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WHAT WORKS? *Research into Practice*

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How do parents and caregivers, especially those from marginalized families, become more active in their children's schooling?

Bringing Marginalized Parents and Caregivers into Their Children's Schooling

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Research Tells Us

- The extent to which parents and caregivers extend their children's classroom work is linked to increased academic success.
- Some qualify the link, suggesting that some activities such as reading together at home and discussing homework assignments are more effective than others.
- Barriers to parental involvement include individual family factors like ideas of parental and teacher roles and parent-teacher factors like attitudes to parental involvement.
- Opening lines of communication and sustaining dialogue is key to engagement and partnership.

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The current consensus is that parents and caregivers play a crucial role in student success in schooling. As we will see, a very large body of research indicates a strong link between their involvement and children's academic success. But who bears primary responsibility for bringing families and schools into closer, more meaningful dialogue? In an Ontario where linguistic, cultural and racial diversity further complicate relationships between families and mainstream schools, the challenge looms large.

For the elementary grades in particular, the extent to which parents and caregivers extend their children's classroom work – both by engaging in activities such as reading together at home and discussing homework assignments, and by demonstrating an interest in their children's development and learning – is typically linked to increased academic success.[1,2,3,4,5,6] While some qualify the link, suggesting that only certain forms of involvement affect student achievement[7] or that some interventions are more effective than others,[8] the weight of evidence supports the prevailing view: Active parents and caregivers improve chances of students' academic success.

Communication between Homes and Schools

Weak or non-existent lines of communication between homes and schools may create suspicion between teachers and parents and caregivers. In my research study, teachers often expressed frustration with "parents who just don't return phone calls," while parents were often at a loss to help children complete homework that "no one at home understands."

Rather than blaming ...

Widening the discussion around the place of parents and caregivers in elementary education offers an alternate route for bringing marginalized parents and caregivers into their children's education. It recognizes that programmatic and research interventions must address a range of factors in the relationship between home and school, including the perceptions that families and schools have of each other, of themselves, and of the histories that shape them.

The scholarly literature supports this view. Grant and Ray[1] note the lack of understanding between educators, schools and families; Harris and Goodall[2] suggest social and economic factors as further catalysts for communication breakdowns; Ippolito and Schecter[3] look to issues of power and inequality, questioning the normative assumptions that frame the family-school conversation; Lee and Bowen[4] highlight the link between family demographic characteristics, including race and ethnicity, and differentiated achievement outcomes; Sanders[6] strategizes school-community collaborations with universities, businesses, social service agencies and faith-based organizations as remedies for strengthening home and school partnerships; and People for Education[5] isolates a communication gap between what research says and what parents and schools do.

This sampling of the literature represents an extended struggle to understand why dysfunctional relationships between homes and schools can be so agonizingly slow to change. On this point, Hornby and Lafaele's[9] synthesis of the research on barriers to parental involvement provides useful insight. They identify four areas where barriers to parental involvement in education can emerge:

Individual parent and family factors include what role parents imagine for themselves in their children's formal schooling and, indeed, what value they feel the school places on their involvement. The authors also note social factors such as socioeconomics, mental health and, importantly, the restrictions that ethnicity and gender can create across cultural differences between home and school.

Child factors include, most notably, children's ages. The authors note that parental involvement decreases as children move through primary grades and toward secondary school. Other child factors such as learning disabilities, behavioural issues and giftedness can further strain relations between home and school and dampen positive parental involvement.

Parent-teacher factors, such as the aims of parental involvement, the attitudes toward parental involvement, and the understandings of parental involvement, may vary dramatically between parents and caregivers and schools. For example, where many teachers feel that parents and caregivers should be involved in supporting the common curriculum, some marginalized parents and caregivers may be more focused on curricular and pedagogical dissonance between home and school.

Societal factors reference specific concerns around the political will to sustain parental involvement. These factors include not only adequate funding, but also the broader historical conditions that have traditionally set homes apart from formal schooling.

These four barriers comprise a detailed framework for understanding why schools and parents and caregivers can find it so difficult to close the gap that too often separates them. They are also useful for assessing appropriate responses. Consider the successful projects Feiler[10] identifies in his discussion of bringing hard-to-reach parents closer to their children's schools. Extrapolating from both these projects and government policy documents, Feiler concludes, "it is apparent that the importance of schools developing constructive, two-way relationships with families has beenrecognized"[10] (p. 152).

Learning in Schools and Homes

Since 2005, I have led a program of school-based, community-referenced research that responds to the barriers synthesized in Hornby and Lafaele[9] – in particular, the perceptions that families and schools have of each other, of themselves and of the histories that shape them. This research shifts the school's focus from how to increase parent and caregiver support to improve classroom performance and test scores in schools with marginalized populations and focuses, instead, on how to broaden adult stakeholder relationships within schools. The aim is to connect marginalized families and their children's schools through meaningful dialogue, offering a broad context within which to address student achievement.

The project *Learning in Schools and Homes* now operates in four elementary schools in two school boards in the Greater Toronto Area. It began as a series of town-hall, community forums with parents and caregivers, in-service and pre-service teachers, school administrators, local community agencies and my university-based research team. The discussions addressed not only issues that parents consider pressing in their families' experience of public schooling – such as standardized testing, homework, report cards and transitioning to middle or high school – but also wider issues of authority and learning, equity policies, minority languages in English-language schools and intergenerational relationships.[11]

In the third year of the project, parents and caregivers wanted to pursue issues in greater depth, and thus "Parent/Caregiver Research Teams" were born. The research teams provide small-group opportunities for parents and caregivers to explore their children's schools and to share findings with their school communities.[12] The project is currently evolving to include classroom teachers, as both research respondents and co-researchers. While the teams are geared toward generating research findings, they also generate new kinds of relationships among key stakeholders.

A shared task ...

A broadened context avoids the question of whether families or schools bear primary responsibility for parents and caregivers becoming more active in their children's schooling. When understood as an inescapably shared task, student success rests on the quality of adult and adult-child relationships at school and at home.

Recommendations for Practice

Sustaining this level of dialogue does require effort and strategy. Through trial and error, I have gained the following insights, adapted below from a letter I initially wrote to a colleague who was facing similar challenges in his international work with families and formal schooling in rural settings.

Letter to a Colleague:

While it seems counterintuitive, to increase the chances of convincing parents and caregives to support your enrichment program, I recommend creating conditions where they can begin to distance themselves from their children's education. At our school-based research sites, we began this effort humbly, sharing coffee and chatting with small groups.

Simply put, I suggest creating an environment for parents and caregivers to learn something about themselves, in particular about their views on their children's education. With luck, they will begin to disagree with each other in the exchange of views. In my research, these disagreements have proven to be the first step in families reorienting themselves to the focal issue. The disagreements often facilitate a change in perspective, as parents and caregivers come to understand the complexity of the issue in terms of its wider implications for schooling. The focal issue becomes the only issue.

Over these past seven years, I've been able to identify concrete strategies for attracting parents and caregivers to these conversations and for moving these conversations forward into sustained investigations. My top-ten list follows.

1. Always start by providing a full, hot meal, prepared to accommodate special diets, such as Halal or vegetarian. I have come to identify this as a research fact: eating together facilitates a fuller exchange of views and experiences, especially with people who do not completely trust the venue or the institution hosting the venue.
2. Consider some form of entertainment (e.g., song, dance or poetry) to accompany the meal. At our events, students often perform in multiple languages.
3. Identify and bring on board community insiders who understand your work and its value, and who are also able to appreciate the reluctance to become more involved in the school. Have them facilitate your conversations with the parents. In my research, these insiders do double-service as both community liaisons and researchers.
4. Publicize the event through channels that parents and caregivers will pay attention to. Word of mouth (via community insiders) is often the most effective.
5. Provide a clear, itemized account of the initiative and invite responses through one or two pointed questions. Allow for multiple discussion formats, such as small-group conversations and larger whole-group debriefs. Have the community insiders prepared to speak on behalf of small groups or individuals who have something to say but are reluctant to do so. The community insiders should also be able to act as translators where required.
6. Listen carefully, be seen to be listening carefully and make a commitment to responding to concerns, either on the spot or in a follow-up session. Parents and caregivers have to feel the sessions are worthwhile, or they won't come back.
7. Don't make demands, or even suggestions, that are unrealistic for parents and caregivers to meet or take up.
8. Be prepared for interest in such conversations to grow slowly. Some of our community forums now attract as many as 250 people, but this was not always the case.
9. Be wary of piggybacking onto existing programs. These programs carry their own baggage and, in some cases, their own socio-educational and ideological commitments.
10. Pay the community insiders for their services – not a lot, since this may cause controversy with other parents and caregivers, but a small amount to acknowledge their work.

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