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Parental Involvement Unlocks Children's Educational Potential

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Abstract

To succeed in any profession, one must thoroughly research the nature of the profession itself as well as its interactions with other components of society. A decision to enter the teaching profession must also follow this methodology. One question that deserves further investigation can be phrased as, "Is parental involvement in the schools positively correlated to student achievement, and if so, then what can be done to facilitate this involvement?"

Throughout the history of the United States, the positive and negative impacts of parental involvement in the schools have been widely debated. In the twentieth century, however, this debate entered the research arena. After years of research, one can confidently argue that parental involvement in the schools is one of the most definitive predictors of children's educational success. The research, however, has also shed light on the ancillary benefits of parental involvement in the schools for both teachers and parents. Even with the empirical data that has been provided by research in the educational field, parental involvement in the schools remains alarmingly low, especially in schools serving children from the working class. To alleviate this situation, one needs to evaluate the impediments to parental involvement in the schools and suggest methods to remove these obstacles.

Importance of Parental Involvement

For Children

While the overall goals of education are often debated, most Americans would agree that children are educated in order to help them live and prosper in a democratic society. To achieve these goals, children need to be able to appreciate both the intellectual and social roles of the school. Research has shown that parental involvement in the schools is positively correlated to the intellectual spheres of overall academic achievement, completion of homework and graduation rates (Tozer, Senese, & Violas, 2006, p. 475). The majority of school superintendents have stated that lack of parental involvement is the single largest roadblock to students' academic achievement (Ryan & Cooper, 2007, p. 338). The research, however, has also proven the positive effects of parental school involvement in the social sphere. Children whose parents are involved with school are characterized by higher attendance rates, positive attitudes toward school, positive behavior and increased positive interactions with peers (Koonce & Harper, 2005, p. 56). Involved parents model for their children that education is more that just the delivery of curriculum (Cullingford & Morrison, 1999, p. 257). These parents model for their children the

collaborative relationship between home and school that can be used as a model for future interactions once the child leaves the relatively safe environment of the school (Tozer et al., 2006, p. 476).

In light of the current outbreak of violence and aggressive behaviors in the school, parental involvement offers children a positive way out of this cycle of violence. Parents who are involved with the school's disciplinary process and participate in their children's academic and social development at school have the positive effect of decreasing their children's suspensions and inappropriate school behaviors (Koonce & Harper, 2005, p. 56). With this in mind, schools might be well advised to strongly encourage and actively solicit parental involvement, in order to mitigate some of the problems of school violence.

For Teachers

While to the casual observer, parental school involvement is only beneficial for the actual students, research has shown that teachers are privy to a plethora of benefits as well. While a teacher may actually see a child for a number of hours each school day, the teacher's knowledge of the child is actually extremely limited. As pointed out by child psychologists, teachers are most effective when they address children where they are at the current time. Parental involvement is pivotal in understanding the child from another perspective (Molland, 2004, p. 37). This understanding of the child as a whole lets the teacher focus his or her efforts appropriately and with a degree of confidence as to effectiveness.

Both teachers and parents have a common goal to educate children; therefore, simple logic points out the fact that they should be natural allies (Ryan & Cooper, 2007, p. 2-436). A teacher who is able to affirm this liaison will actually feel more rewarded in his or her role as a teacher (Tozer et al., 2006, p. 475). A teacher, who has quick access to parents that has been built over time, also has quick access to the solution to many of the students' problems (Tozer et al., 2006, p. 475).

While many teachers feel that their efforts at school are not carrying over to the child's life, the answer lies in involving that child's parents. Parents who are involved with the school will reinforce the teacher's techniques and approaches at home (Cullingford & Morrison, 1999, p. 257). This will alleviate some of the isolation that teachers feel when their teaching efforts seem to be falling on deaf ears.

For Parents

Most parents are extremely invested in the goal of providing the best for their children. While this is an extremely noble goal, their view is one of "particularistic" interest in their children (Molland, 2004, p. 27). The teacher is able to broaden this to a more "universalistic" view if the parent is willing to establish some type of rapport with the teacher (Molland, 2004, p. 27).

One would assume that parental involvement in the school would only benefit parents in their relations with their children. This is actually not the case. There are actually some intrinsic

values that involved parents actually enjoy. The school involvement helps the parents to grow psychologically, to share in mutual learning experiences, and to support and respect the efforts of others, namely the educators (Tozer et al., 2006, p. 476).

Impediments to Parental Involvement

Researchers Hargreaves and Fullan have said, "Nowhere is the two-way street of learning more in disrepair and in need of social reconstruction that in the relationship among parents, communities and their schools." (Tozer et al., 2006, p. 476) This situation has been the result of teacher practices, school policies, and parents' psychological demeanors, but this situation is even worse for schools in low-income areas.

Impediments Stemming from Teacher Practices

Often people assume that teachers are confident professionals who are experts in communicating with all types of people. While this may be the ideal, it most definitely is not the reality. Teachers are trained to facilitate the growth and development of children not adults. Often, teachers are never trained on how to develop a positive relationship with parents, and many teachers actually fear the parents of their students (Cullingford & Morrison, 1999, p. 259). Even the teacher who is adept at communicating with all age groups may falsely assume that parent-teacher interactions are the same at all grade levels and in all schools (Tozer et al., 2006, p. 475). Unfortunately, most teachers totally give up on parents in the older grades, when in actuality parental involvement is critical at this stage (Tozer et al., 2006, p. 479).

While many teachers may express their whole-hearted support for parental involvement, the reality is that they only want this support in certain areas. Many teachers only view parents as acting in support roles (Tozer et al., 2006, p. 477). Teachers often encourage parental involvement in areas like the welfare of the children, but they will strongly resist any type of parental input in areas of professional practices like teaching processes (Ranson, Martin, & Vincent, 2004, p. 259). Frequently, teachers prefer parents to be compliant supporters of the teachers' views (Tett, 2001, p. 194). If a teacher requests that a parent come to school, then it is often only to remediate the parent in some area that the teacher feels is lacking in the parent (Finders & Lewis, 1994, p. 127).

Many specific teacher practices also serve to discourage parents from getting involved with the schools. While teachers expect parents to assist their children with homework assignments, frequently these assignments are given with little or no instructions for the parents (Finders & Lewis, 1994, p. 127). This leaves parents frustrated and feeling that the teacher does not actually want their help or support. When conference or meetings are scheduled, teachers often fail to account for the busy schedules of parents and only provide times that are convenient for the teachers (Koonce & Harper, 2005, p. 56).

Unfortunately, many problems in the area of teacher practices are actually beyond the teacher's control. Huge class sizes and lack of administrative support severely hamper the teacher's ability to develop any type of rapport with the parents of all his or her students (Tozer et al., 2006, p. 483). Some teachers are in schools where the student population is quite different

from their own ethnicity, race or socioeconomic status (Tozer et al., 2006, p. 483). For the culturally naive teacher, this situation is extremely stressful.

Impediments Stemming from School Policies

Schools in general are operating under the premise that the school's perspective is the "correct" perspective (Tett, 2001, p. 195). This translates into the false assumption that parents who are actively involved with the school are in total agreement with this perspective (Finders & Lewis, 1994, p. 127). While this may be the case in some situations, often parents have a different perspective that may be just as valid. Problems arise when parents attempt to communicate their concerns to the administration. While the administration's formal policy may be one of open communication, this communication is only welcome if the source is the administration. Bottom up communication originating from the parents, especially in areas of policy concerns, is not usually well received by the administration (Ryan & Cooper, 2007, p. 338). This discouragement of parental involvement is in sharp contrast to the messages sent to schools in the 1970s and 1980s that parental involvement is critical to students' success in school (Cullingford & Morrison, 1999, p. 261). To add an additional level of disparity to the problem, most schools today have a "Lock Down" policy, which also serves to keep parents out of the schools (Cullingford & Morrison, 1999, p. 261).

In middle schools and high schools, many administrations openly communicate the belief that parental involvement at this level is undesirable (Tozer et al., 2006, p. 483). Even the organization of these schools (i.e. large, bureaucratic, departmentalized) sends a clear message that parental involvement is not welcome (Tozer et al., 2006, p. 483).

Impediments Stemming from Parents' Psychological Demeanors

Historically, parents were encouraged to act as passive observers in the educational process and keep their distance (Ranson et al., 2004, p. 259). Parents were taught to delegate the process of education to the professionals not to view themselves as active participants in a democratic model of education (Tozer et al., 2006, p. 485). Educational research done over the last century, however, has invalidated this model, but now parents must adapt to their new role in the educational process. This includes modifying many parents' belief that children must be independent once they enter school (Finders & Lewis, 1994, p. 128).

Many parents are extremely uncomfortable in the school setting (Finders & Lewis, 1994, p. 130). Personally, they may have had a negative school experience, and now as adults they are uneasy navigating their role in their children's schools (Tozer et al., 2006, p. 484). Some parents are extremely shy about questioning the authority of the educational professionals (Cullingford & Morrison, 1999, p. 258).

Impediments Specific to Low-Income Parents

While there are many obstacles that must be overcome in order for parents to actively participate in the education of their children, additional obstacles exist for low-income parents. Research indicates that culturally diverse and lower socioeconomic status parents on the average

participate even less in the school system than other parents (Koonce & Harper, 2005, p. 59). Educators have helped to create this problem by accepting the dominant ideology's belief that low-income parents don't care for their children, are not competent to help with homework, don't encourage academic achievement and don't value education (Lott, 2001, p. 247). Teachers often promote this stereotype by viewing low-income or culturally diverse parents as dirty, hostile, illogical, impulsive, incoherent and irresponsible (Lott, 2001, p. 249). To add to the damage caused by this stereotyping, educators openly express the idea that middle-class homes provide a positive environment for learning while working-class homes provide a negative environment (Lott, 2001, p. 247).

Schools frequently practice negative, discouraging and exclusionary behavior toward working-class parents (Lott, 2001, p. 249). The schools only want these "lower class parents" to act as compliant consent-givers to whatever the school deems as appropriate (Lott, 2001, p. 251). Even communication with working-class parents is limited to impersonal form letters (Lott, 2001, p. 251). When these parents do attempt to communicate with teachers and administrators, their knowledge and perspectives are often dismissed if it contradicts with the opinions already formed by the educators (Lott, 2001, p. 251).

While teachers and the administration have made it extremely difficult for low-income and culturally diverse parents to participate in the educational process, other barriers also exist for these parents. Many of these parents lack basic literacy skills or are not proficient with the English language (Finders & Lewis, 1994, p. 127). These parents often work two or more jobs and are often at work during normal school hours (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2004, p. 24). While these parents want to be more involved with school, heavy family responsibilities, additional child care difficulties and even transportation problems can further limit their ability to participate in the schools (Lott, 2001, p. 254).

Many of the low-income parents who actually try to participate in their children's schooling are totally unsure of how to act in the school environment. They do not know the questions that they should ask teachers, how to act in the classroom or even how to go about developing a positive relationship with a teacher (Lott, 2001, p. 254). In addition, some parents may feel socially out of place in the schools because of their parenting circumstances (i.e. single parent, adoptive parents, gay parent) (Lightfoot, 2004, p. 24). School personnel, who sense that these parents are often timid in the school environment, will attempt to intimidate these parents rather than applauding their efforts (Koonce & Harper, 2005, p. 55).

Cultural differences may also hamper some parents' attempts to participate in schools. Both the Asian and Hispanic cultures discourage participation in the schools, as these cultures believe that schooling is best left to the professionals, who are not to be disturbed (Tozer et al., 2006, p. 484). Hispanic women are taught early on that their first responsibility is to their husband and family. School meetings and involvement can only be addressed after all family responsibilities have been completed (Finders & Lewis, 1994, p. 128).

Types of Parental Involvement

Parent-involvement researcher, Joyce Epstein, has proposed a theory on the continuum of parent involvement in the schools (Tozer et al., 2006, p. 477). This paper will employ Epstein's framework to detail the types of parental involvement in schools.

At the first level, parents should provide a home environment that supports the efforts of children as students. This includes giving children a quiet area for studying and encouraging good study habits (Tozer et al., 2006, p. 478).

The second level encompasses communication to and from the school (Tozer et al., 2006, p. 478). While the form that this may take can be either formal or informal, this type of involvement is a critical first step in establishing rapport between the school and the parents.

Level three, or volunteering, is the area which most people associate with parental school involvement (Tozer et al., 2006, p. 478). Formal volunteering during the school day may include field trip supervision (Tozer et al., 2006, p. 477), support activities at the school like running off copies or laminating materials, conducting holiday school parties in the classroom, acting as tutors, and providing an extra set of hands for in-class projects. Overall, only 4% of the parents of elementary school age children actively volunteer in the schools twenty-five or more days per year, while 70% of this same population does no official volunteering in the school during the school days (Tozer et al., 2006, p. 478). After school hours, groups like the PTA (parent-teacher association) help to bring parents into close contact with the school. Unfortunately, these parent-teacher groups traditionally are extremely ineffective in spearheading any type of educational reform (Ryan & Cooper, 2007, p. 338).

The fourth level promotes an increased role for parents in the actual academic pursuits of their children at home (Tozer et al., 2006, p. 479). Parents are expected to assist children with their homework. Parents may even need to be trained to act as at-home tutors for their children (Tozer et al., 2006, p. 479). Schools should be sending home family math, science or reading programs for families to engage in during the summer months (Tozer et al., 2006, p. 479). Specifically at the middle school level, teachers need to send home learning activities that assign parents' meaningful roles in collaborating with their children in the completion of these activities (Tozer et al., 2006, p. 479).

The fifth level consists of two parts. At the basic level, parents need to be involved with the schools in meeting the child's social and emotional needs (Tozer et al., 2006, p. 479). At the more advanced level, parents, teachers and school administrators should strive for reaching consensus in decision making on issues involving areas like curriculum, standards, practices and overall school management (Tozer et al., 2006, p. 480).

The sixth level of parental involvement branches out into the community. At this level, students are encouraged to serve the community in a variety of roles, such as volunteering time (Tozer et al., 2006, p. 481). In a reciprocal manner, parents and all community members are encouraged to provide knowledge and expertise to the schools (Tozer et al., 2006, p. 481).

Strategies for Encouraging Parental Involvement

This paper has already provided strong arguments for the necessity of parental involvement in the school, as well as detailing some of the obstacles, which hinder this involvement. To complete the circle, however, one needs to address what can actually be done to promote parental involvement in the schools.

Teacher Strategies

The largest responsibility for encouraging parental school involvement lies in the hands of the teachers. As the focal point for parent contact with schools, teachers must create an atmosphere which not only permits parental involvement but which actively pursues a more active role for parents in the schools.

Prior to the start of any school year, the teacher should send a letter to the parents of each of his or her students which welcomes the parents and child back to school and details routines, rituals and schedules (Molland, 2004, p. 28). Once school begins, the teacher should send home a list of the goals for the year in which parental partnership is actively elicited (Ryan & Cooper, 2007, p. 443). The discipline and homework policies should be sent home for signature, and every teacher should give parents multiple ways to contact him or her (Ryan & Cooper, 2007, p. 443). A teacher should provide the parents with a home or cell telephone number, email address, and possibly even a website where information may be posted (Ryan & Cooper, 2007, p. 338). In addition, the teacher should request that every parent provides home, work and cell telephone numbers to him or her (Ryan & Cooper, 2007, p. 443).

Early in the school year, the teacher should contact all parents to set up an initial conference. This conference is to be a "Listening Conference" which allows the teacher to get to know the child from the parents' perspective (Molland, 2004, p. 28). This conference should be used to encourage parents to share their child's personality, strengths, and weaknesses, as well as to convey the parents' goals, concerns and expectations (Molland, 2004, p. 28). In addition, the teacher should use this time to learn about the family culture, parental jobs and any other outstanding responsibilities (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2004, p. 26). The teacher should strive for 100% participation in this initial conference (Ryan & Cooper, 2007, p. 443). To facilitate this level of participation, the teacher will have to be creative when holding these conferences (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2004, p. 26). This may involve home visits, conferences at odd hours or even conferences held in other non-school related facilities (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2004, p. 26). At this initial conference, it is critical for the teacher to stress the word WE in all conversations to encourage the formation of a partnership with the parents (Ryan & Cooper, 2007, p. 443).

Once initial contact with parents has been made, the teacher must learn to understand and appreciate the cultural differences of the students in his or her class. Teachers should actively pursue education on the cultures of the children in their classes, and bulletin boards and curriculum should celebrate this diversity (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2004, p. 24).

During the school year, teachers should communicate positive information about each parents' child at least twice a year (Molland, 2004, p. 28). This type of communication will

clearly demonstrate that the teacher wants to celebrate success with the parents as well as address concerns.

In all dealings with parents, teachers must make parents feel welcome and empowered (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2004, p. 26). Teachers can encourage parents to advocate for their children if the teachers convey the message that the parents possess important and valued information about their own children (Finders & Lewis, 1994, p. 129). While the teacher needs to verbally communicate these messages, he or she must also communicate these messages in the ways that they communicate with parents both verbally and nonverbally (Finders & Lewis, 1994, p. 129).

Some parents are extremely nervous about getting involved in the schools. Teachers can help to ease the situation by telling parents exactly how they can help (Finders & Lewis, 1994, p. 129). While this involvement may start as homework assistance, a teacher can encourage much more active involvement (Tett, 2001, p. 195). The teacher needs to convey to parents the need for them to act as collaborators, sources of information (both culture and content area related), innovators and teachers (Lott, 2001, p. 255). The teacher then actively needs to pursue parents to assume these roles, and the teacher needs to feel confident enough to accept parents in these roles.

Parent Strategies

Parents cannot rely on teachers and administrators to do all the work in establishing policies and practices that are supportive of parental involvement in the schools. Parents need to possess the confidence and self-esteem to approach the educational system (Cullingford & Morrison, 1999, p. 258). While this psychological condition might be difficult to achieve, parents will have to actively pursue the attainment of this positive self-image of themselves as adults and parents with valuable parenting skills.

Teacher and Parent Strategies

Whenever parents and teachers come together, they must remember to keep the children at the center of all conversations (Molland, 2004, p. 27). They must actively work together to build bridges, identify points of mutual agreement and respect differing opinions and perspectives (Molland, 2004, p. 73). In this manner, parents and educators can work together to solve problems, plan for the future and intervene in a timely manner when problems arise (Koonce & Harper, 2005, p. 61).

Administration Strategies

School administrations can also help to encourage parental involvement in the schools by linking the schools more directly with the community. This can be done by using the schools for community social services (Lott, 2001, p. 256) and creating support groups for parents and children with similar experiences (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2004, p. 4). Parent groups like the PTA can be expanded to reach out to more parents by addressing specific areas like an Adopted Families Group and a Learning Styles Group (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2004, p. 24). These groups,

which are more specific, may then more adequately be able to express parental concerns to the administration (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2004, p. 26).

Administrators can help to educate parents on how to actually navigate the bureaucracy of the school system (Koonce & Harper, 2005, p. 61). This training could encompass understanding how the school system works, how to voice concerns about children, understanding possible parental roles in the schools and understanding special education rules (Koonce & Harper, 2005, p. 61). Workshops could even be held to teach parents how to create a home environment that is conducive to learning (Ryan & Cooper, 2007, p. 338).

Schools need to be open to alternatives to the traditional parent-teacher conferences. This could include additions to already scheduled workshops or even an informal dinner at the beginning of the school year.

Finally, administrations need to work to eliminate the elitist attitude that school has the ultimate knowledge and authority (Cullingford & Morrison, 1999, p. 258). This message needs to be clearly communicated to all teachers, in order for them to view all parents and community members as valuable partners in the educational process.

Conclusion

Years of research have thrown out the old paradigm that parents are not needed in the schools. The problem now, however, is in eliminating the obstacles that prevent this involvement and educating people on the types of involvement that are actually available and helpful.

This paper has detailed many of the arguments that underlie the importance of parental school involvement for students, teachers and parents. Unfortunately, this parental involvement faces a number of obstacles both from within the educational system and from within the parents, themselves. Parents need to understand all the different levels of involvement that are available, as well as the possibilities that strong parental involvement creates.

Finally, a thorough investigation of possible strategies for encouraging parental involvement was conducted. In this manner, all children can be encouraged to reap all the benefits that are available from education.

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