Introduction

Parent involvement, defined as representing a parent’s ‘active commitment to spend time to assist in the academic and general development of their children’ (Borgonovi & Montt, 2012, p. 20), has been widely acknowledged as promoting children’s educational and developmental outcomes (Emerson, Fear, Fox & Sanders, 2012). This involvement includes activities in the home, at school and in the community (Epstein, 1986; 1995). Encompassing these activities, the concept of family–school partnerships emphasises the formation of supportive ongoing relationships between families and schools ‘... based on mutual trust and respect, and shared responsibility ... ’ (DEEWR, 2008, p. 2). In recent times there has been a renewed interest in strengthening family–school partnerships, as governments and educators seek to improve schooling outcomes (Borgonovi & Montt, 2012; Jeynes, 2011). In establishing the foundations of effective parent involvement policy and practice, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) asserts that a sound understanding of different patterns in the ways families and schools form partnerships, based on research within the context in which family–school partnerships policies and practices are to be implemented, is essential (Borgonovi & Montt, 2012).

Parental involvement in family–school partnerships has been widely established as supporting and improving students’ social, emotional and academic outcomes (Avvisati, Besbas & Guyon, 2010; Avvisati, Gurgand, Guyon & Maurin, 2010; Emerson, Fear, Fox & Sanders, 2012; Fan & Williams, 2010). This involvement offers both immediate support, such as in supporting children’s literacy and numeracy development, and as having long-term emotional, social and academic benefits (Avvisati, Besbas & Guyon, 2010; Borgonovi & Montt, 2012; Emerson et al., 2012; Fan & Williams, 2010). Although early involvement appears to be more important, parent involvement offers ongoing support throughout children’s education (Borgonovi & Montt, 2012; Cheadle, 2009; Kreider, Caspe, Kennedy & Weiss, 2007; OECD, 2011; Pomeranz, Moorman & Litwack, 2007).

Based on Epstein’s (1986) notion that increasing the overlap between the three spheres of home, school and community provides a more supportive developmental environment for children, Epstein (1995) proposed that parent involvement in their children’s educational development is represented through: Parenting, where families establish supportive home environments for children as learners; Communicating, between home and school about the child; Volunteering, where parents assist in school and classroom activities; Learning at home,
assisting in ways that relate to the school curriculum; Decision making, such as on councils; and Collaborating with the community, drawing on local resources and services. Epstein’s typology emphasises the role of schools in facilitating parent involvement, and continues to form the foundation of current family–school partnership policies and practices (Baker & Soden, 2006; DEEWR, 2008; Emerson et al., 2012; McConchie, 2004).

Parent involvement theories such as Epstein’s have, however, been critiqued as privileging middle-class values, parenting styles and ways of being, and thus as representing a restricted view that fails to account for diversity in parent involvement practices (Avvisati et al., 2010; Borgonovi & Montt, 2012; Emerson et al., 2012; Gertler, Patrinos & Rubio-Codina, 2007). The OECD argues that a greater understanding of different patterns of parent involvement, in different sociocultural contexts, can support the development of family–school partnership practices that better respond to the diverse needs and interests of families (Borgonovi & Montt, 2012). In particular, the OECD identified the need for research to investigate ‘the extent and forms of parental involvement in children’s education according to gender, socioeconomic and ethnic background’ in different sociocultural contexts (Borgonovi & Montt, 2012, p. 30).

In response to this need for a more nuanced understanding of differentiated patterns of family–school partnerships practices, the OECD studied parent involvement in 14 countries as part of the 2009 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (OECD, 2010; OECD, 2011). As well as establishing the relationship between particular strategies and student outcomes across different national contexts, the OECD identified varying patterns of parent involvement relating to different socioeconomic and cultural background, with these patterns also varying between the countries surveyed (Borgonovi & Montt, 2012). Patterns of parent involvement were not surveyed as part of the 2009 PISA testing in Australia.

**Patterns of parent involvement in family–school partnerships**

International research has identified that parent involvement is usually highest in the early years of schooling and reduces over time (Borgonovi & Montt, 2012; Pomeranz, Moorman & Litwack, 2007). The reduction in parent involvement as children grow has been linked to children’s increasing independence, changing needs as children move into higher school grades, and parental perceptions of reduced ability to provide support as the curriculum becomes more complex and specialised (Avvisati et al., 2010; Bakker & Denessen, 2007; Bouffard & Weiss, 2008; Green et al., 2007). Parent involvement is also linked to child and teacher invitation, which itself reduces as children move through the grades (Daniel, in press; Green et al., 2007).

Though parental involvement in family–school partnerships reduces as children move through the school grades, families may also experience social, economic, personal and practical barriers that limit parent involvement in family–school partnerships (Borgonovi & Montt, 2012; Guo, 2013; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Kim, 2009; Yanghee, 2009). These barriers are more commonly experienced by families from minority and disadvantaged backgrounds, reducing their participation in family–school partnership activities, particularly activities occurring on the school site (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Williams & Sanchez, 2013). International research has identified a relationship between lower involvement in family–school partnerships and minority sociocultural background (Guo, 2013; Turney & Kao, 2009; Yanghee, 2009), and with lower socioeconomic status (Borgonovi & Montt, 2012; Guryan, Hurst & Kearney, 2008).

An alternative perspective proposes that rather than parent involvement being lower, differences between groups may also be the result of different patterns of involvement that are not recognised, and thus not measured, by current frameworks. Rather than participation in more visible school-based involvement practices, these different patterns of involvement may focus on less visible home- or community-based activities. The National Household Education Survey in the United States, for example, found families from western and Asian backgrounds were more likely to be involved in visible school-based activities such as attending school events, volunteering in school or serving on school committees; while families from Hispanic and African–American backgrounds were more likely to be involved in the home-based activity of checking homework (NCES, 2009).

Investigating the efficacy of alternative or less visible strategies may help in identifying a broader range of ways of engaging families in family–school partnerships. The OECD identified the efficacy of a number of parent involvement strategies not normally emphasised in current family–school partnership frameworks in supporting students’ literacy and numeracy outcomes. These strategies included discussing books and media experiences with their children, discussing political and social events and issues, and eating meals together (Borgonovi & Montt, 2012).

Programs based on alternative parent involvement strategies have been successful in building family–school partnerships with families from minority and disadvantaged backgrounds. Bouffard and Weiss (2008) refer to these as ‘complementary strategies’, and advocate the investigation of these strategies, and particularly families’ out-of-school time involvement practice, in building a new framework for family involvement to inform policy, practice and research (p. 3). In Australia, community-based models, for example, have been engaged to build successful partnerships with families from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (Harslett et al., 1999; Muller, 2012; Yunkaporta, 2009), and culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (De Gaetano, 2007; Lewis, Kim & Bey, 2011; Woestehoff &Neill, 2006).
Though patterns of parent involvement differ across family sociocultural and socioeconomic background, there is almost universal agreement that levels of parent involvement do not differ in relation to the child’s gender (Borgonovi & Montt, 2012). The types of involvement parents engage in with boys and girls, however, may vary. The OECD found engagement of parents in school-based activities to be similar for boys and girls (Borgonovi & Montt, 2012). For home-based activities, there were differences in the types of involvement. Parents were more likely to sing to girls than boys in all 13 survey countries, and more likely to have talked to teachers about their son’s progress or behaviour in school.

### Parent involvement in Australia

With its own policy environment, highly culturally diverse population (Hugo, 2004) and history of limited parental involvement opportunity in schools (Goos et al., 2004), understanding patterns of parent involvement in the Australian context is important in informing the development of family–school partnership policy and practice. There have been few large-scale studies of family–school partnerships in Australia. Recent nationally based research was conducted by Berthelsen and Walker (2008) and Walker and Berthelsen (2010). These authors analysed data from the Growing up in Australia: The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children and confirmed a relationship between parent involvement and children’s literacy and numeracy development. These studies also identified lower parent involvement in families from lower socioeconomic backgrounds in the Australian context.

Another recent national study investigated 61 family–school partnership projects as part of the trial of the draft Australian Family-School Partnerships Framework (Saulwick-Muller, 2006). The review concluded that family–school partnerships offer improvements in student outcomes, build social capital in the school community and school culture, provide opportunities for parents’ self-growth and provide professional rewards for staff (Saulwick-Muller, 2006, p. 14). The project also developed 12 in-depth qualitative case studies illustrating features of best practice.

In an earlier study, Goos et al. (2004) surveyed 606 numeracy programs involving parents and schools in partnerships across Australia. The research aimed to describe current practices and identify effective programs as models for practice. Similar to the Saulwick-Muller (2006) survey, the study provided seven case studies of effective programs as exemplars of best parent involvement programs in mathematics.

One area where there has been a focus on family–school partnerships in Australia is in the field of Indigenous education (Dockett, Mason & Perry, 2006; Dwyer, 2002; Yunkaporta, 2009). A history of marginalisation, negative experiences with governmental agencies and unresponsive school practices have been cited as leading to lower participation in family–school partnerships for families from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) backgrounds, particularly within the school site (Harslett et al., 1999; Muller, 2012). Muller (2012) conducted a case study of nine family–school partnership programs across Australia that were successful in building partnerships between schools and families from ATSI backgrounds. In this context, the role of community was identified as an important aspect of successful programs, representing a more culturally sensitive and responsive approach.

The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) (FaHCSIA, 2012) provides nationally representative data from which analyses of patterns of parent involvement in the contemporary Australian context can be developed. Responding to the OECD identification of the need for context-based research describing patterns of parent involvement in different national contexts, this research analysed patterns of parent involvement for 2296 families from the K-Cohort of LSAC in Year 1 and again in Year 3. Building on the findings of Berthelsen and Walker, this research investigates changes and differences in parent involvement practice across the three spheres of home-, school- and community-based involvement in the early years of formal schooling. Variations in these patterns based on children’s gender, ATSI and culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds, and family socioeconomic status are investigated. The implications of findings for policy and practice are considered.

### Method

#### The LSAC project

Growing up in Australia: The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) provides the opportunity to analyse large-scale data on parent involvement, in a nationally representative sample of Australian families. The LSAC study is conducted by the Australian Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA), the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) and the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). LSAC is based on a randomly selected sample of children, stratified on state or territory of residence, and broadly representative of the Australian population for sex, cultural background and socioeconomic status for children of a similar age (Gray & Smart, 2008).

Commencing with Wave 1 in 2004, LSAC gathers data from a B-Cohort of children aged three to 15 months ($n = 5112$), and a K-Cohort aged between four and a half and five years of age ($n = 4991$). Interview and questionnaire data for LSAC are gathered by trained employees of the Federal Government Australian Bureau of Statistics. The data is released without personally identifying information to approved research applicants for analysis. Further
Participants

This study draws from the 2006 Wave 2 and 2008 Wave 3 data for the LSAC K-Cohort. Retention of participants from Wave 1 was 89.4 per cent in Wave Two and 86.8 per cent in Wave Three (AIFS, 2012). Participants represented families of children who were in Year 1 in Wave 2 (average age = six years, nine months) and Year 3 in Wave 3 (average age = eight years, nine months), who had completed parent involvement measures in both waves (n = 2296). Data was provided by the nominated primary parent, 96.5 per cent of whom were the child’s biological mother.

The research sample was similar in gender composition to the K-Cohort in Wave 3, with 51.8 per cent male (n = 1189) and 48.2 per cent female (n = 1107) children. A one-way chi square confirmed this did not differ significantly from the overall K-Cohort (c² = 0.620, p = 0.43). The sample was under-representative of children from ATSI (2.5 per cent), (c² = 9.639, p = 0.002). There were no significant differences for participants from CALD backgrounds (11.7 per cent), (c² = 0.002, p = 0.96). The standardised socioeconomic score of the sample (M = 0.0409), recorded by socioeconomic position (SEP) (see description in measures), was slightly higher than that of the LSAC population (M = 0.0446), with an ANOVA showing this difference was significant, F (1,2296) = 7.864, p = 0.005.

Missing data related to the withholding of demographic details in the released data for individuals in smaller communities, or where questions were refused or not answered. There were 24 families in the sample who were not asked about the language mothers spoke at home and 34 where the respondent did not know. Two participants did not answer the question on Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background. Where demographic details were missing, these cases were excluded for that particular analysis only.

Measures

Reflecting Epstein’s original classifications of home-, school- and community-based involvement, the study investigates family–school partnerships using measures these three forms of involvement provided within the LSAC data. The LSAC measures were derived from similar indexes in international studies including: the National Household Education Survey (NCES, 1996–2007), the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (NCES, 1998–99), and the Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey (US Department of Health and Human Services, 1997–2009) in the United States; and the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (Statistics Canada, 2000).

Home-based parent involvement index

The home-based parent involvement measure identifies a number of parent–child activities in the home that might promote learning and development. Questions asked how often each week parents: read to the child from a book; involved the child in everyday activities, such as cooking and pet care; and played games outdoors or exercise activities (0 = None; 1 = 1 or 2 days; 2 = 3–5 days; and 3 = 6–7 days).

School-based parent involvement index

The school-based parent involvement index represents parent involvement within the school and school community. Parents were asked whether during the current or previous school terms they had: visited their child’s class; contacted the teacher; talked to other school parents; attended a school event; or volunteered in class or on a school excursion (yes/no). The school-based parent involvement index represents the number of yes responses (0 to 5).

Community-based parent involvement index

The community-based parent involvement index represents parental activity with their child outside the home. Parents were asked if they had, during the previous month, attended: a movie; a sporting event as spectators; a concert, play, museum, art gallery or community or school event; a religious service, church, temple, synagogue or mosque; or visited a library with the child (yes/no). The community-based parent involvement index is calculated as the number of yes answers (0 to 5).

Socioeconomic position (SEP)

Family socioeconomic status was measured using the Socio-Economic Position scale (SEP). The SEP is a standardised index based on parents’ income, education and occupational prestige. The SEP scale represents a family’s access to ‘social and economic resources’ (Blakemore, Gibbings & Strazdins, 2006, p. 3), and was developed for the LSAC project applying methods used to derive the same measure for the Canadian Longitudinal Study of Children and Youth (NLSCY) (Wilms & Shields, 1996). Applying the same definition used by Berthelsen and Walker (2008), low socioeconomic background in this study includes families from the lowest SEP quintile.

Cultural background

Parent involvement in families from ATSI (n = 57), CALD (n = 275), and low socioeconomic (n = 459) backgrounds were investigated. Families from ATSI backgrounds were identified through parental nomination of the child’s background. Families from CALD backgrounds were identified using the mother’s nomination of speaking a language other than English when at home, a classification from LSAC applied by Berthelsen and Walker (2008).
Analyses

Paired samples t-tests were conducted to analyse overall changes in home-, school- and community-based parent involvement between Year 1 to Year 3. A repeated measures ANOVA was then used to analyse demographic patterns in the experiences of families based on the child’s gender, ATSI, CALD and socioeconomic backgrounds at and between Year 1 and Year 3. To account for this multiple testing, a Bonferroni adjustment to \( p < 0.001 \) for significance was applied to all tests. Effect sizes were calculated using Cohen’s \( d \).

Results

Home-, school- and community-based involvement Years 1–3

In Year 1, 96 per cent of participants had some activity in all three spheres, and 91 per cent in Year 3. Zero participants reported not having participated in any parent involvement activity from any of the three spheres. Involvement across all spheres was reported by zero participants in Year 1, and by two participants in Year 3. No home-based involvement was reported by 0.9 per cent of families in Year 1, and 1.8 per cent in Year 3. No school-based involvement was reported by 1 per cent of families in Year 1, and 3.5 per cent in Year 3, and no community-based involvement by 2.7 per cent in Year 1 and 5 per cent in Year 3.

The reduction in home-based parent involvement from Year 1 to Year 3 was significant, \( t(2295) = 17.70, p < 0.001 \), with a medium effect size (\( d = 0.54 \)). The reduction in school-based involvement was significant, \( t(2295) = 12.39, p < 0.001 \), with a small effect size (\( d = 0.37 \)). The reduction in community-based parent involvement was significant, \( t(2295) = 5.43, p < 0.001 \), with a small effect size (\( d = 0.17 \)). Sample means and standard deviations are reported in Table 1.

Repeated measures ANOVA tests were then used to investigate differences in parent involvement between demographic groups and the remainder of the sample. Means and standard deviations are reported in Table 1, and graphed against overall sample means in Figure 1.

Families from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds

Involvement in home-based activities for families from ATSI backgrounds did not change significantly between Year 1 and Year 3, \( F(1,56) = 0.14, p = 0.72 \). Home-based parent involvement was close to significance in difference to other families in Year 1, \( F(1, 2292) = 7.30, p = 0.007 \).

Table 1. Mean parent involvement scores Years 1 and 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Home ( /3)</th>
<th>School ( /5)</th>
<th>Community ( /5)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yr1 Yr3</td>
<td>Yr1 Yr3</td>
<td>Yr1 Yr3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall mean</td>
<td>1.78 (0.66) 1.43 (0.64)</td>
<td>3.78 (1.17) 3.31 (1.36)</td>
<td>2.80 (1.20) 2.60 (1.23)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>1.77 (0.67) 1.44 (0.65)</td>
<td>3.81 (1.16) 3.32 (1.37)</td>
<td>2.82 (1.23) 2.60 (1.25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>1.79 (0.65) 1.42 (0.65)</td>
<td>3.75 (1.12) 3.31 (1.36)</td>
<td>2.77 (1.20) 2.60 (1.23)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ATSI</td>
<td>1.54 (0.73) 1.50 (0.67)</td>
<td>2.97 (1.36) 2.90 (1.42)</td>
<td>2.25 (1.12) 2.83 (1.34)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1.78 (0.66) 1.43 (0.65)</td>
<td>3.80 (1.16) 3.33 (1.36)</td>
<td>2.81 (1.21) 2.85 (1.34)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CALD</td>
<td>1.80 (0.64) 1.21 (0.68)</td>
<td>3.82 (1.14) 2.92 (1.44)</td>
<td>2.96 (1.18) 2.75 (1.17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1.78 (0.66) 1.47 (0.63)</td>
<td>3.78 (1.18) 3.40 (1.33)</td>
<td>2.77 (1.22) 2.58 (1.24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low SEP</td>
<td>1.74 (0.67) 1.27 (0.63)</td>
<td>3.87 (1.13) 2.78 (1.52)</td>
<td>2.87 (1.19) 2.07 (1.23)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1.78 (0.66) 1.43 (0.65)</td>
<td>3.78 (1.17) 3.32 (1.36)</td>
<td>2.78 (1.22) 2.73 (1.20)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Means and standard deviations reported.

Figure 1. Mean involvement by demographic category Year 1–Year 3
being lower with a medium effect size \((d = 0.35)\), but was similar to families from other backgrounds in Year 3, \(F(1, 2292) = 0.60, p = 0.44\) \((d = 0.11)\).

Involvement in school-based activities also remained similar between Year 1 and Year 3, \(F(1, 56) = 0.085, p = 0.77\). This involvement was lower than other families in Year 1 \(F(1, 2292) = 28.71, p < 0.001\), with a large effect size \((d = 0.66)\), but similar in Year 3, \(F(1, 2292) = 5.648, p = 0.02\), though with a medium effect size \((d = 0.31)\).

Involvement in community-based activities increased between Year 1 and Year 3 with a medium effect size \((d = 0.47)\), though this increase was not statistically significant within the requirements of this study, \(F(1, 56) = 5.76, p = 0.02\). Involvement in community-based activities was lower than for other families in Year 1, \(F(1, 2292) = 12.05, p < 0.001\), with a large effect size \((d = 0.66)\), but similar in Year 3, \(F(1, 2292) = 1.97, p = 0.16\), with a negligible effect size.

### Families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds

Parent involvement in home-based activities reduced for families from CALD backgrounds between Year 1 and Year 3, \(F(1, 275) = 99.89, p < 0.001\), with a large effect size \((d = 0.89)\). In Year 1, home-based parent involvement scores did not differ from other families \(F(1, 2236) = 0.22, p = 0.64\), with a negligible effect size. By Year 3 there was lower participation in this form of involvement than in other families, \(F(1, 2236) = 41.15, p < 0.001\), with a medium effect size \((d = 0.40)\).

School-based parent involvement also declined significantly from Year 1 to Year 3, \(F(1, 275) = 65.71, p < 0.001\), with a large effect size \((d = 0.69)\). Though starting at similar levels in Year 1, \(F(1, 2236) = 0.38, p = 0.54\), with a negligible effect size in the difference from other families, participation in school-based involvement activities was lower than for other families in Year 3, \(F(1, 2236) = 30.59, p < 0.001\), with a medium effect size \((d = 0.35)\).

The change in parent involvement in community-based activities between Year 1 and Year 3 was not significant, \(F(1, 275) = 4.45, p = 0.036\), with a small effect size \((d = 0.18)\). In Year 1, involvement in community-based activities was similar to that in other families, \(F(1, 2236) = 6.09, p = 0.01\), with a small effect size \((d = 0.16)\), and also in Year 3, \(F(1, 2236) = 4.48, p = 0.034\), again with a small effect size \((d = 0.14)\).

### Families from lower socioeconomic backgrounds

The reduction in involvement in home-based activities from Year 1 to Year 3 for families from lower SEP backgrounds was significant, \(F(1, 458) = 119.72, p < 0.001\), with a large effect size \((d = 0.72)\). In Year 1, home-based parent involvement scores did not differ significantly from other families, \(F(1, 2292) = 2.13, p = 0.15\), with a negligible effect size. In Year 3 there was a significant difference, \(F(1, 2292) = 38.30, p < 0.001\), with a medium effect size \((d = 0.33)\).

The reduction in school-based parental involvement from Year 1 to Year 3 was significant, \(F(1, 458) = 141.17, p < 0.001\), with Cohen's \(d = 0.81\) indicating a large effect size. School-based involvement was not significantly different to other families in Year 1, \(F(1, 2292) = 3.45, p = 0.06\), with a negligible effect size, but was different to other families in Year 3, \(F(1, 2292) = 93.06, p < 0.001\), with Cohen's a medium effect size \((d = 0.48)\).

The change in community-based parent involvement activity from Year 1 to Year 3 was also significant, \(F(1, 458) = 105.36, p < 0.001\), with a large effect size \((d = 0.66)\). Community-based activities were similar in families from lower SEP backgrounds to other backgrounds in Year 1, \(F(1, 2292) = 2.09, p = 0.15\), with a negligible effect size, but lower than other families, \(F(1, 2292) = 110.61, p < 0.001\) in Year 3, with medium effect size \((d = 0.54)\).

### Gender

There were no significant differences in parent involvement for boys and girls in any of the three spheres in either grade. ANOVA results for Year 1 were: home-based \(F(1, 2294) = 0.63, p = 0.43\); school-based \(F(1, 2294) = 0.23, p = 1.48\); and community-based \(F(1, 2294) = 0.85, p = 0.36\); and in Year 3, home-based \(F(1, 2294) = 0.99, p = 0.32\); school-based \(F(1, 2294) = 0.02, p = 0.88\); and community-based \(F(1, 2294) = 0.01, p = 0.92\). All reported negligible effect sizes.

### Discussion

Responding to the need identified by the OECD for research to investigate patterns of parent involvement in different national settings, this research investigated patterns of parental involvement in family–school partnerships in Australia. Drawing on data from the LSAC K-Cohort, the findings of this research confirmed reductions in home-, school- and community-based parent involvement as children move through the early years of schooling. Despite these overall reductions, 90 per cent of children in the research sample continued to experience family–school partnerships in all three spheres in Year 3, their fourth year of formal (primary) schooling, indicating ongoing parental involvement at some level.

The LSAC questionnaire does not explore reasons for reductions in parent involvement. These declines may be related to similar reasons identified in international research, such as the changing needs of children, changing roles of parents and changes in teacher outreach as children grow and progress through school (Avvisati et al., 2010; Green et al., 2007; Patrikakou & Weissberg, 2000). The decline may also reflect modern family and work lives. Contemporary Australian parents are more likely to be in
paid work than 10 years ago, with family time in paid work increasing as children get older and carers return to the workforce (Weston, Qu & Baxter, 2013).

The results also indicated differences in the experiences of family–school partnership related to family socioeconomic and cultural background in the Australian context. Families from lower socioeconomic backgrounds experienced lower involvement in Year 3 in all three areas of home-, school- and community-based activities. However, in Year 1 there were no significant differences in involvement in any form of parent involvement. These results extend Berthelsen and Walker’s identification of lower participation in these activities for the overall K-Cohort in Wave 2 (Berthelsen & Walker, 2008; Walker & Berthelsen, 2010), to identify that these differences emerge as children move through the early years of schooling. That these differences are not evident earlier in children’s schooling indicates an opportunity for building stronger relationships that might maintain ongoing partnerships. These results also identify an area for further investigation to identify the factors that influence the withdrawal of families from these backgrounds from involvement in family–school partnerships.

Similar to the experiences of families from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, families from CALD backgrounds also had comparable levels of involvement to other families in home- and school-based activities in Year 1. Like families from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, lower participation in home- and school-based involvement levels emerged by Year 3. However, higher involvement in community-based activities was reported. This higher involvement was evident with a small effect size, and very close to statistical significance ($p = 0.01$). Community-based involvement in families from CALD backgrounds also remained higher in Year 3, with a small effect size, though the level of significance had moved beyond the parameters required in this study ($p = 0.034$).

As well as language differences that might present barriers to the engagement in family–school partnership activities for families from CALD backgrounds, an increasingly complex curriculum as children move into higher grades in school, and the possibility of content and expectations that are unfamiliar to parents educated in other schooling systems, have been identified as reasons for the withdrawal of families from CALD backgrounds from these forms of partnership activity (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Turney & Kao, 2009; Yanghee, 2009). The maintenance of involvement in community-based forms of partnership, however, presents an opportunity for schools to develop stronger relationships that better meet the needs and interests of families from a greater diversity of backgrounds (Daniel, 2011; Gertler, Patrinos & Rubio-Codina, 2007; World Bank, 2008). The role of the school in understanding and responding to the diverse needs and interests of families has been identified as critical in increasing the engagement of families and schools in partnership to support student outcomes (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Jeynes, 2011).

Families from ATSI backgrounds indicated a different pattern of engagement in family–school partnerships to families from low socioeconomic and CALD backgrounds. Lower involvement in all three areas in Year 1 was reported, all with medium to large effect sizes and at or close to the required levels for statistical significance. By Year 3, activity in all three areas was no longer significantly different to involvement reported by families from other backgrounds. Involvement in community-based activities, however, had increased. This was the only rise in involvement identified in this study. This rise reflects the importance identified in other research of using community-based forms of involvement in building effective family–school partnerships with families from ATSI backgrounds (Harslett et al., 1999; Muller, 2012; Yunkaporta, 2009).

Lower levels of participation in family–school partnerships reported by families from ATSI backgrounds in Year 1, and by families from lower socioeconomic and CALD backgrounds in Year 3, indicate that children may be receiving different levels of family–school partnership support, at least in those forms of involvement emphasised in current frameworks. With strong evidence supporting the link between family–school partnerships and improved student outcomes, these findings of lower parental involvement early in these children’s schooling identifies an area of potential disadvantage and an area for further policy development.

As well as practical barriers to parent involvement, differences in home and school culture can contribute to lower participation in family–school partnerships (Borgonovi & Montt, 2012; Kim, 2009; Turney & Kao, 2009). These sociocultural differences may be evident in these results. With critiques that family–school partnership frameworks emphasise forms of involvement that are more familiar and accessible to families from middle-class and professional backgrounds, some authors suggest a need to investigate alternative forms of partnerships that better meet the needs and interests of families from a greater diversity of backgrounds (Daniel, 2011; Gertler, Patrinos & Rubio-Codina, 2007; World Bank, 2008). The role of the school in understanding and responding to the diverse needs and interests of families has been identified as critical in increasing the engagement of families and schools in partnership to support student outcomes (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Jeynes, 2011).

The engagement of alternative strategies not necessarily emphasised in traditional family–school partnership frameworks may also improve participation in family–school partnerships, and the efficacy of this involvement. The findings of the OECD identifying the efficacy of everyday discussions about books, media experiences,
social and political issues, and just spending time talking with children in supporting literacy and numeracy outcomes at age 15 years, indicate the potential value in investigating alternative involvement strategies (Borgonovi & Montt, 2012). These alternative forms of partnership may also identify more sustainable practices that better meet the needs and interests of families from diverse backgrounds, and as children move through the school grades.

With parent involvement in the early years being potentially more important in supporting children’s schooling outcomes; these results present a particular challenge for Australian educators and education systems. The emergence of these differences for families from lower socioeconomic and CALD backgrounds, and the lower involvement in family–school partnerships in families from ATSI backgrounds noted in Year 1, also present ethical issues of equity and social justice. The increasing emphasis on including family–school partnerships as part of a strategy for improving schooling outcomes presents the potential for increased disparity in the learning experience and student outcomes. This potential for disadvantage adds further urgency to the need to identify effective ways of building early family–school partnership relationships with families from diverse socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds.

**Limitations**

Like the larger LSAC K-Cohort, the research sample was similar to the national population in representation of families based on socioeconomic position. The sample was, however, under-representative of families from ATSI and CALD backgrounds. The findings for families from ATSI backgrounds in this study in particular need to be considered cautiously due to the low number of participants from these backgrounds in this study ($n = 47$), and the geographical and cultural diversity of participants in terms of the representation of different (urban, rural and isolated) contexts.

There were also limitations in relation to the measures used within the LSAC study. The restriction of the home-based involvement to three repeated questions provides a less comprehensive indication of home-based involvement than might have been afforded by a more complex measurement instrument. In addition, the use of yes/no questions in the school and community-based measures provide a measure of variety in activity, but not of the intensity or regularity of involvement in the activities. While participation across several or all of the different types of activity provides one measure of the degree to which parents are involved with their children, parents may be highly involved in only one or two forms of activity, but register as low in involvement overall. The measures also reflect current constructions of parent involvement, which have been critiqued as privileging middle-class values and parenting styles (Gertler, Patrinos & Rubio-Codina, 2007; World Bank, 2008). As a consequence, rather than representing lower parental involvement in their children’s lives, results may be an artefact of the embedding of these constructs within the measurement instruments.

Whether the differences identified in this research indicate an ongoing divergence in patterns of parent involvement in family–school partnerships, and the implications of these differences in terms of children’s outcomes, will require ongoing research. The potential benefits of parent involvement and family–school partnerships are being widely accepted, with a key focus on maintaining and increasing participation in family–school partnerships and addressing disparities in the experiences of students and their families from diverse backgrounds. This presents an ongoing practical and ethical challenge for policy-makers and practitioners, in an area of increasing emphasis in the field of education. The importance of parent involvement in the early years of education gives a particular urgency to addressing these challenges.

**Conclusion**

The importance of parent involvement during the early years of schooling in supporting children’s outcomes means the facilitation and maintenance of family–school partnerships is an important element of educational policy and practice. The findings of this research identify a decline in partnership activities in Australia in home-, school- and community-based activities as children moved through their early years of schooling. With the link between parent involvement and student outcomes well established in research in a number of national contexts, family–school partnerships offer a way of enhancing schooling outcomes. These findings therefore indicate potential areas of focus in supporting improved student outcomes by maintaining and increasing engagement in family–school partnerships.

The differences in the levels of parent involvement relating to family socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds identified by this research also present a challenge for schools in facilitating more equitable family–school partnership experiences for children. With these differences present in Year 1 for families from ATSI backgrounds, and emerging by Year 3 for families from lower socioeconomic and CALD backgrounds. research into alternative strategies that better meet the needs and interests of families from diverse backgrounds as their children mature offers a potential strategy in increasing participation in these partnerships.

An increasing emphasis on family–school partnerships in improving schooling outcomes gives urgency to the need for investigations in addressing these issues. Increased capacity building at the school level and in teacher education programs also offers a way to improve the facilitation of these partnerships. Further research and increased capacity provide a way forward in supporting schools to meet the
challenge of increasing parental and school engagement in partnerships in the early years, and mainlining this involvement as children move through their schooling.

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