

A Case Study: Feeling Safe and Comfortable at School

By Rose A. Hall, Ed.D.

Third Grader Equates "Feeling Safe" With School's Parent Involvement Efforts

During the 2013-2014 school year, a case study on parent involvement was conducted at an elementary school in Florida's Broward County, the 9th largest school district in our nation. The study's goal was to identify a systematic schema for evaluating parent involvement in the school lives of students that would allow researchers to examine the possible influences of parent involvement on the students' school success. The schema identified a number of possible influences that warranted further analysis, but it was a third grader in the study who was best able to articulate one of the most critical components necessary to ensure students experience school success and safety.

During a study interview, the third (3rd) grader was asked, "What's the best thing about your teacher getting to know your family?" Without hesitation, he responded, "I feel safe here now." When the interviewer prompted the student to elaborate, the child explained,

Well the teacher talks to my mother all the time and she knows my family. And the principal knows my name and the people in the office say hi to me because my mother comes here all the time and they know her. So I think they care about me and that's why I feel safe.

This student's response highlights a hallmark of the study: other participants (i.e. teachers, parents and students) also expressed an increased sense of security once parent involvement became a more regular part of the students' school lives. They were vocal about various aspects of parent involvement (i.e. regular communication and increased rapport between all parties) making them feel safe enough to ask for assistance. Their responses revealed that, for them, parent involvement was an important vehicle on the road to school success.

The Case Study: Parent Involvement and School Success

The study's premise was to establish the strength of the connection between parent involvement and school success. A strong connection would provide the impetus for school district leaders to make a greater investment in engaging low socioeconomic and minority students and

their families in the educational process. "Schools continue to struggle with increasing parental involvement with students of color and students of low socio-economic status" (Bower and Griffin, 2011.p.78)

The study provided a structural approach to action research and utilized Epstein's (2009) typology of parent involvement and Wehlage's (1989) school membership studies in an attempt to provide a balanced lens. Epstein's approach places more ownership on the parent and focuses on giving strategies from an outside vantage point. Wehlage, on the other hand, as the seminal researcher on school membership and its importance, places more ownership on the school system, and points out the varied misconceptions and impediments the school system brings. This approach suggests focus, remedies, and applications that act from the inside out. By applying both concepts in concert, Epstein with an external (parent) focus and Wehlage with an internal (school system) focus, the study's conceptual framework was established to evaluate parent involvement benefits.

The study monitored weekly contacts between teachers and parents (i.e. phone calls, written communication, and face to face meetings) to examine the possible benefits of increased parental involvement on students' attitudes towards school and student achievement. The study also identified the school system impediments (i.e. retention, labeling, and adjustment difficulties) that affect student attitudes and ultimately school performance. The literature on parent involvement reveals that it reinforces the importance of education to the student, promotes favorable attitudes towards education, enhances effective communication of student needs between the parent and teacher, and builds an additional layer of accountability (Fan & Chen, 2001; Hill & Taylor, 2004; Wong, 2008; McBride et al. 2009).

The Process

Located in an urban community of minority and low socio-economic families, New Revolution elementary school was chosen as the site for the study. Two teachers volunteered to participate in our action research study. Based on the guidelines the district uses to identify students possessing risk factors for dropout prevention programs, the teachers

Figure 1: Teachers' Parent Contact Log

WEEKLY PARENT CONTACT LOG (Date)						
Name	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Propose/ Outcome
1.						
2.						
3.						
4.						
5.						
6.						
7.						
8.						
9.						
10.						
Contact Key:	1. Phone (P)	2. In Person (IP)	3. Written (W)	4. Other (o)		

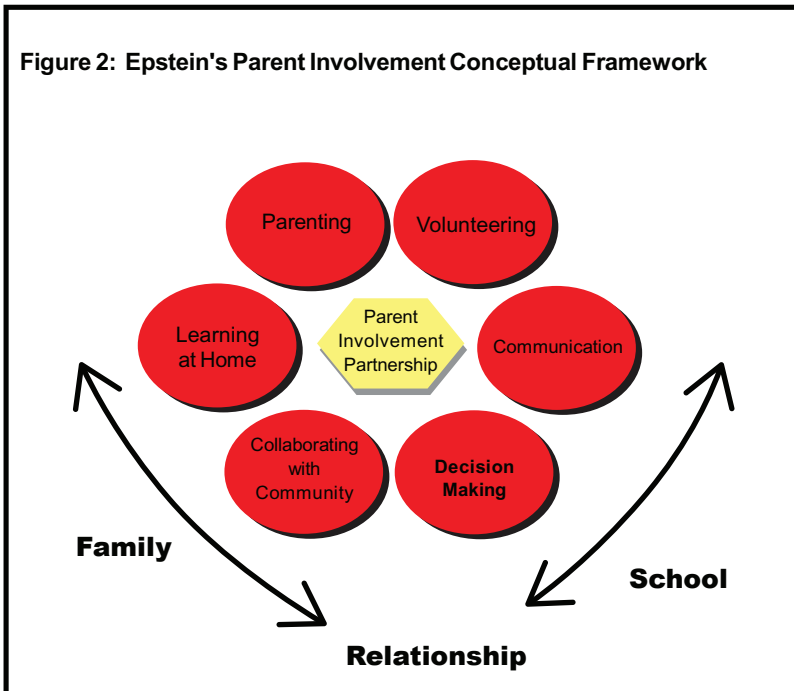
and an administrator identified a mixed group of males and females, ten students per third grade class, to participate in the study. The participants' demographics were diverse in ethnicity (i.e. African American, Arab, Bengali, Haitian, and South American), native languages (i.e. Arabic, Bengali, English, Creole, French, and Spanish), and levels of family education; however, the majority of participants (90%) came from low socio-economic households. The research period was three (3) months in duration. It began in February 2014 and ended in April 2014.

Before the study began, the teachers had been following the district's guidelines for parent involvement that required a mandatory parent contact once a quarter during the school year. Study parameters required the teachers to

increase their parent contact from quarterly to weekly. They were provided with contact logs (see **Figure 1**) to document all contact (i.e. phone calls, written communication, and face to face meetings). The contact logs identified the type of parent-teacher interaction and contained information on the purpose of the contact and its outcome. Teachers were also instructed to chart participating students' grades and behaviors for the duration of the study.

Using the data compiled, the researcher conducted a qualitative study that followed Epstein's (2007) protocol for conducting a school-based study focused on the effects of employing effective parent involvement strategies (see **Figure 2**).

Figure 2: Epstein's Parent Involvement Conceptual Framework



Epstein's (1993) Parent and Teacher Questionnaire (modified version) was the data collection instrument utilized to capture the outcome of the teachers' (school) and parents' (families) attempts to build meaningful relationships that would result in student school success. The data collected was analyzed to identify patterns, themes and discrepancies.

Findings

The findings of this study are not representative of all races, cultures and school systems in the nation, but a small demonstration of parent involvement efforts in one elementary school between two classrooms in one school district. However, several reoccurring themes emerged as the teachers and parents increased communication and the relationships developed. This heightened level of connection increased student attendance, developed positive expectations and student feelings of security and care.

The teachers reported that 75% of their student grades improved gradually, not by leaps and bounds. Greater improvement was displayed in students' attitudes towards school, motivation, engagement, academic effort and positive classroom interaction and atmosphere. Epstein (2009) asserts that communication with parents helps motivate students and encourages parents to become more involved in their child's education.

A student's attendance is one of the key elements to school membership and school success (Wehlage, 1989). Based on their interview responses, 70% of parents were clear about their role and the teachers' expectations regarding their child's education and attendance. Based on student reports, 90% knew their parents and teachers' expectations about attending and were able to articulate it. This communal expectation was in line with the students' attendance records, which indicated that 80% of the sample group who had good attendance maintained it, while other students with lower attendance rates improved.

Parents reported that their initial fears of feeling overwhelmed and being perceived as unintelligent and/or uncaring did not materialize during their weekly teacher contact. Some parents even reported that they spoke with the teacher more than once a week. Parents also reported that increasing their involvement made students' willingness to take more academic risks and ownership for their classroom performance. They reported that their students were more confident that their teachers were invested in their school success. Wehlage contends that increased involvement from teachers garners a greater level of student engagement, increases awareness and compliance to school rules in ways that lead to feelings of school membership, which eventually lead to school success (1989).

Conclusions

At the study's conclusion, the partnership between teachers and parents was still evolving as the teachers established a new level of respect for the many forms of non-traditional parent involvement strategies employed by the parents in an attempt to stay connected to their child's schooling. Since this type of involvement takes

place in the home for the most part, the school and teacher weren't always aware of it. In some cases, being aware of a custom or practice doesn't create value until the benefits are understood.

The importance of this concept on student school success was evident when the students were asked questions about their parents' level of involvement. Like school personnel, some students considered their parent(s) uninvolved with their schooling if their parent(s) was unable to participate in traditional ways, i.e. attend meetings, volunteer for field trips, help out in class or in fundraisers. Many students shared the view of educators about what behaviors constituted parent involvement. Both educators and students wanted a visual display of involvement from parents. Educating school personnel on how various cultures instill pride and promote the importance of education benefits both schools and families.

The study identified an important theme to involvement. There are many misconceptions held by teachers, parents and students about parent involvement. Teachers and parents thought that involvement would be time consuming and create additional work with minimal benefits. Both teachers and parents found involvement to be minimal work once incorporated into one's routine and parent involvement helped teachers reinforce old and new learning strategies and concepts. A pattern of parents receiving additional knowledge on teaching strategies for breaking down and simplifying homework/classwork for their child at home developed. Therefore, teachers, parents and students benefited in meaningful ways from increased parent involvement.

The overall study results reinforced the value of parent involvement among low socioeconomic and minority students as a factor that positively affected student school success for the study population. The development of relationships between parents and teachers was an important component in increasing their knowledge of and input in their children's educations. By developing their relationships with the parents, the teachers were able to aid in building trusting, respectful and caring relationships between students and their families. Parent involvement impacted all study participants in meaningful ways.



NSDC

National School Development Council

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