

A combination of trial and error, survey results and reviews of relevant literature were used to inform the approach taken in this project, including the form of communication used, marketing of activities, what activities were offered and when.

A striking feature of the survey process was the difficulty encountered in getting responses from the parents. This was an ongoing issue throughout. It was also difficult to have parents respond to invitations to activities. The response rate provided an indicator in itself of the “engagement” of the parents with the school.

Initial information was gathered in regard to the educational level of parents, their knowledge of the project and to gauge their interest in possible activities. It was done on a personal basis, some face-to-face, the others by telephone. Efforts were made to contact all parents and responses were taken from 62% of the parent body. Interest in a range of activities was indicated, the majority attracted to cooking or scrapbooking. It also was indicated that a number would be more interested in participating in activities that were directly of benefit to their children and the school.

The first survey, focusing on communication with the school, opportunities for parent participation and involvement of parents with their children’s education, was sent home with the children. Staff and members of School Council were also given the survey. The initial response rate was very poor (29% of families, 18% of staff).

The very poor response rate of the staff should be noted. Only two staff members responded, raising important questions about a fundamental assumption of the project, that the teachers supported it and were an active and integral part of the partnership.

The issue had been foreshadowed to a degree at the introductory staff morning tea, when staff paid minimal attention to the presentation being given on the project and indicated little if any awareness of the project. Whether the teachers felt so overwhelmed by the challenges they faced on a daily basis, whether they felt somewhat cynical and jaded about the prospect of another project proposing to provide solutions to the school’s problems, or whether they felt the project had been foisted upon them without proper consultation, there was a discernible initial lack of commitment to, or engagement with, the project. This had not been factored in – that the project needed to engage not only the parents with the school, but apparently also the teaching staff with the project itself.

These initial responses from staff suggested that perhaps the barriers to the parents engaging with the school were not entirely as initially assumed – ie parents’ negative attitudes to schooling, low education levels, poor skills, a lack of interest in their children’s schooling and perceived lack of opportunities to participate. The attitude of staff themselves was perhaps a significant factor. In contrast, research findings, particularly from overseas, in regard to engaging disengaged parents imply a body of disengaged parents sharing certain characteristics which impact on their ability/desire to engage with a school, and staff who share a degree of enthusiasm and commitment to engaging these parents.

The survey was distributed for a second time, this time with a personalised covering letter. The response rate improved to a little over 50% of both parents and staff and 67% of School Council parents. The overall response of parents was positive in regard to the level of communication from the school, the opportunity to participate and acknowledging the importance of being involved with their children’s schooling. Although the views of 48% of parents remained unknown, these responses did not appear to accord with the representation provided anecdotally and from the Government School Report of 2009 that the parent cohort was largely homogenous and one disaffected with the school.

A key question raised both by these survey results and accompanying observation of staff and parents was whether the parents were particularly hard to reach, or did that only apply to a subset of the parent body, and did the school itself in any way inhibit accessibility for some parents?

Following the organisation of several activities, a further survey was conducted to refine our understanding of what activities parents were most attracted to, whether it should involve school-age children and what time suited parents best. With the offer of being put into a draw for a \$50.00 voucher for those who returned the survey, there was a healthier return of 56% of surveys. The results from this survey closely influenced the organisation of the last activity for 2010, a cookery event involving all the family.

RMIT undertook a series of focus groups in October 2010 with the project team, staff, parents, School Council and volunteers. The evaluation focused in part on the understanding of the aims of the project and the actions taken to achieve these aims. Although some participants in each group expressed concern about the declining enrolments at the school and the community perception that the school was “not good”, participants also expressed pride in the school and its achievements, particularly the parents. Parents also expressed appreciation for the work of the principal, the school staff and the project officer.

In the staff focus group, it was acknowledged how challenging the project was but staff was positive about what had been tried and spoke of signs of progress with some families. They also described how the project had influenced changes in their own attitude, eg not only contacting parents on negative matters but opening the communication lines generally. It was felt that the school was making an effort to be more welcoming and encouraging of parents, a significant and valuable change in approach.

The final key research work was a series of interviews with parents, organised by RMIT in April of this year. The aim was to better understand the beliefs underpinning parents’ behaviour in relation to attending a session which would provide skills in assisting their children with literacy. Valuable information was garnered from the interviews, including why they thought such a session would be beneficial, and who might or might not influence them to attend.

The belief systems expressed strongly influenced both the development of the “Loving Literacy” session itself and the approach used to promote the event.

In regards to the activities themselves, a range was offered during the life of the project and a delivery plan was formulated as follows:

- Step 1: Fun-based activity sessions in the school setting to encourage parents to be involved in a non-threatening environment
- Step 2: Skills sessions associated with their children’s learning needs
- Step 3: Modules from pre-accredited or accredited courses as offered by SGAE
- Step 4: Pre-accredited courses
- Step 5: Accredited courses.

Decisions regarding when sessions could be offered was principally determined by the school’s timetable and always in consultation with the school. Schools are naturally busy places and it was important to fit any extra activities with the demands of the school. In addition, the school experienced particularly stressful periods during the life of the project and this also impacted on when and how many activities were offered.

Which activities were offered and at what time of day was dictated by a combination of factors, principally parental preferences and what resources were available to run the sessions. Hence, given

the parents' stated preference for activities of benefit to their children, fun-based and skills sessions concerning book covering, numeracy, literacy and restorative practices were offered. The level of take-up varied between 8% and 37%.

In an effort to also introduce more learning-based sessions, but not connected to the children, cookery and computer classes were also offered (both of which parents had indicated an interest in attending).

Unfortunately, the computer session was cancelled due to lack of interest. The two cookery sessions (one in the evening, one during the day) attracted a response rate of 10%. It was particularly disappointing that the evening session received such a minimal response as it had been specifically requested that an evening session be held for parents who worked.

A further cookery event was held in Term 4, however this time it was held off-campus, in the evening and with the children invited. 23% of the school's families were represented, but a number of families had both parents attending giving a response rate of 36% (the measure used for all activities). This was a very pleasing result but still does not accurately reflect the success of the evening. A total of 35 parents and children attended (further acceptances sadly had to be declined as spaces at the venue were limited). Perhaps just as significantly 5 staff and 4 of their family members attended. It did mark an extremely positive highlight in the project. School office staff reported that there were "lots of lovely comments from parents" including that it was a "great fun family night", "something different that we could attend as a family", a "very good night".

The activity sessions were generally well received by the attendees, naturally some more enthusiastically than others, but it was the family cookery evening that most captured the sentiment the project had been trying to embrace – a school community enjoying an evening together and learning something new.

The final phase of the delivery plan was to offer two sessions that offered more skills-based learning. The first was a cookery module that could be credited to enrolment in a certificate course and was marketed as a "taster" for adult learning – "experience what it's like to go back to school". As discussed earlier, the second session was developed in response to information gathered through parent interviews, the Loving Literacy session. This session was designed to provide insights into different learning styles and tips on how parents could assist their children with their comprehension and literacy skills.

The cookery module did not attract any participants so was not held.

The Loving Literacy session received an encouraging number of acceptances (29%), reflecting in part at least (one assumes) the efforts to develop a skills-based session that met the expressed requirements of parents. Attendance, however, still proved to be disappointing with a take-up by only 12% of the parents. The low take-up to these two sessions may have been partially due to offering such a session a little too soon – a step too far from fun based activity to sampling adult education. The Loving Literacy session, in particular however, will provide a useful model for transition from purely fun-based activities to more skills/information based learning. It provides a significant development in relation to developing a pathway to pre-accredited and accredited learning for a new group of adult learners in the community.

Moving parents into pre-accredited or accredited courses for adult learners (Steps 4 and 5 of the delivery plan) was not achievable in the time available under project funding.

Some of the key findings from the project included:

1. That parents were most interested in learning they could recognise as directly benefitting their own children

2. That although those who tended to participate (though not exclusively) were already parents who were engaged with the school community there were still significant and positive outcomes for the school community
3. That there was significant gap between what respondents indicated they would be interested in attending and whether they would attend, and then who actually attended This may point, at least partially, to the basic prerequisite of identifying a need that the prospective participants could see an activity fulfilling. What is said “in theory”, in answer to specific questions, is quite different to what people actually will commit to.
4. The effect of the small student numbers and the morale of the school community is difficult to measure but should not be ignored.
5. Assumptions made about the nature of the parent body also influenced staff attitudes when dealing with a number of the parents. Recognition of this was critical in understanding what were the elements that required some modification in the school community – that it was not just a question of “engaging” the parents by offering activities etc.

However, it cannot be denied that much was learnt in regard both to the operations of partnerships generally and in regard to the implementation of this particular project.

The successes are difficult to quantify. Percentage rates of attendances do not reflect the level of enjoyment of participants and how significant that was in a school suffering tremendous morale problems. However:

- Parents did participate in activities and did provide positive feedback.
- School Council, which was supportive from the start of the project, became more so as the project went on and were a significant source of ideas and support.
- Staff did observe a difference in attitude of some parents and were pleasantly surprised by the involvement of those parents they would not have expected to see at activities.
- Staff acknowledged a change in their own attitude and behaviour towards the parents. They took on board the need to be more positive and welcoming to parents. This change was apparently noted by parents who, in the 2010 Government School Annual Report, ranked the approachability of the school and teachers appreciably higher than the year before.
- For the project to succeed it was acknowledged that it would not be sufficient for a project officer to be facilitating and driving the program. Change and drive also had to come from within the school.

These are all significant and meaningful changes it is suggested, and signify a level of success in what was always acknowledged would be a difficult and slow moving project.

In addition interviewing and surveying of parents provided some valuable information as to what may motivate them to attend activities and what activities they would be interested in attending.

The learning from this project should inform further work in this field and assist in moving hard-to-reach learners onto a learning pathway which is of value and interest to them.