**Towards an ecology of home-school partnership: the other parent in the room**

**Abstract**

**Purpose –** The primary purpose of this paper is to show that secondary school structuration (the duality of structure and agency) determines a school’s capacity to develop viable home-school partnership. The second is to show that home-school partnership has little to do with the will and skill of teachers or hard-to reach families, but is a product of a school’s organisation and management, factors within the remit of schools to change.

**Design/method –** The paper presents a wide-ranging analysis of relevant literature in its search for the defining characteristics of home-school partnership, noting the confusion of terminology between parent partnership (PP), parent involvement (PI), and parent engagement (PE). Two operational systems (same-age organisation and multi-age organisation) are compared to illustrate how structuration determines a school’s capacity to develop the kind of complex networking needed for ecological home-school collaboration.

**Findings –** Schools organised on a same-age basis (the near-universal model) cannot complexify and exercise considerable control over what passes for home-school partnerships, often to the detriment of families, students, and schools. Such schools cannot build the capacity needed to build viable home-school partnership. Schools that have adopted multi-age organisation are open systems designed to absorb the complexity of value demand on their system, i.e. these schools are partnership dependent. As such, they rely on complex feedback loops from actors (staff, students, and parents) to form the information networks needed to support child development and learning.

**Practical Implications –** School leaders need to reflect more on traditional organisational practices if they are to develop a viable home-school partnerships, while teacher trainers and leadership programmes should consider offering more opportunities in transformative learning and systemic thinking.

**Originality –** This paper finds that what passes as parent partnership in schools is determined more by structural design than the will and skill of actors. It introduces the concept 'the third parent in the room', a concept whereby responsibility for learning and support is equally and reciprocally shared by all parties (staff, students, and parents). Further, it suggests that research should focus more on the organisational aspect of schools as learning systems if effective home-school partnership is to be realised. The advent of multi-age organisation should enable a clearer and alternative perspective to emerge.

**Keywords**

Multi-age systems; complexity theory; tutoring; organisational learning; parent partnership; structuration; ecological system.

**Introduction**

There is a discernible if understandable absence in the research literature linking a school’s organisational structure to its capacity to develop effective home-school partnership. The last two decades, however, has witnessed a significant number of secondary schools in the UK adopting an organisational system based on multi-age tutor groups. Their transition from one form of organisation to another demands significant changes to internal and external connectivity; ostensibly, the capacity to build learning networks capable of handling significant increases in information and communications traffic. By centralising the role of the form tutor, multi-age organisational systems (generically called *vertically tutoring*) establish a multiplicity of feedback loops that involve parents and students and secure their shared involvement in the learning process. In effect, these schools have complexified, changing the way information moves both within their system—their interconnectivity and interdependency—and across their borders with families and community. Effectively, this involves a transition from a closed system to one that is open, and from single loop learning strategies to triple loop learning strategies (Flood and Romm, 2018). This paradigmatic transformation offers such schools the opportunity to reflect on the limitations of their previous same-age structure and its limitations, a perspective that this paper explores.

This paper contains four parts. First, the literature review draws together key issues from a considerable body of work on home-school collaboration that hint at structural issues rather than a problem with personnel. While this paper accepts fully the value of home-school collaboration it notes that issues concerning implementation remain largely unresolved. Little is said on the role played by organisational structures, and none mention multi-age organisational strategies that are yet to attract the attention of system science research. It is also recognised that the academic literature concerning home-school collaboration in secondary schools is based on the familiar same-age model, a year or grade system. This form of organisation is rarely discussed and appears to be considered benign, something to be *worked around*.

Second, an attempt is made to define home-school partnership and its constituent elements, an approach based on a synergy of business ideas (Kanter, 1988; Johnston and Clark, 2001) and ecological partnership theory (Palaiologou and Male, 2017). Third, having established clear working parameters for partnership, the links are drawn between organisational structure and a school’s capacity to develop an equitable home-school learning relationship. *Capacity,* a term used throughout, is defined as the maximum level of value-added services that a school can achieve under normal operating conditions—i.e. same-age or multi-age (Johnston and Clark, 2001: 175). Fourth and finally, conclusions are drawn, and suggestions made for further research.

Li**terature review**

Before reading the literature review, a short note. It is generally assumed that the secondary schools that researchers have in mind are the familiar same-age structures that most of us have attended. No mention is made of an alternative structure that might alter or enhance the views that follow. Otherwise, the focus underpinning this review rests not so much on home-school benefits but the unwritten challenge of practical implementation, an interpretation.

There are three critical issues that arise from the research literature and a fourth conspicuous by its absence. First, the benefits of home-school *partnership* are unequivocal. It is accepted that when home and school combine their agential roles, dispositions to learning improve, including increased self-regulation, positive school attitudes, and better study habits (Fan & Chen 2001; Harris and Chrispeels 2006; Henderson et al. 2007). Similarly, it is accepted that meaningful home-school partnership supports academic, social, and behavioural adjustment (Christenson & Sheridan 2001; Izzo *et al.*, 1999). In such a scenario, the agential role played by practitioners, students, and parents is significant and intertwined with school structure. The idea expressed in structuration theory (Giddens, 1984) is for the reciprocity of structure and agency to enable environmental adaptation of the organisation, ostensibly to change.

The second issue to note from the literature is the separation of PP, PE, and PI, terms sometimes used interchangeably. For clarification, PI refers to school initiated home-school interventions whereby parents participate in arranged *opportunities* to discuss progress with teachers (Wolfe, 2014; Gorard and Huat, 2013, cited by Palaiologu and Male, 2013: 3). A rare attempt at distinguishing between these terms (Goodall, 2017: 139) promotes PE as "parents' engagement with the broad sphere of their children's learning", where the privacy of the home environment and home inspired learning plays a critical role. For PI, "the agency for action remains with the school, rather than with the parents or family" (Goodall and Montgomery 2014; cited in Goodall 2018: 143). It is reasonable to assume that the concepts of PE and PI in some way constitute PP as an umbrella term, perhaps a clearing house for different agencies.

The third and most challenging issue comes in the form two questions: (1) How can schools support PE given the complexity and privacy issues current in family life? (2) How can schools enhance PI to enable PE and build sustainable PP, a continuum? For Goodall (2017: 144) this requires "a fundamental re-evaluation of the role of both staff and students". Such a call suggests that PP occupies a quasi-position defined in part by PE and PI, one that describes how the agencies of school practitioners, students, and parents combine to increase effectiveness and support for the development and learning of students. While much is certain about agential roles, examination of connecting structures is less certain.

The fourth issue, therefore, is the absence of a practical means by which the school, the home and the child form a viable working partnership and how that partnership might best be defined. Exactly how can so many bespoke partnerships be entertained by a school? Kohl *et al.*, (2000) point to immediate issues concerning home-school relationships whereby lower-income parents, part of the so-called *hard-to-reach* are less likely to get involved in school activities even when encouraged to do so (see Ingram *et al.,* 2007; Crozier and Davies, 2007). Similarly, Hornby and Lafaele (2011) proffer an extensive list of challenges including family contexts, learning difficulties, age, economic issues, behaviour, context, and language, all of which constitute complex matters of value demand on the school’s system. Hornby and Lafaele (2011: 50) call for “Clarification of the specific factors responsible for the rhetoric-reality gap is considered a necessary precursor to the further development of the practice of PI in education”.

This theme is explored by Goodall (2019: 10) in terms of social justice, asking “How can our work with parents, policy makers, practitioners and the public support the call of Small *et al*.(2010) to ‘debunk existing myths about the cultural orientations of the poor?’” Here, the difficulty of *othering* is introduced. This is reflected in part by the analysis of 378 research articles on home-school partnership (Hughes and MacNaughton, 2000: 242, cited by Palaiologou and Male, 2017) indicating that the role played by parents (PE) is too often regarded by schools as inadequate, supplementary, or unimportant. For both PI and PE, it is difficult to avoid a mindset of 'othering' towards parents, to see parents as somehow deficit and not recognise them as equal partners in learning. These attitudes arise in the absence of a viable home-school system, and again hint at a structural problem.

Given the variation in parenting and home contexts, any outreach mission is beset with challenges (Addi-Raccah and Ainhoren 2009: 805); however, the call for robust home-school partnership remains strong (Epstein 2018; Lucas 2013; Simon 2004; Harris and Goodall 2008). “The evidence is consistent, positive and convincing: families have a major influence on children's achievement” (Henderson and Mapp, 2002). Nevertheless, PE places outreach challenges and demands on a school’s human resources that are difficult to meet in an age of performativity; this is especially so in the case of so-called 'hard-to-reach' families who might otherwise be beneficiaries (Barrett 2008; Cortis *et al.,* 2009; Boag-Munroe and Evangelou, 2012; Carpentier and Lall, 2005).

From a systemic perspective, it seems that schools faced with such a variety of demand have made themselves intentionally hard to reach (Crozier and Davies, 2007: Watt, 2016). A systemic interpretation of the literature (Betts, 1992; Banathy, 1991; Bronfenbrenner, 1979), suggests that schools exercise considerable power in defining what counts as PI (see Anderson, 2002 on parental views) by determining the place, time, cast of actors, roles, content, and limitations on the type of assessment information needed to inform home-school discussion. Communication tends to be one-way, school to home. Schools define the language and boundaries of PI through their determination of the parameters of home-school discourse, structurally controlling the demand that otherwise threatens to overwhelm them, by limiting agency. As Betts (192) suggests, schools are closed systems involved in the task of maintaining patters over time.

For Hill and Tyson (2009), 'theories, research, and policies have identified the significant role of families, family-school relations, and parental involvement in education (Fan & Chen 2001; Hill & Chao 2009; Seginer 2006). However, while the benefits of home-school partnership seem clear, what passes for PP is less certain and especially so in the secondary sector. In his work with secondary schools planning a transition from a same-age structure to a multi-age or nested system, xxxxxx (2018: 252) notes, "Not one was able to show a coherent partnership model, despite many gaining certification or recognition by Ofsted in support of their PP prowess”. An examination of six meta-analyses (Jeynes, 2011) calls attention to the need to be far clearer about the many descriptive parameters involved in home-school collaboration.

Hornby & Lafaele (2011: 38) too, note a lack of factual information regarding implemetation; “Despite widespread acknowledgement of potential benefits … there are clear gaps between the rhetoric on PI found in the literature and typical PI practices found in schools." Hornby and Lafaele point to two surveys, one in the US and one in the UK. The former found that of 1035 secondary school teachers 83% considered the level of PI insufficient and should be increased (Binns, Steinberg, and Amorosi 1997), while the latter (Williams, Williams, and Ullman, 2002) reported that 72% of mothers wanted more involvement in their children’s education (see Andersson, 2002).

Too often it seems, schools are left with a confusion of terminology and a smorgasboard of theory, a situation unlikely to bring about change in overworked schools. For example, Epstein (1995) suggests six types of possible PI (parenting, communicating, volunteering, home-learning, decision-making, and community collaboration), and Hornby (2000) eight (communication, liaison, education, support, information, collaboration, resource, and policy). Souto-Manning and Swick (2006) refine these from a client perspective, suggesting a six-point empowerment strategy which focuses on an appreciation of families, while the Connecticut School-Parent Compact suggests ten similar steps. Also emanating from the research is the imporatnce of involving the child in the process (Ruddock et al., 2000; Souto-Manning and Swick, 2006; see xxxx, 2019: 89) adding additional complexity to agential involvement.

So it is that these advisory lists accumulate school by school, locality by locality, without any solid organisational guidance on the kind of structural design needed for an effective home-school partnership. Such lists of desirable attributes are reductionist in form so cannot be easily reassembled by schools to build the kind of alliance demanded, causing parts to be bolted-on in a somewhat ad-hoc way, restricted in form and centrally controlled. Jeynes (2011: 10) noted that the most potent aspects of PI are often less obvious, “whether teachers, principals, and school staff are loving, encouraging, and supportive to parents may be more important than the specific guidelines and tutelage they offer to parents.

Whether by embracing PI (schools exercising control over home-school processes) or PE (shifting or othering much of the burden of responsibility to the home) structuration plays a critical role. As demand increases, so the same-age school seeks to maintain the balance of its internal connectivity, protecting teacher workload by shying away from the burden of building an authentic home-school partnership. There is no malice nor lack of will and skill by schools, but there is an apparent lack of time and resources, the capacity of such a linear and complicated system to cope.

Reaching out to help parents support their child's learning remains fraught with practical and ethical difficulties for large secondary schools, but for primary schools less so (Cotton and Wikelind 1989; Sylva *et al.,* 2008). Small schools have the advantage of complex and fast-acting collaborative communication networks (Watt, 2016). Every child is known holistically, interventions tend to be faster, and small schools appear to manage collaborative home-school relationship more easily. They act like 'a third parent in the room'. In organisational terms, one of the messages to large secondary schools is to try and make themselves smaller, a matter that multi-age organisation goes some way towards achieving.

Two ethnographic studies go to the heart of the problem. In her study of four secondary schools, Walker (1998) describes parents' evenings (a cornerstone of PI usually involving a five-minute conversation with each of a child's subject teachers) as "a unique interactional event which creates a problematic interface between the power bases of home and school, concentrating on the assessment of a (frequently absent) individual." The title of her study, *Meetings without Communication,* references examples of mistrust, anxiety, and confrontational approaches far from any notion of partnership, joint enterprise and commonality of purpose. A dozen years on, it seems there has been little progress, with the two parties of home and school irretrievably locked in boundary maintenance issues where "The complex negotiations and skirmishes that take place during these encounters testify to their precarious location on the boundary between the two institutions of home and school" (MaClure & Walker 2010).

**Towards the defining characteristics of home-school partnership**

Palaiologou and Male (2017: 10) propose an “ecological paradigm”, an approach congruent with the partnership paremeters set out by Kanter (1994) and Johnston and Clark (2001) below, and one based on an “equitable dialogue between families and schools” (citing Miller et al., 2014: 341). This is defined as “any numner of reciprocal relationships and activities that are shaped towards common goals whereby all stakeholders are equally engaged to form partnership as an interactive process” Palaiologou and Male (2017: 10). This definition recognises that home school partnership relies on building a unique set of trustful relationships that incorporate “complexity, non-linearity, and non-predictability” (Palaiologou and Male, 2017: 10) focused on child development.

This approach is echoed by Ross Kanter (1994) in her discussion on partnership, which sets out three descriptions based on 'business alliances'.

* They must yield benefits for the partners, but they are more than just the deal. They are living systems that evolve progressively in their possibilities. Beyond the immediate reasons they have for entering a relationship, the connection offers the parties an option on the future, opening new doors and unforeseen opportunities.
* Alliances that both partners ultimately deem successful involve *collaboration* (creating new value together) rather than mere *exchange* (getting something back for what you put in). Partners value the skills each brings to the alliance.
* They cannot be "controlled" by formal systems but require a dense web of interpersonal connections and internal infrastructures that enhance learning.

Kanter's last point is essential, in part because it speaks to the rudiments of a complex adaptive system (Laszlo *et al*., 2015; McGee and Edson, 2014; Keshavarz *et al*., 2010; Axelrod and Cohen, 2000) raising difficult questions for schools operating with hierarchical same-age structures and management systems fixated on performative control and metrics.

Similarly, Johnston and Clark (2001: 68-69) writing about customer relationships in the service sector, describe four critical partnership elements.

* **Communications**: the extent to which there is two-way communication between parties; the ability to deliver clear messages, the ability to listen carefully.
* **Trust**: the degree to which one partner depends on the work or recommendations of the other without seeking further justification or collaboration. In some cases, one partner may commit the other to work without prior consultation.
* **Intimacy**: the extent to which each partner shares their plans, strategies, and profits.
* **Rules**: a mutual acceptance of how this relationship operates, i.e. what is acceptable and desirable and what is not.

These attributes accord with the ecological factors identified by Palaiologou and Male (2017: 14). Like Kanter (1994) and Johnston and Clark (2001), and not only afford elaborate descriptions of partnership but offer clues about how such alliances might be built, the degree of trust and organisational enablement needed, and the benefits gained. Importantly, a partnership is a human relationship, and these are always complex involving as they do, elements of trust, integrity, unpredictability, and openness. Such an approach intervenes in how schools think about structuration, the reciprocity involved in structure and agency.

**The relationship between structuration and home-school partnership**

There is a capacity question that the literature avoids: *how, exactly can a school build and maintain over time, a multiplicity of home-school relationships and ecologically-minded discourses unique to the development of each child*? First, it must recognise that the shared organisational and systemic experience of schooling, i.e. the same age, grade or year system, exerts a powerful influence on what is known, what can be reasonably achieved, and what can be asked of schools. Structuration plays a critical role in determining a school’s capacity for organisational learning and emergence. Second, trying to bend a partnership rationale indelibly written into the same-age schools’ psyche is unachievable. Had agency informed structure, paradigm change would have occurred.

Larry Cuban (2019) said this: “The age-graded school organization, an innovation from the mid-19th century, contains within it the basic grammar of schooling.” Cuban explains in detail how this system resists change and repeats over time, the *Tinkering to Utopia* chosen by Tyack and Cuban (1995) as the title of their early work. From the systemic perspective of schools that have abandoned such a system, the following interpretation applies. The same-age system determines structuration; structure determines agency (there is minimal reciprocity); agency determines partnership capacity; partnership capacity determines complexity; complexity determines the school’s ability to absorb the variety of demand on its system; the variety of demand determines organisational learning; organisational learning determines change, emergence and self-organisation. Schools can create an improved hermeneutic circle by re-entering the circle at the right place, changing the construction of groups.

Commenting on the grammar of schooling, Fullan (2020: 2) calls critical attention to a number of common features, including “batching of students by age, grade, and subject; ignoring or miscasting the inequity problem; the custodial and sorting role of schools; separation of parents / communities from schools.” For Fullan (2020: 2), “The default culture, as if it had a life of its own, seems ready to neutralise or blunt any serious attempt at change.” The author’s organisational work (XXXXX, 2018) with an extensive number of secondary schools worldwide, reveals that not one was able to describe a viable home school partnership that met the school’s claimed values, despite many having certificates as to their partnership prowess. There is little doubt one of the characteristics of the 175-year-old path-dependent system inherited by schools involves self-deceit, the distance between espoused theory and practice.

So, the answer to the lead question, “*how, exactly can a school build and maintain over time, a multiplicity of relationships and ecologically-minded discourses unique to the development of each child*?” can be answered but only from the reflective perspective of schools that have abandoned same-age organisation for a multi-age system. These schools understand that no matter what organisational contortions schools strategise, deep learning relationships were always serendipitous in their same-age iteration. For them, the loss of relationships between schools, students, and parents not only distorts values – the teachers’ mantra to make a difference – but is the frustration that drives schools to opt for paradigmatic change (xxxxx 2018) and the cause of wellbeing issues.

In organisational terms this question requires a socio-systemic interpretation. To restore relationships and build partnership, multi-age schools increase their capacity to respond to the value demand on their system by joining to more of themselves and their community. In short, they complexify to build (paradoxically) a simpler system. This is done by enhancing and enabling the role of the form tutors who become the information hubs of the school, the junction nodes through which all information passes and the centre of relational networks of learning. Essentially, these schools rewire mal-functioning, disconnected, and assumed feedback loops inherent in the same-age system allowing information to flow across previously impermeable borders (Betts 1992; Banathy, 1991). By changing structure, they release agency and unpredictability but make their schools congruent with social psychology and ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner 2005) and a higher level of organisational consciousness (Laloux, 2014).

Multi-age organisation introduces a revised set of management principles learnt by transitioning schools to guide praxis (XXXXX 2015, 2018).

* Everyone employed by the school is a tutor including admin staff and the leadership team.
* Tutor group sizes are reduced to 18-20 and two tutors allocated per group.
* All communication is rerouted through tutors operating at the organisational edge.
* Reports contain strategies for improvement and information usable by parents and students to support learning and development.
* Leadership is distributed to enable interventions close to causes. Servant leadership is *de rigeur*.
* The pastoral system and the academic system are combined not separated.
* Every child is a mentor and leader to every other child and is well known.
* Tutors do not teach PSHE which is now designed into the organisation’s relationships.
* The deep learning conversation between the school, the child, and parents is orchestrated through the tutor as the overseer of the child’s development.

There is much more to understand as this non-linear, non-predictable system evolves, increasing the school’s capacity to absorb complexity (see Pflaeging, 2014) just as Ashby’s law of requisite variety suggests.

Structuration is the dual interaction between structure and agency. Too much structure and agency is inhibited; too little and chaos ensues. The self-referencing grammar of the same-age school seeks to separate and limit to maintain. Its autopoiesis is to survive and maintain its identity (see Maturana and Varela, 1991) reproducing itself by controlling the narrative discourse of itself (Luhmann ?????). The multi-age school leaves its ego at the door. It relies on trust, the distribution of power and leadership (Lumby, 2019), and the fusion of structure and agency that enables self-organisation (XXXX 2020). Effectively, these schools have opted for triple loop solutions described by Flood and Romm (2018), expanding their discourse and opening their system to tacit knowledge. Effectively, they have learnt to learn. Such schools risk much to break free from the prison of the past and researchers would do well to listen to their stories and understand their new-found reliance on human relationships.

**Concluding comments**

It seems that the misplaced limitations of PI and the ethical and logistical challenges posed by PE are divergent pathways that too quickly steer schools from the centrality of what PP should be. It may even be that home-school partnership is the wrong discussion, a symptom of a deeper organisational and social malaise, just as the age of performativity is a symptom of current uncertainty. Research indicates that parent partnership is too important to be lost by separating it into PE and PI, and Goodall (2018) is right to ask that school leaders reflect on these matters. Such transformative learning, however, involves critical reflection, discourse, and the abandonment of existing operational assumptions and frames of reference to effect any paradigmatic shift. The multi-age system shows what can schools can achieve when values-led, and how they can disrupt grammar. It was Basil Bernstein (1970) who said schools cannot compensate for society. This has not stopped innovative, self-organising schools and those who walk their corridors from mitigating the worst excesses of inequality by reaching out to families, inviting them in, and being *the third parent in the room*.

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