

Teachers' Beliefs about Parent and Family Involvement: Rethinking our Family Involvement Paradigm

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This article seeks to provide insights into the role of teacher beliefs about parent and family involvement in supporting or inhibiting parent and family participation in partnerships related to the well being of child and family. The authors aim to offer positive beliefs and strategies for developing nurturing relations between families and schools.

KEY WORDS: parent involvement; family involvement; teacher beliefs; family participation; partnership; child and family well being; nurturing relationships with families.

INTRODUCTION

The “chasm” that often develops to create unhealthy dissonance between teacher and parents/families is greatly influenced by teacher beliefs (Swick, 2004). Teacher beliefs include many hidden assumptions and generalizations that are influenced by often isolated experiences and factors. During times of change, beliefs are typically revealed in actions that may represent people’s best but very incomplete response to stress. For example, we (teachers and teacher educators) might say we believe in parent/family involvement but when confronted by a parent who sees things differently, we may not alter our actual relations (Gonzalez-Mena, 1994). Thus, this article seeks to provide insights into the role of teacher beliefs about parent and family involvement in supporting or inhibiting parent and family participation in partnerships related to the well being of child and family. The authors aim to offer positive beliefs and strategies for developing nurturing relations between families and schools.

FACTORS INFLUENCING TEACHER BELIEFS

Teacher beliefs about parents and families are heavily influenced by current and past contextual and cultural elements (Powell, 1998). For example, our own childhood experiences impact the schemes we develop about parent/family involvement. We may lack experiences where parents are in leadership roles. An assertive parent who is seeking to be a leader may bring about a defensive reaction. Or, we may have a history of using a teacher-dominant family involvement paradigm in which the teacher is always in the decision making role instead of creating a partnership approach (Comer, 2001).

An additional factor is the way the “school culture” impacts our beliefs (Comer, 2001). If the “norms” of the school signal to parents that their roles are limited and do not involve leadership then teachers receive distorted messages about how to approach and develop meaningful parent and family involvement. A “norm” of parent–teacher isolation can easily become the accepted standard. In effect, a self-fulfilling prophecy of very limited roles for parents can become the primary way of functioning.

As noted by Vygotsky (1978), sociocultural backgrounds, experiences, and events impact learning and development. Similarly, we believe teachers’ and families’ sociocultural backgrounds affect their interactions and impact how parents are

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viewed and how the process of parent and family involvement is constructed. It is no surprise that prevailing parent/family involvement paradigms focus on the cultural rituals of “school readiness activities” for parents such as “read to your child,” “be involved in your child’s education,” and “be involved in your child’s school” (Bastian, Frutcher, Gittell, Greer, & Haskins, 1985). This prevailing theme in the literature is further reinforced by recent legislation such as the *No Child Left Behind Act* (U.S. Department of Education, 2005), where the emphasis is even more so on school success indicators (Swadner, 2003).

It is important to note that the traditional parent/family paradigm has shown that parents who engage in home-based learning rituals seem to have a positive impact on children’s school success (Lam, 1997). Further, studies (Eagle, 1989; Lareau, 1987) have shown that lower socioeconomic families tend to follow these rituals less often. While the traditional family involvement perspective offers many fine suggestions for parents and families, it impedes a full and valid view of how parents and families are indeed involved in their children’s lives. This paradigm fails to validate many parent/family actions that are important to children’s well being. For example, parents and children may spend the evening in play or visiting grandparents—yet these rich experiences are often excluded from the “involvement” construct that is traditionally valued.

A very powerful influence is the ongoing experience we have with parents and families. Swick (2004) noted that in some cases a self-fulfilling prophecy of negative parent and family involvement happens because teachers have experienced a few negative involvement situations. These negative experiences may create a “stereotype” in some teachers regarding the process of parent and family involvement. Teachers may start out less than enthusiastic about parental partnerships and then have this reticence reinforced by bad situations or those about which they lack understanding (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Comer, 2001).

Ironically, poor or distorted training is also a problem for many teachers. In so many cases, teachers may be “trained” in the traditional parent and family involvement paradigm (Epstein, 1995). While this view includes some useful ideas and strategies, it is very myopic in how it “frames” our relationships with parents and families. Teachers trained only in this model are likely to exclude

parents and families from some very critical partnership roles such as decision making.

LIMITS AND PROBLEMS WITH THE TRADITIONAL PARADIGM

It is very important to recognize that the traditional parent/family involvement paradigm excludes the valuable and legitimate interaction patterns of many families such as where parents and grandparents share stories through oral history means (Gonzalez-Mena, 1994). As Bronfenbrenner (2005) noted, an ecological model must be used that relates to the many sociocultural contexts present in families, and to the interaction patterns prevalent in families. Otherwise, many parents are isolated from success because their patterns of relating and interacting with their children do not fit the school culture (Fine, 1994). For example, the single parent who is working two jobs to feed and clothe her family may approach her child’s education differently, asking grandmother to attend the school conferences. Yet this mother may indeed interact with her child over the telephone on how the school day went and stay involved through using “free time” to visit parks, playgrounds (Long, Bell, & Brown, 2004), churches (Haight & Carter-Black, 2004; McMillon & Edwards, 2004), families (Volk & De Acosta, 2004) museums, and libraries with her young children.

There are several elements in the traditional paradigm that need changing. For example, the traditional paradigm does not account for resource differences in and across parent and family contexts (Tushnet, 2002). Nor does this paradigm validate the many rich cultural habits of parents and families such as the use of visual and oral traditions. A more encompassing paradigm is needed that emphasizes the existing power of parents and families, and creates empowerment strategies where they can use their skills and talents in diverse and culturally responsive modes (Comer, 2001; Heath, 1983; Souto-Manning, 2005a). Further, the ecological model would promote engaging parents and families in situations where they could expand their understanding of involvement strategies in supportive and validating ways.

A key problem with the traditional paradigm is that it is couched in a compensating type of model where particular parent attributes may be seen as deficiencies or weaknesses. That is, parents not socialized in traditional schooling practices are often viewed as “high risk” for failure (Gee, 1996). For example, Souto-Manning (2005a) found that Latino

Teachers' Beliefs about Parent and Family Involvement

children were considered behind other children and placed in remediation programs simply because they lacked some of the traditional paradigm skills deemed relevant for success. Thus, by treating the children in a deficit manner teachers may be discouraging the entire family from becoming full partners in the learning and school process. This cycle of negativity may explain why higher socioeconomic level parents participate in school committees and functions more often.

As schools continue to espouse traditional views of parental involvement, call for more parent involvement, and claim that state and federal goals were not met due to lack of parent involvement, we need to rethink the very definition of parent involvement. Employing a traditional definition of parent involvement serves to promote prejudices and further marginalize children and families as a whole. As school populations become ever more diverse, it is important that definitions of parent involvement apply to a variety of sociocultural backgrounds and honor these students and their very identities. Unfortunately, the phrase "parents who care" is often restricted to parents whose roles abide by traditional definitions of parental involvement (Fine, 1994). Inequity of resources across families and schools is often not factored in this paradigm, and this serves to further aggravate injustices in schools and classrooms (Tushnet, 2002). For example, being read to by parents while in preschool correlates with higher success rates in elementary school. Only 61% of Latinos read to their preschool-age children, while 75% of African-Americans and 90% of Whites do so (Souto-Manning, 2005a). By looking at these statistics that consider reading as traditional book reading, White students are clearly advantaged as their home cultural practices more closely resemble those practiced at school. If we extend the definition of literacy to include oral traditions, however, African-American students might be able to add a whole new dimension through oral story telling (Heath, 1983).

The traditional paradigm is couched in a compensating model for perceived weaknesses and inadequacies in those who are poor and experiencing discrimination. Those who were not socialized in traditional schooling practices by their parents are then considered at-risk and often experience discrimination (Gee, 1996) by not abiding by the traditional definition of what a child must know upon entering schools. Today, children entering elementary schools are expected to possess certain skills required to succeed. Often, not attending preschool, not being

schooled at home, or not being exposed to the school discourse causes many Latino children to start kindergarten behind and en masse become part of remediation programs (Souto-Manning, 2005a). Such perceptions may result from limited "parent involvement," as traditionally conceived. By seeing these children from such a deficit perspective, teachers may start to drive parents away from schools and not value these children for their rich knowledge domain and sociocultural backgrounds and experiences, consequently adopting a "cultural deficit" stance (Fennimore, 2000). As such, parents' attendance at school meetings and events, and volunteering on school committees is greater among White parents than among Latino and African-American parents (Souto-Manning, 2005a).

EXAMINING PARENT INVOLVEMENT ACROSS CONTEXTS

Recent research suggests that parental involvement has generally increased during the last 20 years. Minority parents, however, have been less involved than those parents who enjoy greater resources of information, time, transportation and finances. In the United States, teachers often interpret lower involvement and visibility at school as lack of interest, yet social, language, and cultural differences are rarely considered as justification for limited family involvement. In Mariana Souto-Manning's experience growing up in Brazil, we learned from an interview she conducted with her mother, that teachers were called aunts and considered the member of the family who would make decisions regarding the child's education. Parents' roles were to not interfere with the teacher's role and responsibilities. Her parents, for example, only visited the school she attended upon an invitation.

At Southwood Elementary School (pseudonym), a diverse mid-size school in an urban area in the Southeastern United States, expectations for parent involvement were different from those expressed by Souto-Manning's mother in Brazil. Teachers reported having difficulty involving parents whose racial, cultural and linguistic backgrounds were different than those of the teacher in the midst of rapid growth in linguistically, racially and culturally diverse student populations over the last ten years. Because some parents did not speak their language (English), many teachers blamed the lack of achievement of these students on the parents "not caring." According to interviews conducted with 37

teachers and assistant teachers (28 holding advanced degrees, 15 mean average years of experience) this was the reason most of the teachers gave for students performing lower than the federal and state expectations. These teachers thought English Language Learners (ELLs) and African-American children were not achieving at the same rate as White students due to “lack of parent involvement” or “no parent investment,” to quote direct phrases from the corpus of interviews. Using *WordSmith* software for analysis regarding word collocation, parent involvement was closely located in transcripts with deficit words, such as lack, low, and no. To insure students met curricular goals, the solution typically suggested was to make sure parents were indeed enacting the role ascribed to them, ignoring cultural practices and backgrounds. Teachers along with administrators suggested the Parent–Teacher Association (PTA) hire a teacher to teach these parents English so that they could help their children. This would, according to their responses, apply to both parents of English Language Learners (ELLs) as well as to African-American parents, as they did “not speak proper English,” to quote one teacher who spoke on behalf of many. Erasing cultural backgrounds and expecting that parents assimilate (Krashen, 1985a, b) the prevailing model of parent involvement suggested by the teachers during interviews put many students at a loss and devalued family practices. Rather than highlighting and valuing children’s diverse backgrounds, they exemplified the very concept that schooling is “the way it’s supposed to be and they don’t think it’s going to change” (Kozol, 1991, p. 222). And while this paradigm for defining and understanding parent involvement aligned with the needs of teachers, it hardly depicts the multitude of possibilities in which a parent or family member may be involved in his or her children’s lives.

According to Vopat (1994), parents “can best help their children succeed in school when they know how to foster and connect the learning in the home environment with the learning in school” (p. 8). Clearly, this does not match the definitions of parent involvement sponsored by the participants of this study. In talking to parents of many children at Southwood Elementary, data showed that lack of familiarity with the schooling discourse proved to be a major obstacle to their children’s success, as they could not socialize their children into a discourse which was foreign to them. In addition, parents often did not feel comfortable and empowered to challenge the teacher’s socio-cultural construction of parental involvement as

school involvement, and of children’s success resting on their parents’ ability to tutor them after school hours by explaining the concepts they should have learned in school (Souto-Manning, 2005b).

RETHINKING THE PARADIGM

Education cannot continue to be guided by definitions of parent involvement that may not include so many children and families of rich and complex sociocultural and linguistic backgrounds. Such a paradigm serves to continue discrimination in schools and position education against the very premise of *Brown vs. Board of Education* (Gutierrez, Rymes, & Larson, 1995; Orfield, Eaton, and the Harvard Project on School Desegregation, 1996) and reflects all the resistance such a ruling has experienced over the years. Educators need to start envisioning paradigms of parent involvement that value diversity and refute cultural deficit models. By unintentionally not meeting traditional definitions of parent involvement, many parents have been labeled unsupportive of education, poorly educated, and uncaring (Briggs, 2004). If we are indeed to move toward true educational opportunity for all children in public schools (Carter, 1980), we need to start re-envisioning and re-crafting the parent involvement paradigm and the very definition of caring—a paradigm that includes many threads, many cultures, and values each child and family for what they add to the educational fabric (Swick & Freeman, 2004).

Statistics and demographics show a substantial and growing immigrant population who need linguistically—and socioculturally-appropriate educational experiences—today and even more so in the future. Students’ interests, cultures, languages, and literacies must be taken into consideration, and their diversity must be recognized as a resource in the classroom. It is our duty as educators to empower all parents to recognize the active role they already play in their own children’s education. Thus, we need to review closely our attitudes and perspectives about parents and families. Do we foster an inclusive approach that values the richness and power of every parent and family? Recognizing and valuing parent involvement from diverse perspectives has the potential to ultimately improve the overall education being offered to all children. According to Blackburn (2003):

[I]f our goal, as...educators..., is to work for social change, then our work is never done. We must continue to interrogate relationships between literacy performances and power dynamics...with the under-

Teachers' Beliefs about Parent and Family Involvement

standing that justice lies in the perpetual interrogation (p. 488).

AN INVITATION FOR RE-ENVISIONING PARENT INVOLVEMENT

We have started becoming more meta-aware (Freire, 1970) of our own paradigms for parent involvement. We hope that reading this piece will help all of us—teachers, teacher educators, and parents—to reflect on our own practices. Respecting and valuing each child's culture is the beginning in challenging our traditional paradigms of parent involvement. Learning with and from our students, we can all come to a more inclusive definition of parental involvement, such as Urdanivia-English's (2003), who defined parental involvement as any involvement that affects the present or the future of the child, getting beyond the classroom walls.

We believe that key elements of an empowerment paradigm for parent and family include focusing on:

(1) *Family and child strengths*: We have been encouraged to identify child and family strengths and integrate these as the focus of our involvement with families. We are aware that this requires getting beyond the classroom walls and extending our existing definitions of curriculum and learning. We have found that a good way to identify strengths is by observing and becoming a learner, a classroom ethnographer, someone who takes notes and celebrates multiple cultures, backgrounds, and learning styles.

(2) *An inclusive approach where all families are validated and engaged in a partnership*: We have used strategies that reach parents and families of diverse cultures. In doing so, we sought to develop inviting and supportive settings so families feel welcome. We learned about families' parent involvement definitions and views. We tried to be open to expand our own definitions of what parent or family involvement looks like, and we did. Most importantly, we embraced and valued multiple perspectives and paradigms of family involvement.

(3) *The recognition and valuing of multiple venues and formats for involvement*: We learned about what families enjoy in terms of involvement and integrated these into our planning. When Souto-Manning was teaching primary grades, she found that some of the parents of the children she was teaching were more comfortable meeting at Wal-Mart or at the local flea market than receiving a home visit, for example.

Others were more comfortable with home visits. Yet, others preferred to visit the school and/or classroom. In recognizing and valuing multiple venues and formats for involvement, it is imperative that we forefront the understanding that there is no one model, venue, or format works for every teacher and/or family.

(4) *A lifelong learning approach in which the teacher learns alongside children and families*: We made ourselves vulnerable and envisioned our roles as symbiotically teaching and learning alongside our students and their families. We kidwatched (Owocki & Goodman, 2002) and based our teaching on the observations we made regarding how children learn, their interests and sociocultural backgrounds. We constantly sought to embody a posture that conveyed our deep value and respect for parents' funds of knowledge (Moll & Greenberg, 1990). Finally, we let children and parents see us in learning roles, not only by participating in community events and going to professional conferences, but by learning from them and valuing their backgrounds, histories, and interests in developing curriculum and classroom setting that were embracing of diversity.

(5) *Trust-building through collaborative schemes and through recognition of multiple family involvement definitions and paradigms*: We sought to be responsive to the multiple ideas and contributions of parents and families. For example, we let parents see us employing their ideas and asking their input in the family involvement program. We genuinely asked for their feedback and contributions and learned much from them. According to Austin (2000), true collaboration needs to value each partner and "involve[s] an exchange of value among the participants...The four dimensions of th[e] basic [collaborative] framework are value definition, value creation, value balance, and value renewal" (p. 87). Therefore, we realized the importance of problematizing (Freire, 1970) the status quo, the institutional value of parent involvement, how families and teachers may create value for one another, how to keep a two-way balance in the exchange of values, and what can be done to preserve and enrich the partnership's value, once it is collaboratively created. We realized that there is no way to prescribe or standardize a single way of going about building trust, as teachers and families differ, so, there is no simple formula. There is, however, a need for respect and appreciation for a multiplicity of perspectives. In our experience, the best collaborations were co-constructed in conversations and collaborations, through looking closely and

listening carefully (Mills, O’Keefe, & Jennings, 2004), through problematizing existing definitions and paradigms of parent involvement, engaging in dialogue, and problem solving together (Freire, 1959), embodying a true democratic process.

(6) *Linguistic and cultural appreciation, recognition, and reflective responsiveness*: In our practice as teachers and teacher educators, we sought to value a student’s and family’s linguistic and cultural backgrounds as resources in the classroom, as multiplying possibilities for learning, and not as subtractive from the learning process (Souto-Manning, in press). We provided and prominently displayed bilingual books and books featuring characters from multiple socio-cultural backgrounds. We continuously sought to locate resources that valued diversity in the classroom and that could support and encourage families to be involved. As we observed students and families, we learned from them, and reflected on what these learnings meant for our own classroom and practice.

While it would be easy to prescribe steps for parent and family involvement, we purposefully chose not to do so, as we would risk defining one more inflexible framework that would unavoidably fail many parents and students by seeing them from a deficit perspective. Instead, we shared our experiences and enthusiastically invite you to embrace diversity as a resource, rather than as a deficit and to keep adding to the list above as you learn from and with children and their families. We know that:

When teachers open themselves to recognize the different roads students take in order to learn, they will become involved in a continual reconstruction of their own paths of curiosity, opening the door to habits of learning that will benefit everyone in the classroom (Freire, 1998, front flap).

In such a spirit, we invite you to reconstruct your own path of curiosity, to learn alongside parents and families, rethinking your theories according to new learnings, and valuing each student and each family for their richness, for all the wonders they bring to the school and classroom community regardless of how many days their parents, siblings, or grandparents come in and volunteer or how many nights their parents engage in reading bedtime stories. Just as children initiate responsibility for their own learning, being active agents in the process (Taberski, 2000), we must also become active agents (Freire, 1970) and learn from the families that make up the intricate fabric of our classroom communities.

We need to see beyond the classroom walls as we learn from families and students; we need to

“continually integrate new findings into [our] framework of knowledge” (Taberski, 2000, p. 3). In doing so, we envision our role as facilitators, bringing all students’ home cultures to the classroom while respecting and learning from multiple frameworks, from multiple definitions of parent involvement. We hope that you will learn from multiple families that thread the rich and beautiful fabric of your classroom cloth, recognizing the value and individualities of each thread while exploring and reenvisioning the multiple possibilities and definitions for parent involvement.

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Teachers' Beliefs about Parent and Family Involvement

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