Enabling participation of diverse families: A discussion paper for P&Cs

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Background

- **Purpose of the paper**

In 2008 the Federation of Parents & Citizens Association NSW commissioned Dr. Margot Rawsthorne to undertaken research on the barriers and facilitators of parental participation in the P&C movement (and more generally in their involvement at schools). A number of observations fuels this interest, including

- The relatively small number of parents involved in P&Cs in comparison to the whole school community.
- Increasing difficulty securing canteen volunteers in many schools, with a corresponding increase in the number of canteens being outsourced to private provision
- Awareness of the increasing time demands on parents, either through paid employment or other volunteer commitments
- The low rates of participation of culturally and linguistically diverse parents and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents in the P&C movement
- The difficulties facing schools in maintaining viable and dynamic P&C bodies whose members participate in supporting the operation of local schools and representing parents' views with respect to the coverage and provision of educational programs.

This discussion paper reports the findings of research undertaken with active P&C members, potential P&C members, access staff and senior school staff. It places the findings from this research in the context of the broader scholarship and existing research.

The aims of the Discussion Paper are to resource local P&C committees as well as generate discussion concerning participation. It does not advocate for a 'one size fits all' approach, instead recognises that strategies will be most effective if developed locally and tailored to the particular composition of individual schools and communities.

- **Volunteering**

The challenges facing P&Cs in attracting and retaining volunteers should be placed in the broader national and international context. Social changes over the past three decades have eroded the ability of individuals to volunteer. Australian statistics indicate that whilst more people are seeing themselves as volunteering there has been a gradual decline in the amount of time spent on volunteering by individuals. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), in 1995 24% of the population volunteered an average of 3.1 hours per week. Five years later, in 2000, the ABS reported that 32% of the population volunteered an average of 3.0 hours per week. The Giving Australia Report (PMCBP 2005) found that in the year to January 2005, 41% of Australians volunteered an average of 2.53 hours per week. These statistics

suggest a rise in short-term or episodic volunteering. For organisations such as the P&C which has traditionally attracted long serving volunteers the changing nature of volunteering in Australia creates challenges. It is the growth of episodic volunteering that may lie behind the frustration sensed by some members of 'all the work falling to a handful of people'. The challenge for the P&C movement is to respond to the growth in episodic volunteering to take advantage of more people willing to give time but on a more occasional basis.

Research suggests that volunteer retention is related to various organisational factors such as:
- utilisation of volunteers skills;
- preparation and training for the volunteering work;
- the amount of appreciation and support the volunteer receives from the organisation; and,
- supervisor feedback (Bryen & Madden, 2006).

The literature on volunteer retention also reveals that certain demographic factors such as age, race, gender, level of education, distance from the volunteering site, household income, and previous volunteering history can affect a volunteer's tenure on the job. Links have been demonstrated between certain demographic factors (age, level of education and the amount of time spent in the community where the volunteering took place) and a volunteer's commitment and service duration (Bryen & Madden, 2006, p. 4-8). It is unrealistic to expect parent bodies to flourish in all school and community settings. Some communities simply do not have the personal or other resources to participate and support P&Cs. It is noteworthy that within the random sample of public schools in New South Wales approximately 10% did not have an existing parent body. Many of these schools were located in areas of considerable social disadvantage (Vinson, 2007). Schools in these communities have an added challenge of engaging parents.

- **Benefits of participation**

Most schools actively seek input from parents and recognise the benefits of such involvement. Schools have a particular interest in making connections with marginalised families (CMYI/O'Sullivan, 2006, pp. 5-6). Parent bodies, such as the Parents & Citizens Committees, share this interest. Participation of marginalised families, such as Indigenous families and those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds enrich the cultural life of schools.

Additionally, there is significant evidence of the numerous barriers to educational success facing some Indigenous and CALD students. Studies have shown that the active involvement of parents in their child's education has a significant positive effect on students. Research indicates that parental engagement can lead to higher academic success, improved attendance, more time spent on homework, increased school retention and fewer discipline problems. One way in which parental engagement can be encouraged is through school Parents & Citizens Committees.

- **Barriers to participation**

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The participation of marginalised families in school life is shaped by a range of factors. It is important to recognise that not all Indigenous and CALD families will experience these barriers but for many they create a significant challenge. Many Indigenous families have a history of negative interactions with institutions, including schools. This can make 'stepping through the school gate' very difficult for many Indigenous parents. In the past, many Aboriginal parents have felt unwelcome or have felt they and their children were not important to the school (SA Department of Education & Children Services, p. 2). School is associated with authority and not a place where parents can engage in partnership with the school community on equal footing. There continues to be low levels of literacy among Indigenous adults, arising from inadequate schooling as children. For families of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds barriers include: lack of knowledge of the school system; language barriers; practical considerations; stigma (believing that contact with school indicated a problem); and conflicting understandings of the school/home relationship derived from their own schooling experiences (CMYI/O'Sullivan, 2006, pp. 6-7).

Key findings from research

The research was undertaken over 2007 and 2008. A randomised self-administered mail survey of active and potential P&C members was undertaken in 2007. The information gathered via the survey was complimented by interviews and focus group discussions with parents and school staff held in 2008. The interviews and focus group discussions enabled more in-depth exploration of the issues raised in the survey.

The data from the survey was analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 11. The analysis particularly focused on the different responses of: active members and potential members; cultural groups (Anglo-Australian; CALD; and Indigenous responses); and, location (Greater Sydney metropolitan area; regional; rural or remote).

In Term 4 2007 a letter was sent to 200 randomly selected P&C bodies throughout New South Wales. Each letter contained 10 blank surveys, with the P&C secretary asked to distribute these surveys to active members and potential members. Active members were defined as people who had attended 2 or more P&C activities in the past 12 months. Potential members were defined as people not involved in P&C activities but with children at that school. As at February 2008 a total of 341 completed individual survey were returned from 64 schools. This represents a response rate of 32% of P&Cs, which is more than acceptable by general standards.

- **Respondents**

The vast majority of respondents were women (86%). Approximately 70% of completed surveys were from parents who had attended a P&C activity in the past year (defined as 'active members'). Whilst the majority of respondents were from Anglo-Australian background, 11 responses were received from Indigenous parents (3.2%) and 28 (8.2%) were from CALD backgrounds. This suggests the views and experiences of CALD parents are under-represented in the survey findings. 60%

were aged 34-44 years of age. Nearly half of respondents had 3 or more children, mostly of primary school age. Just over half volunteered for other groups as well (55%), although CALD respondents had the lowest level of volunteering among all respondents. The vast majority (92%) of respondents were partnered, suggesting an under-representation of the experiences of sole parent families. Only 23% of respondents were employed full time although there were marked gender differences (69% of male respondents worked full time compared to 17% of women respondents). Indigenous respondents were much more likely to be working on a casual basis or studying than other groups of respondents.

- **P&C involvement**

Over 70% of P&C members were involved in fund raising activities, although this was influenced by the school level. Respondents with children in primary school were much more likely to be involved in fundraising, repairs/maintenance, classroom assistance and transport than those with secondary school children. Among respondents with secondary school children P&C activities included administration, information dissemination, lobbying and canteen. There were only minor differences between cultural groups in their activities on the P&C, although CALD respondents were much more likely to be involved in information dissemination. Disappointingly given the potential link with other Indigenous parents, no Indigenous parents indicate an involvement in information dissemination.

For CALD parents P&C involvement was motivated by a desire to find out more about the school, gain new skills and take up a new challenge. For Indigenous parents P&C involvement enabled them to influence the running of the school and facilitated social interactions.

All respondents were asked 'what helped or would help you join the P&C?' (more than one answer was possible). The survey provided a number of common recruitment strategies. Table 1 below reveals that participants were spread quite evenly across the options, suggesting no clear single strategy would be appropriate. The largest proportion of respondents supported a personal approach however, this was considerably less than half of respondents.

Table 1: What helped or would help you join in the P&C?

	Number of Responses	Percentage (n=341)
Approached personally by member	130	41.5%
General P&C publicity	113	36.1%
General invitation by the principal or teachers	103	32.9%
Friend/relative joined recently	69	22.0%
Other	67	21.4%

There were a number of differences between those not currently involved and active members. For active members, being personally approached was more helpful (46.1% active members compared to 22.1% potential members). This difference was statistically significant ($x^{2} > .000$). There were also statistically significant differences

between the groups responsiveness to general publicity (41.4% active members compared to 16.3% potential members). This data suggests that all of the strategies identified were less helpful to potential members, who most highly supported 'other' strategies (30.8% potential members compared to 14.7% active members). None of the strategies listed received strong support (>25%) from respondents not currently involved in P&C activities. It may be that participation is most influenced by factors beyond the recruitment strategies used, such as competing demands which is discussed further below.

There were some comments from active members suggesting those not involved were either 'lazy' or 'wanting something for nothing'. This sentiment is common in groups feeling overwhelmed or undervalued however can have unintended creating a barrier to participation. P&C committees need to mindful of how they might be perceived in the broader parent community as this will affect how welcome new members might feel.

- **Barriers to participation:**

  The biggest issue for our family is time. We just can't find the time to attend. Also our P&C is quite active but they are mostly concerned with fundraising. We would be more interested if they were involved in the running of the school and if we understood what influence they can have. We always read the Principal's report to the P&C

The survey asked respondents 'How important are the following issues in influencing your participation in the P&C?'. Respondents were asked to rate the level of importance on a five-point scale, from 'not at all important' to 'very important'. The Table below show respondent's responses.

Other demands (such as work and family responsibilities) were rated as 'most important' by largest proportion of respondents (50%). This finding reflects general trends in volunteering across Australia and the world in which the time available to volunteer is being squeezed. Nearly two thirds of those not current involved in P&C activities rated 'other demands' as very important. Reflecting this, the timing of meetings and the amount of time required were also of importance to many respondents. One respondent commented

  As a mother of 4 I have always felt that belonging to the P&C very important, I now work part-time and constantly hear that 'I work' excuse. Whilst I understand that it is not always possible to give all the time that sometimes seems necessary we are becoming less involved in our children's lives by not being involved at school on some level. Thanks to the Gov pushing for mothers to be working and not doing activities to support our local schools.

Being welcomed by existing members was also 'very important' to many (40%) respondents. This suggests that it is not merely a matter of time but also the culture of the P&C that influences participation. Confirming this nearly 30% of respondents also rated as 'very important' support for new members.

I think people feel as soon as they go to this type of forum they will be expected to take on office. It needs to be known that people turning up to express opinions and offer ideas and suggestions are welcomed and wanted.

Time pressures appear to be important to respondents from Non-English speaking backgrounds, who identified other demands, timing of meetings and amount of time required as very important. For Indigenous respondents there was a broader range of issues identified as important including: perceived poor management of P&C; feeling welcomed; ability to participate in broad educational matters; and recognition of involvement in P&C.

Table 2:   Respondent's rating of importance of factors influencing participation

	Not at all/not important %	Somewhat important %	Important/ very important %
Timing of meetings	6.1	22.9	68.9
Amount of time required	8.5	27.3	61.9
Financial costs	53.7	21.7	21.7
Poor management of P&C	12.9	22.6	57.4
Type of work (particularly fundraising activities)	8.5	22.6	65.7
Other demands (such as family and work)	4.1	15.8	78.1
Feeling welcomed by existing members	8.8	15.8	73.6
Feeling like you have skills to offer	10.6	29.6	57.5
P&C involvement in broader educational matters	23.7	27.6	45.1
Information about the P&C and what it does	11.7	27.6	58.4
Recognition of P&C involvement within the school and community	14.7	24.3	57.2
Support for new members	9.4	21.4	65.4

Over 60% of those respondents not currently involved in P&C activities indicated 'other demands such as work and family' were 'very important' in influencing their involvement. Once again, the timing of meetings was also identified as 'very important' to this group. Potential members also identified the amount of time required by the P&C suggesting 'time' needs to be central to any strategy aimed at increasing participation. Some typical comments included:

'Time constraints – small business owner. I have previously been on P&C at another school but that was when I worked part time. I often work a 13 hr day'

'With both parents working full time and one work shift work it is very difficult to attend'

Other research suggests health status is an important influence in participation. Survey respondents were asked to self-rate their health status. Those respondents not currently involved in P&C activities had poorer health generally than active members.

- **Strategies to enable participation**

One of the survey questions asked a general question in relation to strategies to enable participation: 'what would have made it easier for you to participate in P&C?). The survey listed a number of common strategies (such as childcare, better information, formality of meetings and timing of meetings). Whilst there were small differences between active and potential members on many of the strategies there was a strong (and statistically significant) difference in relation to the time of the day meetings are held. Timing of the meetings was important to 42% of respondents not currently involved compared to only 22% of respondents currently involved in P&C activities. Childcare was slightly more important to potential members (26.6%) compared to active members (19.3%), suggesting the provision of childcare is less important than the time of the day although it is likely the two factors are connected. It may be that, even with childcare, a meeting at 7 pm is not suitable for the main carer of small children.

Information was identified in the survey as an important participation 'enabler' for potential members. This included information about what the meeting will discuss beforehand and information about what is involved. Interestingly, there was little support for changing the name of the committee or changing the format and language used in meetings.

One of the aims of this study was to identify existing or new strategies that may assist in supporting the participation of non-English speaking background parents and Indigenous parents in P&C activities. Table 3 below indicates support for a wide range of strategies. Nearly half of respondents however believed that a direct approach by an existing member would be most effective in encouraging participation. There was also considerable support for specific events tailored to provide information for these parents.

Table 3:
What do you think would help non-English speaking Background parents or Indigenous parents to become more involved in P&C activities? *(more than one answer possible)*

	Number of Responses	Percentage
Direct approach by existing member	154	47.2%
Information about the P&C in languages other than English	119	36.5%
Encouragement by the Principal or class teacher	116	35.6%
More awareness and encouragement from existing members	116	35.6%
More informal format and language of the meetings	60	18.4%
Specific events (such as welcome nights or picnics) to providing information to these parents	131	40.2%
Greater inclusion of cultural diversity in the whole school community	69	21.2%
Don't know	52	16.0%
Other	10	3.1%

Respondents from remote communities showed themselves to be different from other respondents. They were much more likely to identify direct approaches by existing members, more awareness and encouragement from existing members; more informal format and language of meetings; and greater inclusion of cultural diversity in the whole school community. The provision of information about the P&C in languages other than English was only really identified by respondents from the Greater Sydney Metropolitan area.

Those respondents from CALD backgrounds were more likely to identify the provision of information in languages other than English and encouragement by the Principal or class teacher as supporting diverse participation. Indigenous respondents identified a more informal format and language of the meetings as well as greater inclusion of cultural diversity in the whole school community as important supports to diverse participation.

Focus group participants confirmed and expanded on these findings. CALD parents suggested that a lack of knowledge about the activities of the P&C discouraged people from participating. They cautioned however against expectations that CALD parents would attend every P&C meeting, suggesting instead one or two meetings per year. These meetings could be much more informal and aimed at identifying practical ways in which CALD parents could participate (such as at a school fete). Focus group participants emphasised the significant family caring roles often played by CALD women, the lower confidence of newly arrived parents in participating in 'formal' meetings in English and the significant work commitments of many CALD parents. It was noted that the focus group discussions might provide an example of an engagement strategy – personal invitations were issued, the forum did not require an ongoing commitment, was time limited and of specific relevance to participants.

Indigenous participants confirmed the many barriers experienced by some Indigenous parents in 'stepping through the school gate'. In some schools, Indigenous parents preferred to use the 'back gate'. The equating of P&C with fund raising acted as a deterrent for some Indigenous parents, as they felt they had little to offer. Once again the focus group discussions might provide an example for engagement with Indigenous parents expressing some surprise that they had anything to offer the school or the P&C. When this was explored further in terms of cultural knowledge and skills they expressed enthusiasm towards sharing these and having greater involvement. In order for this to be possible however greater effort was required in bridging the gap between Indigenous parents and the school community, through the celebration of Indigenous culture and history. The creation of a 'safe' space for Indigenous parents was seen as very important with many feeling intimidated and not welcome in more formal settings.

In a number of schools across the State P&C Committees had established informal sub-committees or groups to support Indigenous parents. These groups on occasions had a formal role in terms of specific State Government funding although this was not always the case. These sub-committees or groups often had a broader function than the P&C itself including social support, pre-school activities such as playgroups and transition to school programs. This was mostly possible in schools with specific additional resources either through the Schools as Community Centre program or Indigenous education support programs. These groups were often

successful for a period of time although many P&C Committees reported interest waning over time, although it may be unrealistic to think of these groups as ongoing. Instead what is required is a celebration of their achievements within a given time.

Discussion

The catalyst for this research was concern about and a desire to enable parental participation in the P&C movement. The research indicates that the P&C movement is facing many challenges, created by social changes and forces beyond its control. It would be wrong to describe the movement as 'in crisis'. The very act of commissioning research into ensuring the Federation is well placed to respond to these challenges points to the fundamental health of the movement. Children's education remains a priority for parents. It is interesting that one of the factors that would motivate participation among those not currently involved in the P&C was a perception of poor management by the existing P&C. In this way, their non-involvement is an endorsement of the work currently being undertaken by P&C members.

Targeting specific groups recognises the additional barriers these families face in participating in school life and supporting their children's education. There may be some concerns among members about targeting specific groups discriminating or excluding others. Encouraging participation by diverse families in the P&C movement does not aim to exclude others but aims to create an environment welcoming of diversity, enriching the educational experiences of all students. There is considerable research that indicates catering for minority groups in mainstream institutions will have a positive impact on all participants, not just those from the minority group (WA Substantial Equity Unit).

Creating a welcoming environment for minority groups includes changes to the physical environment (images, language and symbols) and protocols (such as a welcome to country). P&Cs may wish to consider inclusion of diverse languages and symbols in promotional material as well as commencing meetings with a welcome to country. Experience suggests that a direct verbal invitation is likely to be more effective in many CALD communities. Whilst printed information in languages other than English may be effective with some parents it should be remembered that many speakers of languages other than English are not literate in that language. A direct phone call will enable CALD parents to ask questions and to fully understand the purpose of the meeting. In terms of Indigenous parents a similar approach may be used although ideally direct verbal invitations would come from another Indigenous parent or caregiver within the school community.

The CALD respondents of the survey were more highly qualified than other respondents, suggesting that the P&C movement is engaging more middle class people from CALD backgrounds. This suggests the need to explore how to engage less affluent and educated CALD people. The focus group discussions suggest that community leaders, often more established, are important facilitators of participation and links to CALD communities. These community leaders need not be parents but approached in their role as community leaders, providing advice and expertise to the P&C. Although there were only a small number of Indigenous respondents to the survey, their lack of involvement in information dissemination points to a potential

strategy to enhance Indigenous parent's involvement. Strategies aimed at enabling participation need to acknowledge the history of poor relations many diverse parents have with schools. Participation in the cultural life of the school may need to precede involvement in P&C committees.

Throughout the research 'time' was a re-occurring theme. The respondents not currently involved in P&C activities clearly felt themselves to be 'time poor', an issue they raised repeated throughout the survey. Many active members committed 2 hours per week to P&C activities, suggesting P&C involvement requires regular and ongoing commitment. This type of volunteer commitment is declining more generally, with a growing tendency towards short one-off acts. The P&C movement, due to the very strong links made by members between participant and children's wellbeing, will be protected to some extent from this with at least some parents being able to make ongoing and significant contributions. This does not however diminish the very real changes that have affected family life over the past three decades. It is important that P&C recognise that all contributions – from ongoing and significant to one off – are important. A number of strategies may be worth considering, including:

- Identifying and advertising a continuum of involvement with specific time commitments, for example
    - 4 hours per year – volunteer at annual fete
    - 2 hours per term – canteen duty or grounds maintenance
    - 2 hours per month – contributing to meetings and decision making
    - 2 hours per week – newsletter or P&C executive functions
- Inviting parents unable to commit to regular participation to identify how they would like to participate to the P&C. In focus groups for example the suggestion was made that women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds may be happy to provide food for school events but unable to make regular meetings
- It may be worth rotating the timing of meetings to open up participation to parents with specific time clashes (such as shift work or business hours).

Other information related strategies also seem important and are linked to the time pressures experiences by many parents. It would seem good practice for P&Cs to advertise meeting agendas to facilitate broader participation as well as adhering to strict time limits.

Whilst time pressures clearly affect ability to participate this is not an explanation alone. Timing of meetings, the amount of time required for participation and other demands were highlighted by both active and potential members. From both the overall data and the individual comments perceptions of not fitting or not being welcomed by existing members was common among non-members. This is a very common experience for individuals in relation to established groups and one about which there is a large amount of research. The Federation of P&Cs is well placed to provide resources and training in relation to working effectively in groups, a role supported by focus group participants. Open and transparent process is important in engendering a sense of welcome for new members. Ensuring information is disseminated in ways that is accessible and comprehensive so parents feel they know what is happening and when important decisions are being made. Acknowledging the contributions of all parents – large or small – to the life of the school will also assist.

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