

The Discursive (Re)construction of Parents in School Texts

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This paper explores the familiar issue of parental (non-)involvement in schools. More specifically, it examines the language of selected texts in one school context and finds initially that the roles of parents are not discursively constructed in these texts as their being involved in the school. Rather, a close reading of the texts' discourse displays parents as the deficit half of a contrastive pair (parents vs the school). The issue of parental involvement at this school, first highlighted in a survey analysis as significant, gains a complementary and extended interpretation through the application of discourse analysis to interviews with the school leaders and a section of the school's web page. Further analysis of interview data referring to the implementation of activities designed to increase parental involvement highlights movement towards the discursive reconstruction of parents as standard relational pairs with school leaders. The findings highlight the importance of the use of discourse analysis as a tool for understanding and implementing change in school culture.

Keywords: parent involvement, school effectiveness, parent-school partnerships, discourse analysis, leadership for learning

The Struggle to Involve Parents in School Business

Schools around the globe struggle to include parents in the business of schooling. Overall, there is wide agreement among stakeholders with the view that strong partnerships between home and school are integral to school effectiveness (Bastiani, 1997; Wolfendale & Bastiani, 2000). Bateson (2000: 54) has pointed out that there are many barriers preventing parents and schools from working closely together and it is important to understand the prevailing attitudes and expectations of parental involvement before there can be any engagement with change. In particular, there is a need to question a belief that, when it comes to developing school/parent partnerships, it is the parents who are the problem (Bateson, 2000; Hopkins *et al.*, 1994). The problematic view of parents stems from (mis)conceptions that parents do not want to be involved; that they have too many commitments, problems or priorities; or that parents do not have the confidence to be involved in or assist with their children's education. In response,

Smrekar and Cohen-Vogel (2002), who examined factors contributing to home and school-based activities, found that in relation to minority-community parents, low instances of involvement did not reflect a parental lack of interest in their child's development.

The relationship between school effectiveness and parental involvement has been linked to several factors. The role of the principal has been signalled as important for encouraging parental involvement (Griffith, 2001; Nichols-Solomon, 2001). Parental involvement in decision-making is a related area of concern in assessing school effectiveness. Although there are few instances that profile productive instances of parental involvement in decision-making about teaching and learning, Strahan *et al.* (2001) report on a study that included parents' evaluation in a comprehensive school evaluation of 17 middle schools with a view to developing school improvement plans. Another important factor worthy of consideration is the way in which the language that surrounds schooling has the power to enhance or limit home-school relations. Studies on how the role of the parents is discursively constructed are sparse and literature related to minority parental involvement even more so. In an analysis of school policy texts and family-school compacts, Nakagawa (2000) adds to this field. She reports on how the discourse of the texts controls who gets involved and how that involvement is structured, especially for disadvantaged and ethnic minority parents. In this paper we look at the role of schools' texts, including interviews with school leaders, and discuss how at a school consisting of a high proportion of ethnic minority parents, parental involvement can be linked to the way the discourse seeks to construct them and subsequently how they are seen as (in)active members of the home-school partnership.

A Brief Description of the Research Project

This paper is generated from the Cambridge University based *Leadership for Learning (Carpe Vitam)* project¹ (henceforth L4L), which is investigating how leadership is understood in different school contexts, how learning is understood and promoted within these schools, and what the relationship is between leadership and learning. MacBeath (2002: 3–4) summarises the basic theoretical tenets of the project as: leadership, teaching and learning are integrally connected; learning is a shared enterprise and held in common, as well as individually, among its members; leadership is distributed; good schools rely on collaborative modes of working and must be committed to building and strengthening teamwork; relationships are characterised by trust, honesty and openness. These tenets also serve to inform the collection of the data.

The project is being conducted in two stages over a three-year period (2003–2005). The first stage employs a portraiture method for 'mapping' each school's perceptions and practices in regard to leadership, learning and the connections between the two. Hackman (2002: 51) sums up the appropriateness of this method in terms of its capacity to stimulate 'educational change and reform, by helping practitioners solve real problems in educational settings'. The portrait for each of the three schools is derived from the researchers' collection of several sources of evidence such as a baseline survey of staff and students aimed at ascer-

taining key insights about the leadership, learning and development context of each school. Also contributing to the initial school portrait is a limited round of qualitative enquiry consisting of semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with school leaders (both principals and other key stakeholders with designated responsibilities for leading) and selected teachers and students. Complementing the school portrait is a school profile – data produced by each school – consisting of information that school staff themselves view as important in presenting as full a picture as possible of their particular institution (e.g. the school web page, records, external reports, articles from the school's newspaper and newsletters, and so on). Additionally, student-generated profiles of their schools have been collected. These profiles are produced in a variety of genres and focus especially on the meaning that school has for those Australian Year 8 students who have produced them. Having prepared the school portraits, the Australian researchers are working with three schools on stage 2 of the project: to refine and implement specific development tasks relating to leadership, learning and leadership *for* learning in the particular sites, based on the findings from the first stage of the project. A high degree of importance is placed on selecting projects for developmental work that are linked clearly to evidence contained in the school portraits. The collaborative process of co-enquiry between researchers and the schools enables all stakeholders to recognise where the schools are, how they see themselves, and what their expectations for the future are. Co-enquiry re-enacts the basic philosophical tenets of the L4L desire for distributed leadership within an open and trusting environment, and mirrors the manner in which the school itself is attempting to create a democratic environment marked by equity and social justice for all involved. The latter part of the second stage of the project is mainly concerned with documenting change in the three schools as they undertake developmental work and begin the process of reflecting on and evaluating their own principles and practices. Throughout the two stages of the project university researchers and school project teams continue to discuss the data and examine their implications for school action, reflect on practice and the outcomes of action research, and share information and outcomes nationally and internationally.

This paper reports on selected data mostly from stage 1 (but also stage 2 briefly), collected from one of the three Australian schools. The school is renamed *Metropolis* for confidentiality reasons. The issue of parental (non-) involvement, highlighted in the survey analysis as significant, gains a complementary and extended interpretation through the application of membership categorisation analysis of interview transcripts and of a school web page. The findings presented are primarily about the manner in which the role of the parents is NOT discursively constructed as a leadership role for learning, or anything else related to the school's core business. Rather, parents' roles are constructed as the deficit side of a contrastive pair. Although only sections of interviews with school leaders and the school's web page are examined, the sentiments contained in them are congruent with those parts of the other teachers' interviews that deal with the topic of parental involvement in the school. Overall, this paper contributes to our understanding of the role of language and discourse in leadership and school culture: showing how language not only represents but also shapes social practices.

Before proceeding to the data analyses and findings we present a brief description of the *Metropolis* school site from which those data are generated.

Contextual Features of the School Setting

Metropolis State High School, established in 1963, has grown to become a large urban high school (with approximately 1250 students) servicing a complex and varied community. It has a long tradition of academic excellence, as well as supporting a range of inclusive programs for ESL and overseas students, and focusing on sporting excellence through special programmes including a Centre for Athletic Development.

Metropolis High is a co-educational school, which offers secondary education programmes from Year 8 to Year 12. It opened at a time when secondary-school education was expanding throughout Queensland and has continued to provide a flexible curriculum that has adapted to the changing needs of individual students.

Over the years, the Metropolis corridor has become popular with Chinese speaking families and businesses. By linking with local businesses, the school has worked with the community to offer cultural and other support for Chinese-speaking students. In recent years, the local community has continued to attract a range of non-English-speaking families, creating a rich cultural diversity within the school population and the local community at large.

Students of this school speak 55 different languages other than English in their homes. The list of birthplaces for students extends to 60 different countries other than Australia. Students come from a variety of countries and ethnic backgrounds, including Taiwan, Hong Kong, Korea, China, Vietnam, Japan, Indonesia, Britain, Scotland, Ireland, Italy, Spain, Yugoslavia, Romania, Hungary, Poland, Sudan and many more.

(Adapted from information contained in the Metropolis website in 2003).

Creating Questions Through Statistical Analysis of Survey Information

The description of the school context and the survey findings suggest questions for the qualitative part of the study. Methodologically, we have taken the most prominent findings from the statistical analysis as an opportunity to ask more questions regarding whether, and how, parents are involved in leadership for learning at *Metropolis*. Those questions have then become a focus for our examination of the interview and school's web-page data. In other words, a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods is designed so that the statistical analysis highlights an area of concern (Freebody, 2003). Subsequently, discourse analysis explores those concerns further through a close examination of the language used in the principals' interviews and in the school web-page document. In this particular instance, although the mixed methods are complementary, more priority is given to discourse analysis (Cresswell, 2003) because we are examining the question of parental involvement from the methodological perspective that language represents and constructs certain versions of the school world, an understanding of which concept facilitates a more appropriate reconstruction of that world. The findings presented are primarily about the

manner in which the role of parents, at the beginning of Stage 1, is NOT discursively constructed as a leadership role for learning, or anything else for that matter. Rather, in the initial stage that role is discursively constructed as the deficit half of a contrastive pair in both of the texts examined.

In the first instance, as part of the stage 1 collection of data for the school portrait, surveys were offered to all teaching and administrative staff in each of the three participating schools. In explicating the staff-survey data we produced, in statistical terms, positive and negative gap scores for each of the three participating schools. Gap scores were calculated by subtracting *Agreement* scores from *Importance/what ought to be happening* scores, for each item in the questionnaire. Therefore, the gap scores signify not only a difference between what is considered important by the school and what it considers it is not doing very well (positive gap scores) but they also signify a discrepancy between what the school perceives itself to be doing well but which it does not consider to be important (negative gap scores). One significant issue that emerged from the gap score analysis for *Metropolis School* was related to the issue of parental involvement (see the Appendix). Two of the three items in the staff survey that were germane to parental involvement received the highest positive gap scores. The item concerning effective partnership between home and school (Q16) received a score of 2.81 on the 4 point Likert scale of *Agreement* compared with a score of 3.24 on the 4 point Likert scale of *Importance*: a (positive) gap score of +0.43, indicating a difference between what is considered important but which is NOT being done well. In percentage terms, 51% agreed to strongly agreed with the statement and 99% placed this as quite important, through very important, to crucial. In similar vein, the other item pertinent to parental involvement (Q20: *Parents are kept well informed about their children's personal and social development*) received an *Agreement* score of 2.68 compared with an *Importance* score of 3.06: a gap score of +0.38. In percentage terms, 45% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement and 98% rated the item as quite important, very important, or crucial (see the Appendix).

The staff perspectives on these two items clearly agree. However, when we turn to the findings for the third item that explored staff views, there is a different understanding (not necessarily disagreement) of the kind of parental involvement that is important. The third item in the survey relevant to parental involvement, (Q5) *There is a variety of opportunities for parents to participate in school decision making*, received a negative gap score of -1.64. For this item, 74% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, while 50% of respondents considered this aspect of the school's activity to be not important at all or only quite important (see the Appendix). In other words, the staff felt there was adequate opportunity for parents to participate in school decision-making, but this was not seen as a particularly important element of the school's overall operation (see the Appendix for graphs representing gap scores). The three statistical trends created questions that required deeper understanding about the issue of parental (non-) involvement in this particular school context. Working from the perspective that language is a powerful means of representing and shaping social practices in any institutional site, our next analytic concern was to explore important examples of language use in this context. Although during stage 1 we collected interviews with the principal,

some teachers and some students, here we examine the principal's interview mainly (supported by short extracts of interview talk by two other school leaders) and link it to the language in a section of the school's web page. This analytic path was chosen, as it was likely to lead to the most appropriate designing of action research school development projects.

Examining the Language of the Interview and Website Data Using Membership Categorisation Analysis

In examining the language of the principal's interview and web site data there are several analytic options available from the group of methodologies referred to generally as discourse analysis. This methodology works by heeding the nature of the linguistic and rhetorical language to gain a supportable explanation of what is happening. Contexts external to the data are invoked to a greater or lesser degree depending on the kind of discourse analysis being conducted.

We provide a deeper understanding of the manner in which the role of the parents is NOT discursively constructed as a leadership role for learning, or anything else related to the school's core business, through the application of membership categorisation analysis (henceforth MCA) (see Hester & Elgin, 1997; Sacks, 1995). This form of discourse analysis is derived from ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967; Sacks, 1995), whose aim is to show how members, as speakers and writers, use language in a sequential, turn-by-turn fashion to constitute a particular version of their topic about parental involvement in the school. Originally this method of analysis was applied to naturally occurring data such as telephone calls and meetings. More recently, it has been seen as useful for understanding settings such as interviews (Baker, 1984; Johnson & Paoletti, 2004) and visual-written materials (Emmison & Smith, 2000; Johnson, 2002).

In conducting our analysis we attended to the following specific analytic principles. We employ Sacks' (1995) foundational ethnomethodological notion that people use language to arrange their worlds into collections of otherwise separate categories, things that he called membership category devices (henceforth MCDs), as an analytical starting point. In our data the MCD 'school' brings together otherwise separate categories of principal, staff/teachers, parents and students. The first analytic step is to locate categories of persons, places and events. Silverman (1998: 139) explains that MCA 'demands that these categories be studied *in use* and that analysts' claims be grounded in demonstrable features of that use' [emphasis in original], and therefore contextual features about the school must at least be made relevant or oriented to during the talk-in-interaction. We show how the membership categories of the principal, staff/teachers, parents and students are oriented to in the data through the members' use of various conversational devices to highlight activities that can sensibly be heard as associated or bound with those categories. 'Certain activities can be treated as "bound" to certain categories and this bounded-ness provides a common-sense understanding of the world' (McKinlay & Dunnett, 1998: 36). Therefore, 'activities become "category-bound" not through some social scientist's assertion but through the way members actually invoke particular categories' (Silverman, 1998: 139) during the data-generation process. Simultaneously,

the members' reference to different people, places and things therefore produces a moral order, for example: good/involved parents, bad/uninvolved parents.

In order to understand precisely *how* the language of the interview and the web page is constructing certain views on the topic of parental involvement in school matters, we employ two related MCA principles in the analysis that assist in elaborating further how the clustering effect operates to produce explanations and moral evaluations by the speakers/writers. These two principles are known as standard relational pairs and contrast pairs that are produced during sequences of the talk-in-interaction (Sacks, 1995). Standard relational pairs can be seen as aligned in so far as they complement each other, for example teacher and student, husband and wife. However, 'such pairings can make observable the *absence* of the second part of any such pair' (Silverman, 1998: 82, emphasis in original): when one side of the pair is re-evaluated as *not* fulfilling its commonsensically held moral obligations, the pair is then renamed as a contrast pair (bad husband) (Hester, 2000: 207). Both explanations of pairings assist in 'explaining and making morally accountable [parents'] behaviour' (Hester, 2000: 199). This methodology then affords the researchers a rich and reliable description of the topic that serves to complement and extend the questions raised in the survey-data analysis.

Analyses of the Principal's Interview Accounts and the Website Data

As a follow-up to the staff survey, the principal of *Metropolis* was interviewed using research questions that corresponded with the four core themes explored earlier through the survey instrument. These themes are embedded in the research questions: How is leadership understood in different school contexts? Which individuals are seen as having leadership roles in relation to the schools engaged in the study? How is learning understood and promoted within these schools? What is the relationship between leadership and learning? One such theme, how leadership is understood in different school contexts, invited the interviewers' enquiry into this particular school's environment, human, cultural and geographical. Accordingly, the principal was asked to describe the parents and students. The whole interview was audiotaped and transcribed, at first with minimal transcription symbols. After repeated listening, selected segments deemed to be related to the research questions were retranscribed using conversation-analysis conventions that indicate more precisely the paralinguistic features of the talk (Jefferson, 1984). Analysts' choices have been made about how to represent the talk in transcript conventions and that process must be seen, at the very least, as a pre-analytical step (Ochs, 1979).

Segment 1: Interview with 'Metropolis' principal, 19th May 2003

In this interview the principal has been responding to the interviewer's question to speak about the first topic on the interview schedule: the school environment. The principal takes the lead in the opening talk and interprets the topic in terms of her leadership activities in relation to her staff, the teachers. She explains how she interviewed all the staff when she first came to the school as the new principal: *I ah initiated a lot of research to find out what the school culture was . . . I*

collated the data and I published the data and I used that as a set of priorities. It appears that her response is bound by her orientation to the interviewer as a fellow researcher, related to the topic of the school environment. At the point where the principal explains how the changes she has made in the school, as the result of her prior research, have been received very positively by the teachers, the interviewer changes the topic to the students and parents, as is seen in the following segment of the interview transcript.

In this first segment the parents are constructed as part of the MCD 'school' but as a contrast to their pair partner/s, the school principal/staff. The co-constructed interview talk, through a description of activities or predicates attributed to their category, builds up an evaluation of the parents as wanting.

8. I: OK well that that's sort of looking that was looking at the teachers and the leadership and where you're that's great that we've got that sort of um to start with how um does that um those um innovations fit with how you perceive the tea-ah the parent ah student body
9. P: OK we have um traditionally with non-English-speaking backgrounds students we have um they are not involved in their schools I know this for a fact because in 1991 I ran a project of national significance working with um the H . . . community up in I . . . and my role there was parent participation they traditionally don't get involved for reasons one that the systems that they've usually come from see the principal in a very different role than ours
10. I: yes
11. P: it's a non-consultative
12. I: yeah
13. P: lord of the world (heh heh) making godlike decisions and um parents don't have input and shouldn't have input often when they ring up because their children are ill they think they need to speak to me
14. I: mmhmm
15. P: um and and um the other reason is that um traditionally in high schools in inner city in *Metropolis* the parent participation has fallen off dramatically and we have trouble getting a quorum for our P and C we have 1200 students and we have trouble getting 15 parents along we'd be lucky to have more than ten parents at a P and C meeting and for the last four or five years they've struggled to get a P and C president here at the school so the parents are not involved with the school except for when they intersect with either the behaviour-management process or some other process in the school
16. I: OK do you um that's cultural partly but there's other factors
17. P: oh I think socioeconomic
18. I: yeah
19. P: comes into it as well time we have you know lots and lots of working parents
20. I: yep

The principal's talk seems to be designed for the recipient/interviewer as co-researcher. The topic superficially is parents' participation in the school:

I know this for a fact because in 1991 I ran a project of national significance working with um the H... community up in I... and my role there was parent participation. And once again the description of herself as a researcher reinforces her credibility on this new topic. Her talk is sustained around 'descriptions of people and scenes' (Baker, 1997) constituting the MCD 'school', particularly schools with a high proportion of students from *non-English-speaking backgrounds*. She describes the school's non-English speaking parents in terms of their (in)activities in so far as they *traditionally don't get involved*.

An important part of our interest in conducting this form of discourse analysis is to explicate the survey finding that *There is not an effective partnership between home and school*. Having categorised the parents as non-participatory, the principal proceeds to do the moral work of producing a set of contrast pairs through the use of pronouns: *the systems that **they've** usually come from see the principal in a very different role than **ours*** (turn 9, bolded type for added emphasis). A 'them' (parents) and 'us' (staff) binary opposition is set up as a contrast pair and this pattern sustains a deficit model of parental participation. If it were not for this contrast pairing between the parents and the staff, parents' activities – such as seeing the Principal's role as *non-consultative* (turn 11), being parents who *don't have input* (turn 13), or who *are not involved with the school except for when they intersect with either the behaviour management process or some other process in the school* (turn 15) – might not seem to be the problem that it is.

When the principal is prompted to account for *other factors* (turn 16) that could explain parental non-involvement, she adds *socioeconomic* and *lots and lots of working parents* (turns 17–19). Within the pattern of contrast pairs these factors act as further descriptions of the deficit parent category and hence serve to reinforce the contrastive binary between parents and school staff, at this stage.

The website analysis

When we look to other aspects of the school portrait for further information on parents' participation throughout the school, we recall the principal's brief mention of the P and C (Parents & Citizens Association) in segment 1:

traditionally in high schools in inner city in Metropolis the parent participation has fallen off dramatically and we have trouble getting a quorum for our P and C we have 1200 students and we have trouble getting 15 parents along we'd be lucky to have more than ten parents at a P and C meeting and for the last four or five years they've struggled to get a P and C president here at the school so the parents are not involved with the school except for when they intersect with either the behaviour management process or some other process in the school. (segment 1, turn 15)

Accordingly, the description of the parents as absent from P and C leadership and membership positions further confirms their place on the ailing side of the contrastive pair.

Using Fairclough's (2003) notion of 'genre chains', we now juxtapose that section of the principal's interview talk about parental involvement with an extract taken from the school's web page that forms part of the initial school-profile data. Genre chains here are understood in terms of the network of different texts that represent aspects of a particular issue: parental involvement in the school. In assessing documentary realities, Atkinson and Coffey (1997: 56)

argue that '[I]t is important to recognise that, like any system of signs and messages, documents make sense because they have relationships with other documents'. Our purpose here is to link two qualitative data sources that constitute the MCD 'school' so as to explore further the survey finding that *there is a variety of opportunities for parents to participate in school decision making*.

An extract from the school web page reads:

The Parents and Citizens' Association (P&C) is a collection of parents, caregivers, school staff and other citizens who wish to promote the education of students at *Metropolis State High School*. Parents and caregivers often think that once their children make the leap from primary to secondary school they are no longer needed and that it becomes the exclusive job of the secondary school to take over their children's education. This could not be further from the truth. Students do best when there is a three-way partnership between the student, the home and the school.

Parents can help them simply by being interested in their studies. Showing that parents care can be a big confidence-booster for children even if parents do not understand some of the things their children are doing. Another more tangible way of being involved is with the P&C. This can be as a volunteer in the tuckshop, uniform shop, in the library or in the music support group. It is a way of parents being around, while respecting children's 'space'. If commitments prevent parents from helping during the day they can simply join the P&C and come along to the evening meeting held once a month (it's free to join). The activities of the P&C also raise money which is used for the benefit of the school. (Adapted from the *Metropolis State High School* website, 2003)

By applying MCA to the language of the web-page text we are able to examine it in a manner similar to that used to interpret the interview segments and therefore provide a robust connection between 'documents' in the genre chain. Again, we rely on the MCA principles of categorisation and of contrast and standard relational pairs to support the view of parents produced by the authors of the web page (the school). A close look at the sequential nature of the language of this text reveals a description of secondary-school parents as interested carers of their children's schooling. The activities that are bound to this category 'interested parents' are concern about children's studies and caring and acting in a volunteer capacity as a member of the Parents and Citizens' Association. In producing parents in this way, the school continues to draw up a contrast between (interested) parents, who watch their children's learning from afar, *even if parents do not understand some of the things their children are doing*, and staff, who are engaged in decision-making roles about students' learning. When the focus on parents is shifted from the role of carers to the role of educators, the parents are seen to occupy the deficit side of the binary in opposition to school staff. Staff, who are characterised as 'experts' (Silverman, 1998: 82), form part of 'Collection K' (Sacks, 1972: 37) in so far as they form 'a collection constructed by reference to special distributions of knowledge existing about how to deal with some trouble'. This contrast builds an account that is characterised once again by an asymmetrical relationship between school staff and parents, where parents are being accounted for as having less right to school knowledge than do staff (Heritage,

1997). The tangible way offered, through the web page, for parents to participate in the category device 'school' is as ancillary help in matters of learning and as members of the P and C. In other words, according to the web page, the most desirable way for parents to behave is to assist the school in auxiliary matters that are peripheral to leadership for learning matters. This view confirms the staff survey view for Q5: that there was *adequate opportunity for parents to participate in school decision-making [related to leadership for learning]*, but this was not seen as a particularly important element of the school's overall operation. We now look to later sections of the principal's interview for possible shifts in the production of the topic 'parental participation'.

Segment 2: Interview with 'Metropolis' principal, 19th May 2003

In this second, later, segment of the same interview, parents are reconstructed as still being part of the MCD 'school', but they are no longer described as a contrast to their pair partner/s, the school principal/staff. The co-constructed interview talk builds up a re-evaluation of the parents through a description of them as involved. Now, the activities or predicates attributed to their category 'parents' are named through their involvement in the school. In this segment of the interview the description of the pair, staff and parents, shifts a little closer to the relational side of the continuum. In segment 2, following on immediately in temporal terms from segment 1, the principal formulates, *so we've put in place a lot of structures this year to try and involve our parents more in what happens in the school* (turn 21). One such structure concerns a change in the process of conducting parent-teacher interviews.

21. P: so we've put in place a lot of structures this year to try and involve our parents more in what happens in the school
22. I: oh OK can you just give me a couple of examples of that
23. P: um we've totally changed our parent-teacher interview process
24. I: oh OK
25. P: last year we had parent-teacher interviews where they all sat in the hall and we had about 120 parents that came along um and a lot of them complained afterwards because they didn't get to speak to the teachers there wasn't any privacy there were a whole range of things that were they were unhappy about
26. I: mmhmm
27. P: now when we changed our structures this year to monitor our kids more carefully so within the school we've got sub schools where we have roll mark teachers and they have a new roll and these sorts of things we decided that we would try our parent-teacher interviews um at the end of term one which is traditionally about how they're doing in school generally rather than just an achievement-type focus we would have it in a variation day so the students didn't come except when they came with their parents for an interview and they went to their roll-mark teacher who talked about all of their progress with them
28. I: so the students had to come with the parents
29. P: that was the request yeah we had 400 parents come

30. I: mmm
31. P: um we've had some negative feedback on that as well because we ran it during the day um we did that purposely we started early for parents who dropped their kids off and maybe they would come before work so we started at eight some started at seven um but a lot of parents wanted it to be at night time um
32. I: which is the traditional time for parent-teacher interviews
33. P: yeah out of the 400 I've gotten over a hundred we gave each one of the parents that came to the interviews a um ((interruption checking the tape)) um we gave them each a survey form to take home and fill out and return to school and um out of those we've received over a hundred back

The principal begins to talk about the new topic by producing the actual scenario (Baker, 1997) of the new parent-teacher interviews: *we would have it in a variation day so the students didn't come ((to school)) except when they came with their parents for an interview and they went to their roll mark teacher who talked about all of their progress with them* (turn 27).

In this segment the school is identified as making decisions about and implementing new structures for parent-teacher interviews and the parents are now described as co-operative, interested and appreciative of the school's efforts to keep them informed. They are described as having taken up more morally responsible positions in so far as 400 parents (an increase of 300 from the previous year with the old structure) brought their children to the parent-teacher interviews and *went to their roll-mark teacher who talked about all of their progress (not just the academic progress)* (turn 27). Additionally, the principal reports happily that, *we gave them each a survey form to take home and fill out and return to school and um out of those we've received over a hundred back* (turn 33).

Throughout the principal's interview, there remains an absence of direct talk about parents' decision-making in the school (regarding question 5 on the survey instrument). Even when parental involvement is discussed positively, it is in relation to parents who have responded well to initiatives and decisions made by the school, to redesign the process of parent-teacher interviews. However, the manner in which the parents are now reproduced as a standard relational pair to the staff confirms the staff survey finding to some degree for Q5: that there was *adequate opportunity for parents to participate in school decision-making*, and this was now being re-evaluated as a particularly important element of the school's overall operation.

Moving Towards Positive Roles for Parents in Leadership for Learning

The multi-strategy analysis demonstrates how parents are discursively constructed through school texts. Although there is evidence to suggest that the textual construction of parents limits their involvement in decision-making at *Metropolis*, there is also movement towards a changing, more inclusive role for them.

In accordance with the aims of the research it is crucial that the move to stage 2 of the project be generated from the evidence of the initial portrait research find-

ings: that parents at *Metropolis* are starting to be seen more and more as partners with school staff. In support for this shift, MacBeath and Moos (2004: 11) see 'parents as learning partners and co-educators, and other social agencies as key players in creating conditions for family, community and professional learning'. As noted earlier, stage 2 of the L4L project involves the implementation and tracking of changes that take place as part of the school's development plan. Accordingly, *Metropolis* is continuing to conduct school development activities to increase parental involvement in the decision-making roles. In particular, this aim is being enacted through activities related to teachers' and parents' awareness of the school's pedagogical knowledge and practices. In the following interview extract, a current staff leader explains how changes in structure and conduct of parent teacher interviews have continued the process of recognising parents as partners.

Segment 3: Interview with 'Metropolis' acting principal 10th August 2004

17. I: I'm always fascinated with parent-teacher interviews . . . you say you've done some training [with teachers about how to conduct parent-teacher interviews] . . . say a parent is really hostile and doesn't want to hear negative views do you cover that . . .
18. P: to some degree yes when we're preparing for parent-teacher interviews particularly in our older style of parent-teacher interviews one of the things that I would always do is put out tips on how to start an interview the things that it's appropriate to talk about at an interview how to end an interview because sometimes you can't get the parents to leave and you've got a time frame in which to do it so yes definitely but also I talk to teachers about what if you were a parent I was interviewing I'd say yes we're both working towards the same thing and we both have I can see that you and the school are both doing this and how lucky the child is to have a parent who is concerned and how lucky the child is that the school is working towards that as well I always put the two of us together working for the same outcomes

The shift to the inclusive pronoun 'we' constitutes and fortifies the home-school partnership through language use. A further more practical shift towards incorporating parents into leadership for learning roles and decision-making is also evident in the following comments from another school leader during a recent (stage 2) interview at *Metropolis*.

Segment 4: Interview with 'Metropolis' acting deputy-principal 10th August 2004

32. DP: . . . we are looking at parent-teacher interviews and interaction we have the parents in our the changing of the nights incorporated a little bit more of the pedagogy as well as just reporting back on classroom success or failure and what I was just talking about the second lot of interviews in the learning team rooms themselves with the learning team teachers and that was very successful and we talked about in those particular rooms talked about what's happening in the classes

- what projects the students were doing and then we moved on from those rooms into a central our central new auditorium teachers from all of the different faculties for the subjects that they'll be moving into
33. **I:** do you feel that during this process that the parents were getting more confident to say
34. **DP:** absolutely . . . I know would like too to have more sessions with parents to discuss what's happening
35. **I:** when you say you focus on thinking skills what exactly tell them about
36. **DP:** you tell them exactly what it is
37. **I:** so do you have a programme of (core) skills here
38. **DP:** sure well we do a lot of call it thinking let them know exactly what call it thinking involves because I'm sure that parents are picking up some language at home . . . I
39. **I:** this is a focus on pedagogical knowledge
40. **DP:** yeah

Both examples reflect the school's growth towards a more effective partnership between home and school.

A further possibility for 'marketing' parental involvement in decisions about learning is to concurrently reconstruct the school web page so that it becomes a venue where parents are offered opportunities to see different leadership roles for themselves and are given opportunities to take up leadership roles in relation to learning. More specifically, the interpretation gained from the MCA analysis where parents have been reconstructed as a standard relational pair with school staff could be the premise upon which sections of the web page referring to parents are rewritten, perhaps by the parents themselves.

There are alternative ways of explaining to parents how 'students do best when there is a three-way partnership between the student, the home and the school' thus encouraging parents' participation in the leadership *for* learning focus within the school. For example, the web page can be rewritten accordingly (see Table 1 for new ways of discursively reconstructing parents' roles).

Concluding Comments

Overall, our aim has been to understand more precisely how *Metropolis* School accounts for their understanding of parental involvement with a view to formulating plans and implementing activities that will strive in the long term to refocus parental involvement in relation to leadership *for* learning. An important finding that resonates within and across all of the initial (stage 1) teacher surveys and interviews is the problematic nature of understanding parent (non-) involvement. The findings presented initially are primarily about the manner in which the role of the parents is NOT discursively constructed as a leadership role for learning, or anything else related to the school's core business. Rather, parents' roles are discursively constructed as the deficit side of a contrastive pair in both the genres examined. However, there is some evidence, from the stages 1 and 2 data, that the role of parents is being reconstructed and that parents are being invited into and accepting roles in the school's leadership activities concerning home-school partnership about students' learning: specifically through the

Table 1 Reconstructed roles for parents

<i>Current School Web Page</i>	<i>New School Web Page</i>
<p>The Parents and Citizens’ Association (P&C) is a collection of parents, caregivers, school staff and other citizens who wish to promote the education of students at <i>Metropolis State High School</i>. Parents and caregivers often think that once their children make the leap from primary to secondary school they are no longer needed and that it becomes the exclusive job of the secondary school to take over their children’s education. This could not be further from the truth. Students do best when there is a three-way partnership between the student, the home and the school.</p> <p>Parents can help them simply by being interested in their studies. Showing that parents care can be a big confidence-booster for children even if parents do not understand some of the things their children are doing. Another more tangible way of being involved is with the P&C. This can be as a volunteer in the tuckshop, uniform shop, in the library or in the music support group. It is a way of parents being around, while respecting children’s ‘space’. If commitments prevent parents from helping during the day they can simply join the P&C and come along to the evening meeting held once a month (it’s free to join). The activities of the P&C also raise money which is used for the benefit of the school.</p>	<p><i>The Parents and Citizens Association is . . . (As in original on the left)</i></p> <p><i>Showing that parents care can be a big confidence-booster for children. Parents can help students by being interested and participating in the home–school decision-making process about their studies. An important way of being involved is through attendance and participation in parent–teacher interviews. The interviews are opportunities for parents and your student to become involved with school staff in decision-making about how best to learn. It is an opportunity for you to tell us about the ways teaching and learning at school are linked to your home environment . . .</i></p> <p><i>The school is very pleased to see that many parents whose first language is not English are engaging with interpreters to show their keen interest in their child’s wellbeing at the school.</i></p>

mechanism of a revisioning of parent–teacher interviews. It seems the school has heeded the finding of Smrekar and Cohen-Vogel (2002) that, in relation to minority community parents, low instances of involvement did not reflect a parental lack of interest in their child’s development. At least some of the current success with the involvement of the diverse cultural parent population can be attributed to the school’s provision for the presence of multilingual interpreters at parent–teacher interviews and for other points of contact with the school.

The most productive means of putting the research findings into practice is not always straightforward. For example, before any further school development activities are undertaken at *Metropolis* regarding parental involvement, the opinions of parents and students should be collected and any analysis must also be linked to the existing layers of evidence. Still more questions need to be asked, therefore, about what parents think about their involvement in school matters:

for example, how, if at all, they see they are being invited to take up leadership roles in the school so as to produce positive learning outcomes for their children and themselves. Students also should be asked related questions: how (much) would they like to see their parents involved in their learning? This approach assumes that all members of the school community, parents included, have the potential to exercise leadership (Day *et al.*, 2000) in a partnership that is likely to build a broad 'community of practice' (Wenger, 1998). Subsequently, a more diverse understanding of how to create an even more productive nexus between parents' involvement and leadership and learning could be forthcoming.

However, even then it must be remembered that the 'voices' of those parents and students who elect to be heard might not be always in accord with the diverse views and values of the entire parent body. In the multi-layered analysis presented there is some indication that change in the nature and extent of parental involvement could require a large-scale cultural shift on the part of all stakeholders regarding their views on the roles and responsibilities of teachers and parents in children's learning. It is quite possible that at least some of the parent body has internalised negative beliefs about their own efficacy and agency, although there is no hard evidence for this suggestion at this stage. If the long-term aim is to create an authentic space for parents to be involved in decision-making, then having their 'voices' present is not necessarily enough. Parents themselves need to be part of the reconstructive process so that they too can see and talk about themselves in terms of a *standard relational pair* with teachers and leaders in the decision-making process. The leaders, staff and parents might be assisted to face this set of circumstances, at least initially, by understanding the way the school talks about its members from the perspective presented in this analysis – as a point of departure for further positive action. The discourse analytic approach used to examine the school texts (interviews and school web page) could be integrated into professional development on educational leadership preparation, so that leaders, including parents and students, could have access to it as a tool for improving the home-school partnership and, by extension, school effectiveness.

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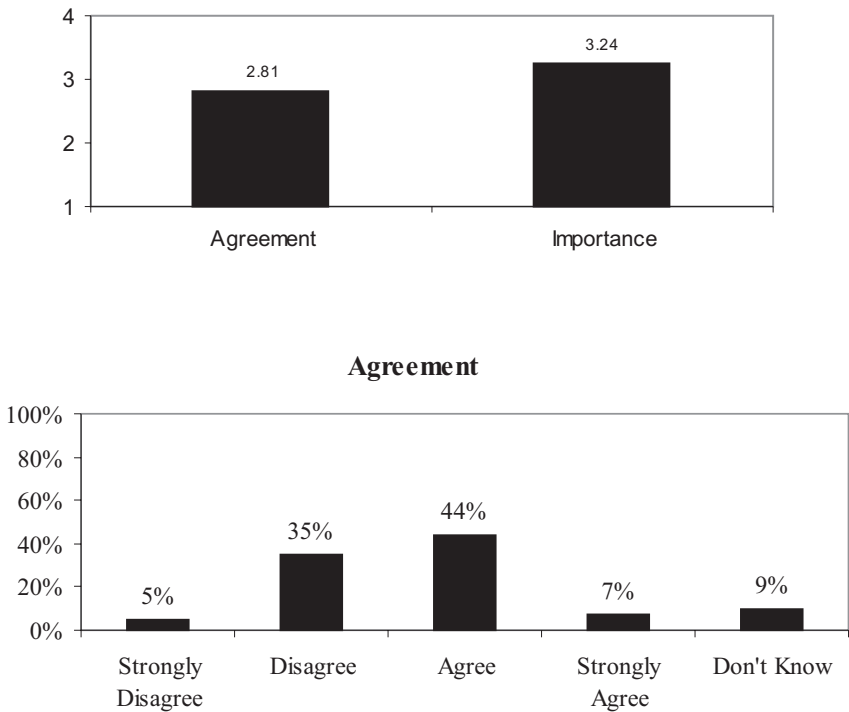
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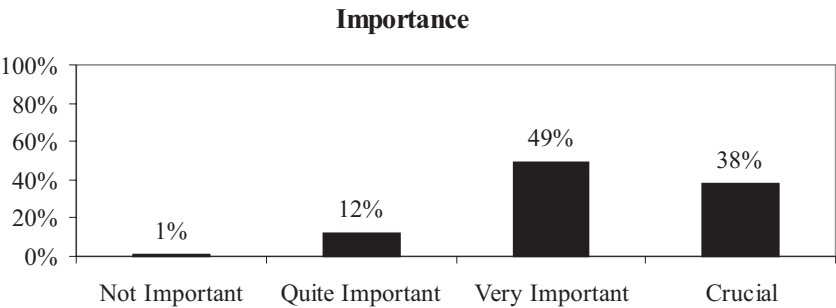
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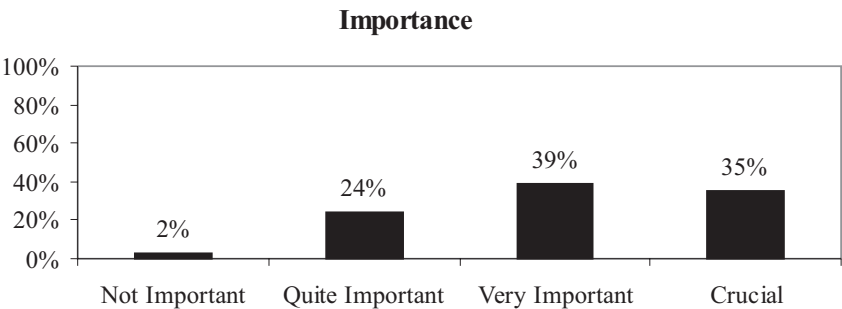
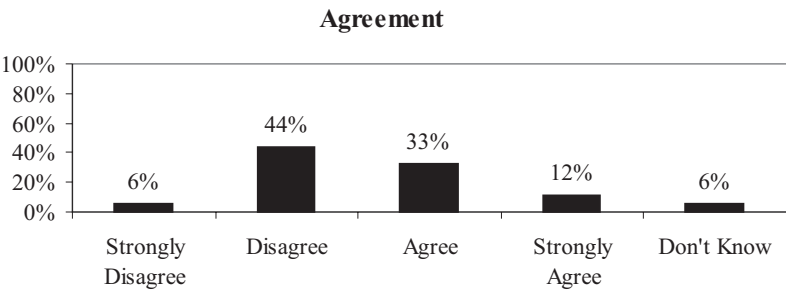
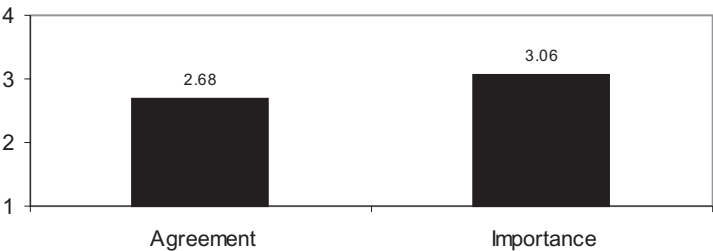
Appendix

Q16 There is an effective partnership between home and school.

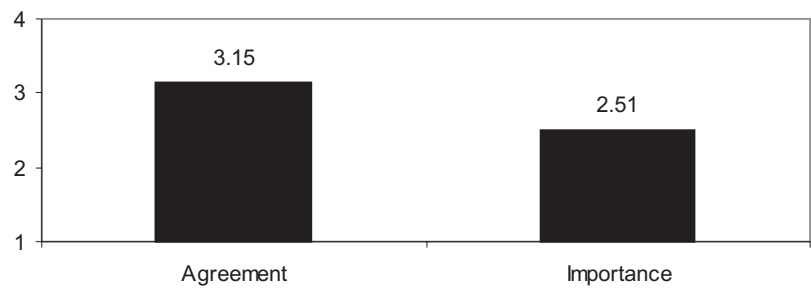




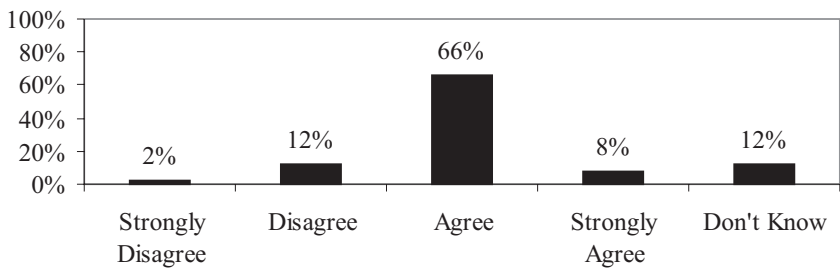
Q20 Parents are kept well informed about their children’s personal and social development.



Q5 There is a variety of opportunities for parents to participate in school decision making.



Agreement



Importance

