

Parents' experiences of teacher outreach in the early years of schooling in Australia

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Background

Based on growing evidence of the benefits of parent involvement, there has recently been renewed interest in the engagement of families and schools in partnerships in the education of children (Borgonovi & Montt, 2012). These relationships are particularly important in the early years of schooling where the benefits of parent involvement may be strongest (Steinberg, Brown, & Dornbusch, 1997). The benefits of family-school partnerships continue throughout the child's education (Borgonovi & Montt, 2012; Pomeranz, Moorman, & Litwack, 2007).

Parental engagement in family-school partnerships is strongly related to teacher facilitation, or teacher outreach, with this relationship holding true regardless of family socio-economic or cultural background (Patrikakou & Weisberg, 2000). Although international research has investigated teacher outreach, there is a need for research in the Australian context to inform the development of policies and practices that meet the needs and interests of Australian families and their children.

Aim

The aim of this study was to investigate parents' experiences of teacher outreach in the early years of formal schooling Australian context., and in particular:

- ❖ How these perceptions change as children move through these early years; and
- ❖ The extent to which these perceptions vary for families from minority and disadvantaged backgrounds where lower levels of parent involvement have been reported.

Method

Data was drawn from the K-Cohort of the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC). The LSAC project provides extensive data for a randomly selected sample of children with families that are "broadly representative" of the Australian population for sex, cultural background, and socioeconomic status (Gray & Smart, 2008).

Participants in this study were parents from the LSAC K-Cohort with children in Grade One in Wave 2 and Grade Three in Wave 3 of data collection who had completed the teacher outreach measure (n=1863).

The sub-sample for this study was similar to the LSAC K-Cohort at Wave 3 in relation to the number of boys (51.6%) and girls (48.4%) ($\chi^2 = .506, p = .49$), but there were fewer families from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (2.5%, n = 47) ($\chi^2 = 19.09, p < .001$), and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse backgrounds (12.3%, n = 223) ($\chi^2 = 1.91, p < .001$).

Along with analyses of the experiences of families based on socio-economic status, the experiences of families from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse backgrounds are reported.

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Measures

Teacher outreach

Teacher outreach was measured using the Teacher Communication Scale from LSAC. This measure was adapted from similar measures used in longitudinal studies in the United States (NCES, 1998-99; NCES, 2005).

Parents' teacher outreach experience scores were calculated as the mean ranking using 0 (not done at all), 1 (just okay), 2 (well) and 3 (very well) for five questions, asking how well the child's teacher or school:

- makes you aware of chances to be involved and take part in the school?
- lets you know about study child's progress in the program or class?
- helps you understand what children at study child's age are like?
- gives you information and advice about how to help study child at home?
- gives you information on any community services to help study child or your family?

The internal consistency of this five item scale, as measured by Cronbach's alpha, was good in both waves ($\alpha = .83$ for Wave Two, and $\alpha = .86$ for Wave Three)..

Demographic analyses

Separate analyses investigated the experiences of families previously identified as having lower parent involvement in Australian and international research.

Lower socio-economic background was defined as representing the lower quintile on the socio-economic status measure within LSAC.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) background was by parental nomination of the child's cultural background.

Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) background represented families where the mother of the focus-child spoke a language other than English when at home.

Results

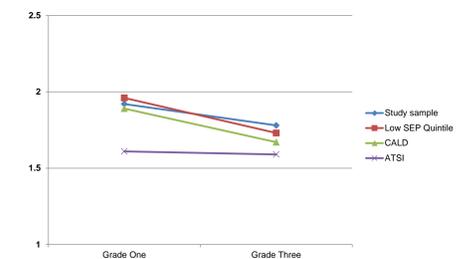
❖ Parents experienced a significant decline in teacher outreach from Year One (M = 1.92, SD = .75) to Year Three (M = 1.78, SD = .80), $t(1862) = 5.87, p < .001$, with a small to medium effect size ($d = 0.18$).

❖ Families from lower socio-economic backgrounds reported similar experiences of teacher outreach to families from more advantaged SES groups in both Year One $t(1, 1860) = .94, p = .35$, and Year Three $t(1, 1860) = 1.28, p = .20$.

❖ Families from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds experienced significantly lower levels of teacher outreach than that experienced overall by other families in Year One $t(1, 1859) = 2.92, p < .005$, though reported similar levels in Year 3.

❖ Families from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse backgrounds reported similar levels of teacher outreach to families from other backgrounds in Year One, but somewhat lower teacher outreach in Year Three, $t(1, 1859) = 1.96, p = .05$. Though not statistically significant within the Bonferroni correction of significance applied within this study of $p < .005$, the medium effect size ($d = .30$) indicates a need for further research.

Mean ranking of teacher outreach overall and by demographic grouping (/3)



Changes in teacher outreach scores between Grade One and Grade Three for the study sample and each demographic group.

Conclusions

❖ Similar to international findings, Australian parents report a decline in teacher outreach as children move through the early years of formal schooling.

❖ Despite previous reports showing lower parent involvement in families from lower socio-economic backgrounds, this study found no differences in teacher outreach for parents from different socio-economic groups.

❖ Differences in experiences of teacher outreach for families from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds in Year One indicate an early disjuncture in the facilitation of family-school partnerships.

❖ These findings indicate a need for improved teacher outreach practice as children move through the early years of formal education, particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

❖ Further investigations of effective teacher outreach in initiating and maintaining parental involvement in family-school partnerships within diverse school populations and as children mature is recommended.

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Resulting and related publications

- Daniel, G. R. (2013). *Teachers' facilitation of family-school partnerships: Parents' experiences of teacher outreach in the early years of schooling*. Paper presented at the Australian Association for Research in Education Conference 2013, Shaping Australian Educational Research. 1 – 5 December, 2013, Adelaide, Australia.
- Daniel, G. R. (under review). Patterns of parent involvement: A longitudinal analysis of family-school partnerships in the early years of school in Australia. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*.
- Daniel, G. R. (under review). Parents' experiences of teacher outreach in the early years of schooling in Australia. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*.

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