended some school-based activities not requiring face-to-face meetings such as concerts.
- Aspirational – saw education as a stepping stone to employment and financial security however juxtaposed with goals of fame for the child as a hip hop dancer.

Barriers to Danni’s Involvement

- Own schooling and ‘embarrassment’ at the thought of engaging with teachers.
- Missed opportunities for open communication between teacher and parent as:
  - No follow up about home reading.
  - No alternatives to provide information or communicate about Jamiera’s day.
  - Little understanding of parent situation or effort to involve parent in day-to-day schooling.

5.6.2 Case Study 2

Erica is, according to her mum (Cassandra), *a really happy, cheeky little girl who just loves everything…and … always has a go at anything*. She is the second of three children in her family. Erica's Aboriginality comes from her father. Cassandra readily identified a number of factors that helped Erica make a smooth transition to school. Erica's older sister was in Year 2 at the same school so Erica knew the school grounds as she had been with her mum and sister during school drop off and pick up. The year before starting school Erica had attended a preschool that was just around the corner from the school. Many of her preschool friends started school with her. Erica attended a transition program in the year prior to starting at the school; she got to know her teacher, her classroom and others in the class.

Cassandra was not surprised when, on her first day at Kindergarten, Erica simply said *Bye Mum. S*he recalled how Erica just *walked in the door* [laugh] . . . *she was fine* and at the end of that day *she came out [of the classroom] with a big smile on her face*. Cassandra feels it is important to be involved in the school as much as possible. She does this in a number of ways. The whole family attends barbecues hosted by the school. Cassandra sees this as a good way to raise any concerns she has about the school in a relaxed and informal manner. She volunteers in her daughters' classrooms, which she finds challenging; she can only go when her youngest daughter is in day care, and even then divides her available time between two classrooms. Cassandra is comfortable meeting with the teacher after school, attending parent-teacher interviews and asking for additional work to do with Erica at home. During the first term of Kindergarten she was, for example, concerned that Erica wasn't learning enough and asked the teacher for a copy of the sight word flashcards to practice at home with Erica. She monitors Erica's homework and at-home reader. Throughout her Kindergarten year, Erica has become increasingly independent with her homework. She is now confident and happy to do it without Cassandra's help.

Cassandra reports that, when asked, Erica has long said she'd like to be a teacher. More recently though Cassandra has noted she says she'd like to be a vet (her older sister would like to be a doctor). Cassandra is very proud of the high aspirations held by her daughters and contrasts their future plans with her childhood:

> When I was at school I didn't have a really set goal of anything. I was just going with the flow. And I don't know what I want to do and now I'm a full time mum [laugh]… I'm glad that as soon as you ask 'What do you want to do?' [They reply] 'I want to be a doctor'; 'I want to be a vet'. When I was asked that when I was young [I'd say], 'I don't know' [laugh].

Cassandra is actively engaged with her girls' school, keeps a close eye on Erica's academic progress and social development, and regularly questions her daughters on their aspirations. She hopes her daughters will have a different life to the one she had. She is determined her story will not be the life experience of her daughters. Now her daughters are settled at school Cassandra is considering what she wants to do with her life and wistfully admits she is still unsure. Leaving school at Year 10 with no goals or aspirations of her own, and happy to go with the flow, she now finds herself with no skills or training.

Supports to Cassandra's Involvement

- Recognised importance of parent role to support child learning, including attending parent-teacher nights.
- Participated as a family in activities organised by school such as barbeques.
- Assisted with homework (although child is becoming more independent in managing homework tasks).
- Good relationship with class teacher.
- Advocated so Erica was learning and doing well at school.
- Aspirational for children to do well and complete further study.

Barriers to Cassandra's Involvement

- Care of younger children.
- Time (especially to assist in both children's classes/activities).

5.6.3 Case Study 3

Don is the middle child of a large family. His mother is unable to care for him and his three siblings, so they now live permanently with relatives, Chris and his wife. Don's Aboriginality comes from both his mother and father.

Don was described as having a *nervous* start to school. The time immediately prior to school start was difficult for Don and his family. Don did not attend pre-school because he moved to live with his relatives. He had little opportunity to develop local friends and *was very quiet; he was pulled to himself 'cause he never been away from his siblings.* Chris was particularly concerned as Don had some behavioural and learning challenges, and expected that Don would do poorly at school: *I didn't have much – much expectation of him to learn as a normal child.* Don started school in a small multi-stage class to support identified learning needs and despite Chris' low expectations and the challenging life circumstances prior to starting school his teacher reported, *He came really settled. He came with reports that said he wouldn't be, but he was very settled from the very beginning…Yeah, so he just transitioned really well which was surprising, considering the turmoil he had come from.* Despite being settled at school Chris was having difficulties with Don's behaviour at home. Chris's wife would not attend the school due to negative personal school experiences. Chris felt similarly but believed he had to support the children and walked them to and from school every day, informally meeting Don's teacher: *I see the teachers every day. Yeah, I've got to take him to the school in the morning and pick him up in the afternoon.* The teacher would tell Chris what Don was doing and enjoying at school, particularly in cooking classes, and Chris began to try to incorporate these enjoyable things at home; *Oh, he wants to cook it down there, but I can't let him do that with me because the, er, the bench is too high. And I don't want him to stand on a chair. But sometimes I put him [up] to sit with me.*

In Year 1 Don continued with the same teacher in the small multi-stage support class. Don had a somewhat unsettling start attributed to *the change in the environment in class, or ….[perhaps] in response to being away from school and that routine from a big five-week break* but this quickly resolved. Don was also integrated into a single-stage Year 1 class with a different teacher and although Don was reported to be working and learning well in the classroom, his teacher was concerned that he was not making friends and was isolated on the playground. Both his teachers worked together to better connect Don with his Year 1 peers.

Chris continued to experience difficulties with Don's behaviour at home, and remained somewhat unconvinced by the teachers' reports that these behaviours did not occur at school: *Oh, she comes to say hello, 'Don was good,' if he – yeah. I mean I take their word for it. What else can I say?* Chris maintained his frequent informal meetings with both teachers: *I see every teacher twice a day, every one of them, and every time they've got something to say to me, they will come down and talk to me*. Despite scepticism about Don's classroom behaviour, and behaviour problems at home, Chris admits that Don was not *backwards, not this one. He's – he's cluey. And he did learn a lot.* Chris knew Don was doing well: *he's sitting there, he's communicating, he listens, he cooperates with the teachers.*

Don's transition into Year 2 was a continuation of his spending time with his peers as they moved into the single-stage Year 2 class with a new teacher, and spending some time in the smaller supported class with the same teacher. Don was happy: *He's happy. He had – he had his teacher* [support class] *there with him and that's it. As long as she's there he's sweet as.* Chris did not attend formal parent-teacher interviews because of his regular informal engagement with the teachers: *They got about four times a year, their parent teacher interview, they tell – tell you, ah, but with our – with Don, yeah, I go down there, they – they tell me all that before even – I don't have to go to parent, the teachers' meeting.* Don's interests expanded in Year 2 and included both his ongoing interests in cooking, and in planes and helicopters. Both the school and his parents supported this interest through excursions to airports; *He's fascinated with that thing, doesn't matter, it flies, he's in it. That's his favourite.* Don continued to do well at school, however, problems at home also continued: *He is very, very polite at school, that's Don. He does whatever teacher asks him, that's Don. When he comes home, he's a quack. He doesn't want to do nothing.* Despite these problems, however, Chris now has aspirations for Don: *I hope he – he just be a Don, a nice person*, and *be good in the school, learn everything, get your pilot license and then you be – you could fly helicopters.*

In addition to class activities, Don was supported by the Aboriginal teacher throughout these early years of school. Augmenting the integration of Aboriginal cultural learning within the classroom, Don attended a weekly activity for Aboriginal children. Chris is happy the school supports Don's Aboriginal identity: w*hatever helps them to learn their own ways, their own culture…go for it,* but he has concerns the weekly activities take time away from class learning and could be divisive: *but I feel if you keep going like that and we separate them from the others it will create racism.* Chris ultimately expressed the utmost confidence in the school despite his own poor experiences as a child: *I think he's in very, very capable – capable hands*

with his – with his teachers in school; and the value of education: *Education, which is a must. Learning, it's essential. It doesn't matter if you've got a – difficulty to learning; you've still got to learn. Without education, you're nothing.*

Supports to Chris' Involvement

- Constant and informal engagement and positive feedback about the child's learning and activities at school.
- Awareness of child's interests and strengths at school supported at home.
- Supported to develop a positive view of the child's learning abilities.
- Respect for each other's role in child's learning and growth.
- Openness, understanding and acceptance of contextual life factors that impacted on parent and child.
- No pigeon-holing or stereotyping of child and family but a genuine willingness to build on resources and strengths over time.
- Additional teacher improved monitoring and support for child and family.
- Valued education and confidence in school.
- Consistency of same support teacher over time.
- Aspirational – both personal and educational aspirations for the child.

Barriers to Chris' Involvement

- Initially, expectations of child's learning potential.
- Family commitments and life challenges.
- Stresses of instant family – change in roles.
- Poor personal experiences as a child with education system.

5.7 Discussion

The case studies show a range of experiences of involvement at school and the nature and type of relationships, or the lack of, which existed between the school and home contexts. The different opportunities and challenges that families and teachers faced in developing partnerships are shown. Core areas of overlap in the case studies existed with similarities in parent involvement that fit the categories of Epstein's framework (1992, 2006) – whereby families: established support for children to complete homework (parenting; learning at home); recognized the importance of their role in the child's learning (communicating; learning at home); trusted the school would make contact if something were needed and were prepared to respond (communicating); formed a connection with the school and/or the child's teacher (communicating); and had aspirations for the child's future, to do well at school and to achieve more than the parents had achieved in school and in life (parenting). Clearly there are areas for growth in the relationships, where the framework does not capture the types and nature of 'hidden' supports according to the strengths and resources of each family.

There were clear areas where families' circumstances differed. Parent factors prevented Danni from being involved at school due to her current life context, history of school interactions and feelings of embarrassment (Hornby and Lafaele 2011). Chris also spoke of personal (and his wife's) negative school experiences. Aboriginal families' may have negative associations with schools, such as feelings of alienation and fear, due to their histories (Herbert 2006). However these barriers can be overcome, as shown in Chris' case. Through their informal interactions and persistence Don's teachers developed a rapport with Chris (and Chris with the teachers) that helped develop trust. This was not easy initially. The teachers helped Chris to become involved without pressuring him to attend formalised meetings and slowly developed his appreciation for Don's learning style, abilities and interests. An advantage in Chris' situation was having the same teacher in the multistage class over Don's initial school years.

Cassandra's experiences of parent involvement were positive from the beginning. Cassandra had a good relationship with the teacher and was able to advocate early in the school term for Erica's learning. Cassandra was involved in a more "visible" way in the school context. She recognised the importance of her parenting role in supporting Erica's learning and participated in activities in the school context by attending barbeques and parent teacher nights. Cassandra volunteered in the classroom. She supported Erica's school learning at home, requesting resources from the teacher, helping Erica to become independent in completing her homework activities. Cassandra also experienced some barriers to her involvement in the form of care of her younger children and time.

In the case studies, informal interactions to exchange information between parents and teachers were important in establishing trust and gaining feedback from parents; they helped to build parent confidence and understanding of the school system. Parents are usually receptive to and trusting of their child's teachers (Pianta et al. 2001). Teachers provided positive feedback to parents in interactions, opening communication pathways that welcomed parents' concerns and ideas to support their children's learning. These exchanges occurred without parents feeling uncomfortable in formalized face-to-face meetings. Teachers often initiated these exchanges and persisted to engage parents. Don's teacher tried to understand Chris' perspective and worked through Chris' preconceptions about Don's abilities to learn, and finally encouraged Chris to be aspirational for Don's future. Jamiera's teacher attempted to encourage Danni to continue to support Jamiera's reading at home through a letter, realising that she was getting reading support from someone at home. The contrasting approaches however showed very different trajectories for parent involvement. Parent-teacher exchanges in Chris' case strengthened the parent-child relationship and parental involvement, ensuring a more positive outcome for Don's learning. For Danni, the parent-teacher relationship stalled.

Overall, the case studies presented a range of parent involvement behaviours, highlighting supports and barriers. There is a common theme that links the individual experiences of parent involvement: effective communication between parents and teachers supported the family-school partnership. Development of effective partnerships relies on mutual understandings and respect between collaborators;

this must be initiated by gaining an understanding of parents' beliefs and perceptions about education. The case studies showed these parents were involved in supporting their children's learning although they were not visibly active in the school. Lack of "visible" involvement at school does not mean parents are not interested in their children's education (Crozier and Davies 2007). The teacher plays a critical role in initiating and maintaining effective communication with the parent and in initiating and sustaining parent involvement (Anderson and Minke 2007; Green et al. 2007). The key to building effective communication and strong family-school partnerships lies in focusing on common goals for children's learning. By establishing common ground with parents, particularly those whose voices are seemingly "invisible" in the school context, schools can create more inclusive environments for learning that provide support for all children and families.

Schools must provide safe and comfortable contexts for parents to share their beliefs and concerns, and have them acknowledged, respected and addressed. The shift presented in these case studies saw teachers utilising informal ways to engage and involve parents without pressuring them to attend formalised school activities such as parent teacher interviews. Focusing on parent involvement only at school misses the diversity of parents' responses to support their child's learning in other contexts such as home.

Epstein's categories of decision making (5) and collaborating with the community (6) were not mentioned by parents in these case studies. Cassandra, the most "visibly" involved parent of the three was not involved at the decision making level at the school or in drawing community resources and services into the school. Involving parents in ways to informally express their ideas may be an easier way to gain the perspectives of "invisible" parents in decision making and collaborating rather than through formal groups and meetings. As evidenced in these case studies, some of the parents of Aboriginal children did not feel comfortable or feel the need to be involved at the school but were still very involved in their child's learning and education. Parents do not have to be "visibly" involved in the school context to want the best for their children, but they must be actively involved in decisions about their children's learning to achieve the best outcomes.

5.8 Concluding Thoughts

We began this chapter defining parent involvement and explored the idea of family-school partnerships and the mutual understandings and reciprocity that underlies these relationships. Parent involvement is important and beneficial to children's learning and impacts on their educational trajectories. The notion of parent involvement must acknowledge support for children's learning outside the school context and not rely on parents being "visible" in school as a sign of their commitment to children's learning. The reality-rhetoric gap sustains imbalances in schools; imbalances that exist when schools are not places that are inclusive to all families and children, and where school goals and dominant voices persist. Three cases studies

of Australian Aboriginal children and their families in the transition to school were presented noting the supporting factors and barriers to parent involvement. Australian Aboriginal families have complex histories that may impact on their interactions with schools. We responded with ways to transform thinking about the practices that drive parent involvement using strength based perspectives of families and highlighted the critical role of the teacher. The case studies reinforced the need for schools and teachers to consider informal ways to involve parents in their child's education. It is hoped that the case studies will assist understanding and respect for the different ways families are involved in, and support their children's learning and development, even though they may not be "visible" at school. More importantly, this chapter has highlighted the importance of persistence and the commitment of parents, schools, and communities to work together in partnership to provide safe and inclusive contexts to support every child's learning and development.

> We can walk together to change the status quo. Ken Wyatt (Australian Inspirations 2016).

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