PARENTS & SCHOOLS

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Have you thought of taking that lonely and afraid mother to the school, and asking the staff about ways in which she could participate in the place where here kids spent their day?

When is the last time you knew that the man incapacitated through accident or illness had a school age child, and yet did not take into account the school as part of the life of that family?

Have you considered that the man who has recently retired might enjoy sharing his skills and knowledge at the nearby school?

There is much talk these days about parent involvement in schools. The 1960's and 1970's were decades when people increasingly claimed a right to participate in the organizations and institutions that influenced their lives. No longer is it accepted that "the experts" are the only ones with a right to decide.

In public education, the push for system change came from teachers, and Departmental administrators, as well as from parents. Thinking and acting about collaborative school-community ventures has taken place at policy and planning levels and at grass roots levels. A number of exciting ventures have been activated and the processes of involvement and participation of parents in schools are becoming commonplace.

However, parent-school-community collaboration is not easily accomplished. Some difficulties in establishing lasting change include:

— parent inhibition
— teacher inhibition
— school organization and structure
— the fact that teachers are busy, have heavy teaching schedules and are continually surrounded by children
— professional and industrial concerns

This is an account of some developments at a Melbourne suburban primary school, which occurred over a ten year period. The writer was actively involved, as a parent, and later, following the provision of funds, as the first teacher aide for a period of two years. Subsequent contact has continued as a member of a community involvement sub-committee which functions as part of a "think-tank" for future directions in the school.

PARTICIPATION OR INVOLVEMENT?

The issue of participation in the schools attended by our children is a matter of interest to everyone who has responsibility for the care of young people. We may be social workers and psychologists offering counselling and other services to parents and children, we may be cottage parents charged with the day-to-day care of children, or planners and administrators concerned with evolving a relevant network of services linking with the other systems of society.

Hedley Beare draws a distinction between involvement and participation.[1] Whereas involvement means being implicated in the process, by, for example, choosing the school that your child is to attend and ensuring that he gets there, participation is the process of sharing in the action. The action doesn't happen, or is not the same, without your part in it.

So if the stake is to be meaningful, the emphasis is on participation, as well as involvement. The responsibility for participation is not just with parents, but with each of us who work in contexts concerned with the better functioning of parents and children.

Perhaps the first question to address then is; why participate? So participation has become a fashionable word, but what will it achieve?

Three broad reasons can be identified and all have relevance and validity:

1. To contribute something to the school. Labour, skills, money are all in short supply.

This, of course, has been the traditional area of "acceptable" parent involvement in schools. It's O.K. for the school to have you at working bees, or in the canteen, or even in the library mending books, and of course these are major contributions to the functioning of a comparatively complex organisation. Community based agencies, such as health centres, and local government welfare departments are beginning to explore ways of contributing consultative and direct services to schools.

2. To link home and school. It is argued that home is the primary socialising influence for a child. If this is so, the school is an important secondary influence, introducing new adult models, providing the opportunity to establish peer groups, and introducing new knowledge and ways of thinking and behaving.

The child may have difficulty in bridging these two worlds, and reconciling alternative perspectives. It can be made more difficult when the teacher has no "feel" for the sort of family from which the child comes, or of their expectations of the child and the school. Parents who themselves were educated a generation past are not familiar with present school practices and attitudes. Many older people remembered their own schools as authoritarian, boring and undifferentiating of the different needs and strengths of children. They can convey their ambivalence about schooling to

their children, and so create a dilemma "Mum seems to be telling me that school is no good — yet I like it. What's wrong with me?"

When children see their parents physically present at school, when parents have reasonable information about policies and programmes, know teachers and other parents, the bridge is being built. Anxieties and tensions can be dealt with, and a congruence of expectations between parent, teacher and child is established.

3. To provide the opportunity for parents to utilize the resources of the school.

Our society recognises that learning is a life long process, but we do not all have equal access to the formal adult education resources that exist. Lack of access may be because we do not want to be taught in formal ways, we may not have the money or time to be so involved; or it may be because we do not have the confidence in ourselves to take up opportunities.

Literature indicates that many adults, in particular women, see themselves as "just parents", or "just housewives" with little of worth to contribute.[2]

The school is an immediate resource, potentially accessible to many adults. It can be the place that adults look at themselves and become free of that sense of lack of self worth. Every adult has a bank of knowledge and skills to be transmitted to a younger generation. The school provides the environment for people to look again at what they know and what they would like to learn. It provides the place for people, both adults and children, to share and exchange knowledge, and to integrate new learning into their daily lives. The school has the facility to teach new skills: spinning, pottery, new ways of parenting, specialist cooking, languages and so on; and it can also provide the meeting place for exchanges of information: how to organize one's hire purchase agreements better, where to go for child care facilities, information about health services. It is a place to make friends.[3]

Parent involvement in school activities builds new skills in such things as working together, running meetings and thinking, planning and organizing projects, and it can consolidate on past skills that have "gone rusty" and which need practice before being used again in employment.

These three reasons to support participation have been stressed here, not only in justification of the philosophy, but also to draw the attention of professionals who work with families of the potential within the school system to enable families to creatively and constructively establish and consolidate their personal and family resources.

THE CAPACITY OF THE SCHOOL TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS PROCESS

The ideas put forward above are not necessarily shared by schools.

Parental involvement in schools has traditionally been seen as a means of bringing extra resources in to the school for the benefit of the children and staff.

Involvement has frequently centred on fund-raising functions, support for school open days, sports days, concerts, etc.; and in the maintenance of buildings and grounds. Involvement in educational areas has been confined to occasional parent teacher interviews. "Middle suburban" schools explore ways in which the now recognized parental resources of information, energy and enthusiasm can be harnessed for the benefit of the school. Many primary schools would now utilize parents in elective teaching, giving information about their jobs, assisting in running the library and craft rooms. Some would hold discussion evenings about aspects of the curriculum.

Some schools have community based curricula which utilize the resources of the locality in the education experience. The issue at stake in these forms of involvement is whether it is developed as a solution to the manpower and financial deficits of the existing system or as a right of parents to be involved, or whether parental and community involvement is recognized as an enriching, developmental experience and a partnership in learning.

The move from exclusion, to involvement, to participation does occur and this article will proceed to describe one particular process of change in a school, and from that draw out the conditions that may be necessary for such a change.

The degree of school, parent and community cooperation arrived at in this case is not unusual. Many schools now have vital, lively and relevant programmes, and add support to the argument that much is possible, while more can be done.

A DECADE OF ACTIVITY

The school in 1970 had a population of about 450 children. This number decreased by about 100 toward the mid 1970's, as was the trend in other inner suburbs.

Children from homes of European origin formed the majority in 1970, but decreased in numbers as their families moved to the outer suburbs, and as Government migration policies changed. They were replaced by two new groups: children of families with professional or business interests, and the children of flat occupants who were often low income or lone parents. By 1976 about one third of the children were in the care of one parent only. Additionally, the suburb is marked by a high rate of population turnover. Census figures indicate that about 23% of people in the municipality moved homes in the twelve months to June, 1976. The school catchment covered an area of highest mobility, where there was up to 43% change in that period.[4] This meant that grade composition was continually changing.

The teacher turnover was also high. In the early 70's, about half the staff would leave each year.

The school was run on traditional lines, with one teacher being responsible for a class of about thirty children. Some of the buildings were a century old, and facilities were extremely poor. Infant and upper schools had separate buildings, which made it difficult for staff to congregate together.

Pettit has defined four models of school functioning with respect to parent involvement.[5] His first model, "the instrumental approach" where the teacher is the expert, and the focus is on teaching a curriculum, is an appropriate codification of that school, in 1970. Pettit makes the point that such a school has "few structures to adapt to changes outside the school".[6]

At that time the principal was the main link between the school and parents. The school committee had little authority because the school's disposable funds were virtually non

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existent. The mothers' club had a paid-up membership of about ten, and could do little more than run one fund-raising stall each year.

The literature suggests that parent or community participation cannot be achieved without the active consent or leadership of teachers.[7] Certainly the case studies in Fitzgerald and Pettit's project reveal that the principal in each of those schools was the activating force for bringing parents and other resources into the school.[8]

In this case it was a group of parents who took the initiative, and while the evidence suggests that participatory collaboration cannot be achieved without positive staff commitment, it also reveals that parents, or outside community agents, can be the initiators of change toward participation.

A number of events were influential in moving the school population to a point where there could be participation based on mutual respect and open dialogue. These events took place over four years, and required a sustained effort of persistence and commitment.

THE STIMULUS FOR CHANGE

A number of parents with young children were concerned about the lack of information about school policies and procedures. Formal communication was limited to occasional notices, and informal channels were hard to find. Parents were not welcomed inside the school buildings, and contact with staff was via the principal. The school committee whose function it was to maintain the grounds of the school and provide money for extra teaching aids, was usually elected in a token way, having been invited to stand by the previous committee.

At the 1971 annual meeting the six retiring members were opposed by six new parents, who were elected. It was at this point that parents through the new committee were to actively assume control over areas delegated to committees by the Education Department, and an early action was to require the setting up of a playground re-planning subcommittee whose members sought consultation with the staff in order to find out what the issues were. Another important initiative was to become actively involved in fund raising on a fairly large scale, and then require that the staff have a say in how the money should be spent. Three initiatives in particular deserve mention.

A few mothers decided in 1973 that one way of fund raising was to write a book: a book of things that families could do and make and enjoy together. They wanted it to be a contribution to the community, as well as a way of making money. By starting this project, which grew into a successful commercial venture, many women became involved, but only after they had been helped to identify what they knew and could contribute. People who thought they didn't know much, or couldn't write it down, found that they had all sorts of skills that they could share with other people. Ideas were pooled about how to entertain sick children, what games to play on a long car journey, how to help a child grow a garden and how to make shirts into paint smocks. It was a special way of developing confidence, establishing friendships and feeling successfully involved, which was confirmed by the popularity of the book on the open market.

A second initiative undertaken by the mothers' club grew out of concern about the numbers of children who were at home without adults during the school holidays. The body then responsible for running programmes, the National Fitness Council, was contacted. Information was collected from other schools about need, and a submission was made to the local Council for support for the idea. Mothers' Club members lobbied successfully, and the first stage of a now thriving holiday and after-school programme was implemented.

The third influential event was the decision by the school committee in 1973 to employ an architect to develop a master plan for building development. The architect saw his client as the total school population and sought consultations with all members of staff about their philosophies of education. Not only did this bring them in on the decisions that were being made, but also it helped everyone identify the views that were shared, as well as points of disagreement. This process helped parents and teachers recognize common goals.

In summary, the five years to 1976 had seen the establishment of a dialogue between teachers and parents; between local organizations like the City Council, and the school; and between parents. Parents had gained confidence about what they had to offer.

The demands made by parents for more active involvement in the areas over which they had some authority were tempered by demonstration that parents wanted to support teachers in their work. This was primarily done by providing money for more and better equipment, planning together for the development of school facilities, and offering assistance to take elective programmes, run book selling schemes and help with excursions.

Although there had been changes of principal and staff during this period, the initiative for involvement still resided with the parents. No member of staff had advocated for a situation where parents, as a right, would participate in the day to day life of the school. The interaction that parents could have with the school appeared to have developed as far as was possible within the existing structure, when the Education Department made money available for employment of a teacher aide, early in 1976.

THE TEACHER AIDE PROGRAMME

Teacher aides were initially employed in Victoria under the Supplementary Grants Programme to schools categorized as disadvantaged. This school was just under the cut-off point for classification as a disadvantaged school, and apparently because of that was granted a sum of money, which had not been requested, to employ 1 full-time teacher aide.

At December 1976, 195 Victorian schools employed a total of 582 teacher aides under the Supplementary Grants Programme[9] They are employed in a large range of non professional teaching duties such as preparation of teaching aids, clerical duties, care of sick or upset children, to arrange and go on excursions, and to liaise with parents. Rodgers specifies that the dominant theme in the work undertaken by aides "is to allow teachers to attend to matters more in keeping with their specialized skills and knowledge".[10]

In this particular school, because an aide had not been asked for, there had been no thinking through by staff about how such a person could be employed, and there was not universal agreement that an 'outsider' should be taken into the school.

However, under the funding arrangements made to individual schools under the Education (School Councils) Act 1975, the salary was to be made over to the school council as the employing body. New powers under the 1975 Act enabled school councils to employ ancillary staff.

The aide was already known to staff as an active parent, and her social work training was known to them, yet there was not a clear idea of what roles and relationships would be developed. The staff produced a list of duties which included typing and clerical tasks, the production of teaching aids, library assistance, the hearing of reading and playgound duties. The aide on the other hand saw the role in terms of school-community liaison, and said so to the principal, but did not press for this as the primary focus because the staff had yet to demonstrate their view about increased contact with parents or other neighbourhood resources. The aide was not invited to staff meetings or to share the staff room, but had to assume those rights against some early negative reaction. This was in keeping with attitudes toward visiting specialist staff, and student teachers, who were not encouraged to participate in staff get-togethers.

The aide considered that if a relationship of trust and cooperation were to be established, the first priority was to demonstrate awareness and concern for the difficult conditions under which the teachers worked. At the same time, it was necessary to recognize and acknowledge the specialist skills employed by teachers that were separate from the things a competent parent might do. The aide continually stressed the different nature of her work to that of teaching, and attempted to gain acceptance for the idea that any contribution by the aide could be matched by other parents with more specific skills.

It was therefore a priority to establish a working relationship with every member of staff and to undertake every task that was proposed by a teacher. Work time was allocated so that the aide's time was equally shared between the fifteen staff members. The aide then discussed with each teacher how the time allocation could best be used, and an agreement arrived at.

The aide's aim was to establish a process whereby a teacher and parent could work together to enhance the functioning of the school, and so add to the quality of the experience for the children of the school. This aim was not based on arguments of efficiency or expediency, but that many contributions could add to the richness of learning, and that the contributors themselves would be major beneficiaries.

So, once a specific role was established, and the contribution valued, the aide would ask that teacher if she could be replaced by a parent in that role. This could only effectively happen after the teacher, the task, and the skills of parents had been assessed and matched.

After several months assuming responsibility for all tasks an opportunity arose for engaging parents. The first occasion was for the hearing of reading. Previous offers of parent help had been refused. A new teacher to the school had formerly been at a school where parents were used, and after careful discussion between teacher and aide a proposal to involve one parent in that class was put to the principal. A parent was carefully selected by the aide, mindful of skill, her tact and discretion, and this ran quietly for some weeks before another teacher asked the aide if any other parents might be interested.

As that scheme became established, so it was possible to introduce parents for weekly music and movement sessions, assistance with roneoing, regular library work, preparation of teaching aids and helping with excursions. Within a year parents and others became a regular sight in the buildings as part of the school programme rather than as part of activities peripheral to the main educative purpose.

CONDITIONS FOR PARTICIPATION

Underlying this apparently simple process, a number of approaches were employed.

Hamilton-Smith has set out some of the necessary conditions for participation.[11] They include sharing in responsibility and power; clarification within the system as to where responsibility specifically resides; and recognition that leadership and expertise are not antithetical to participation.

As part of that approach, in this context, the responsibilities and professional contributions of teachers were not denied. One of the outcomes of having parents and teachers working together was that it did help everyone identify the advanced knowledge and skill employed by teachers. Parental respect for teachers grew, and teachers were confirmed in their expertise.

It was considered that participation could only be established in the following climate:

— open communication between staff and parents
— open communication between staff
— recognition within the school of parental (and children's) rights
— mutual trust
— greater staff awareness of the place of the school in the child's total day
— increase in staff and parent information about community resources and the potential place of the school with respect to other services
— recognition of the potential benefits to all parties
— recognition of each person's different, but contributing, skills

Four identifiable processes took place in order to establish a climate for participation.

I. Establishing communication channels.
II. Providing information.
III. Assessing actual and potential needs and resources, including those within people.
IV. Linking resources to needs.

ESTABLISHING COMMUNICATION CHANNELS

The aide talked to everyone: teachers, parents, children, community workers. The subject usually was what the aide was doing, and this frequently provided the spark for ideas. It was essential to be open, and at the same time to respect confidences. This meant that where information was important and relevant for other people, the aide had to gain permission to take it further. Time was spent encouraging staff to talk to other staff, or to parents. Parents often needed support to speak with staff. When most parents had themselves been educated in an era when teachers were the only experts whose authority could not be questioned, they sometimes were reluctant or fearful of approaching staff. This view was expressed by a number of parents who recounted their own unhappy school experiences. It suggested that they were giving their own children the

message that school was at best to be tolerated, but never enjoyed.

Some examples of establishing communication channels which led to links with appropriate resources were: an evening of "new games" was arranged between teachers and Department of Youth, Sport and Recreation staff; the school librarian was introduced to the municipal children's librarian in order to work on ventures such as buying foreign language books co-operatively; the municipal recreation officer was introduced to the principal as part of a move to develop after-school and holiday programmes at the school. These early links were the forerunners of imaginative and far-reaching connections that staff began to pursue themselves. Now the school links with drama, music and other specialist training schools whose students regularly participate in everyday teaching.

Communication between parents was also fostered. Although by this time a lively and active parents group had developed, there were other parents who did not 'belong' or had recently arrived at the school. Each new parent was contacted, and the aide listened for any special needs that family might have, then linking them to community resources, and/or to other parents. A frequent request was for child minding. An interesting development at the end of the 2 year period was when a group of single parents and other parents without resources met together themselves and organized a child minding co-operative for emergency or evening care.

Whereas in the early stages of the programme the aide did much of this linking, the emphasis later on was to encourage teachers and parents to make their own contacts. One outcome was the development of a community room organized and run by a few mothers who had not joined the regular parent and school activities. It was suggested to the school principal and council that, if these people were to have a sense of belonging in the school, as a right, they must have a tangible stake over which they had authority and control. There was no expectation of this group in the use of their room other than they reached out to other parents, who like themselves thought of schools as alien places. They spent a good part of the day drinking coffee, chatting about problems at home, and sharing ways of coping with life. Gradually, as their confidence grew they could make decisions about whether or not they wanted to be more active in classroom programmes. More importantly, though, they learned to speak to teachers, shared with their children the activities of the school, and developed supportive friendships and interests.

A special channel of communication existed between the aide and the psychologist attached to the school from the Counselling, Guidance and Clinical Services section of the Education Department. Although that worker was well known at the school, and had proved very effective, yet the teachers had difficulty in fully employing her knowledge and skills. This was a specific area where the aide's social work training was accepted and employed by teachers. They would explore whether referral might be relevant, or would accept the aide's opinion about problem behaviour and appropriate action. Children and their families who had special needs were identified, and the potential for enhancing development was recognized.

PROVIDING INFORMATION

One of the glaring lacks in the school was that of information. Teachers did not know about equipment or teaching material already in the school. One teacher would have worked on a project, and another would be wondering where to turn in order to begin on the same topic. Teaching aids would be locked in a cupboard, and yet would be needed. Information about services, excursions, or how to obtain specific requirements was not available to staff. An early activity was to open every cupboard and drawer and identify what actually was in the school. Open shelving was introduced in order that everything was visible to all staff. The aide would respond to an idea about a possible excursion by collecting relevant information. Systems for collating resources were developed. This was a major contribution to the fostering of trust. When all the information was there to be used, there was little room for suspicion about what someone might know, and not be sharing.

ASSESSMENT OF NEEDS AND RESOURCES

Many parents had already identified what they themselves could give; this had happened in the earlier involvement stage. Others lacked confidence or thought that they had nothing to contribute. Resources were also in the form of elderly residents, who happily came into the school to teach card and other table games, or a local resident who could read stories in Italian because no parent was able to take that task.

Teachers were carefully listened to, in order to identify with them what they saw as needs. At other times there was an interpretation of what needs there might be. Teachers sometimes felt unconfident about ways of handling interactions with parents. "What do I do about the child in my grade who smells?" "I feel nervous in parent-teacher interviews." "I don't know how to visit a home." The aide would discuss strategies with teachers who were uncertain of their own skills, and on occasions visit with them and offer support.

The identification of potential resources and how they could be developed to meet needs was an important focus in establishing participation.

LINKING RESOURCES TO NEED

Some of the linking aspects have already been addressed. However some issues should be stressed. The skills needed to carry out a task must be assessed. People and tasks need to be matched. Not everyone can do everything, or wants to do particular things. The capacity to feel comfortable, to work together cooperatively, to have a sense of fulfilment, all must be respected. New skills may need to be taught. Supervision must be arranged. A system must be organized where people participate without turning the school into chaos.

People should be able to advance their own skills through their participation in a number of activities.

Availability of large numbers of people is not always beneficial, but can be downright obstructive. The organizing and supporting role is managerial in nature and just does not happen.

AND NOW:

The school has continued its policy of parent, teacher, community collaboration, and has a lively programme involving nearly half the families of the school as well as many outside community groups in working together to provide a rich, stimulating and exciting learning programme for all who are engaged.

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environment of their organisations.

Why this landslide of books, courses, films etc? The reason is not difficult to spot and is that true managers (as opposed to those whose tasks are purely operational) function in an area of abstractions where decisions all too often have to be made on the basis of very incomplete knowledge, where the results of a decision may not be known for months or years — and where in any case new and unforeseen factors may (and do) suddenly appear out of nowhere. This arena therefore is often characterised by an atmosphere of uncertainty.

The "Welfare" or "Human Service Delivery" areas have been rather slower than their industrial counterparts in setting up management training, evaluation and planning systems — probably because they are not profit oriented and the pressure to justify and plan activities in a quantitative manner has not been so urgent.

With the increasing tightening of the welfare dollar however things are changing and more and more do we observe welfare executives groping around the management shelves of bookshops and libraries as well as flocking (albeit sometimes reluctantly) to the various courses sprouting to meet this new need.

Well then, what does a manager really do? The answer of course is that he makes long term planning and economic decisions and the degree to which he makes them effectively is the degree to which he succeeds as a manager. This is all heady stuff, apt to induce acute discomfort in the welfare executive trained to analyse human behaviour and deal with problems on a one-to-one basis.

But let us not despair, for we can always rely on those rational enemies of vacuums to come to our rescue — and I refer to the Americans. This book is a good testimony to their obsession with planning systems creaking under heavy loads of detail and jargon. True to that tradition the authors have produced an attempt to apply the theories espoused by Management By Objectives, Systems Analysis, Systems Design, Managing For Results etc to the Cinderella field of welfare planning. The particular vehicle they have chosen for inspiration is a "new" technique graced with the title of zero base budgeting (or ZBB to initiates). This technique looks at all programs "from base zero" i.e. should the activity go on? what will happen if it ceases?

If that "new" technique rings a bell in the minds of astute readers let me mention another technique recommended by the authors which will surely transmit the book's atmosphere — i.e. the Delphi technique in soliciting value judgements. This method involves "anonymous response", "Iteration and controlled feedback" and "statistical group response" and is stated to be "a well defined process that can be described quantitatively. In particular, the average error on round one is a linear function of the dispersion of the answers . . ." So it goes on and on. To the relief of the reader however he finds that the rationale of the method is that "two heads are better than one" when making a decision.

My main comment about this book is that its aim is a noble one and that it adequately covers the area managers must deal with before making planning decisions — e.g. what is the organisation on about? what are its aims? how can one reach these aims within necessary limitations? how can one lay a blue-print for the organisation's future? what are the factors in the organisation's environment which must be taken into account?

My concern about this book however is that these matters are dealt with in such a laborious, repetitive and dull fashion as to cause a mental stupor in the reader who is looking for an imaginative and exciting treatment of all those abstract factors and philosophies the manager in the welfare field should concern himself with. The reader will *not* find in this book the approach which made Peter Drucker such an influential figure in the industrial management field — i.e. one which is characterised by the ability to combine wisdom with commonsense and to dispense this mixture to the reader through the lucid lens of ordinary English.

With an increase of books like this one aimed at the Human Service Delivery field the equivalent of a Peter Drucker may yet emerge to stimulate us. In the meantime my personal preference is to stick to that body of literature which is already abundant elsewhere and do the transferring of ideas myself.

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Parents and Schools

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The level at which a person wishes to participate is accepted. Some people would be actively teaching several days a week; others would come to drink coffee and chat. Teachers hesitate to move to other schools. Many parents are sad when their children finish at the school, because it has become the focus of a neighbourhood community.

CONCLUSION

Analysis of the process of parent engagement at one particular school suggests that participation cannot be fully developed without the active collaboration of all parties. The degree of integration achieved would appear to be enhanced by the observation that the most successful innovations have been initiated at the grass roots level. The project would also suggest that a substantial degree of community and parent involvement can be achieved by reaching into the school from outside if a sustained effort based on goodwill, trust and open communication is made. Observation of this project would suggest that participation in schools is an enriching and confidence building means of strengthening the lives of individuals and families.

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