First Nations Parental Involvement in Education

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Abstract

There is a correlation between the Levels of student achievement in formal Western schools and the levels of involvement that their parents have in this education. Many First Nations students have low levels of achievement, which can be attributed to a lack of parental involvement. The negative perception of school left behind from residential schools is often cited as a reason for this lack of involvement. Teachers and school leaders need to develop strategies to lessen these negative perceptions and encourage First Nations parents to become actively involved in their children’s formal education. If the efforts of educators are successful, the low achievement rates of First Nations students will rise.

Parental involvement at home and in education plays a major role in student achievement within the Western schooling context. Students with parents who have a high level of involvement typically have higher rates of student success than students with parents who are less involved. First Nations parents often have a lower level of involvement, which results in First Nations students having lower levels of achievement in school. The residual effects of residential schools, coupled with the ways that current schools make parents feel uncomfortable, contribute to the lack of First Nations parental involvement in formal schooling. Through the effort of educators, parental involvement in education can be increased for First Nations and non-First Nations families.

Parental Involvement

All parents are involved in children’s lives in different ways. Family A might consider parental involvement as having supper together every night while discussing each family member’s day, reading bedtime stories, and taking part in different activities such as swimming, ice skating, and going to the movie theater. Family B might consider parental involvement as making supper for the children, sending them to bed at their bedtime, dropping them off for swimming or skating lessons, and inviting other children over to play on the weekends. Family B is making sure that the children are fed, getting adequate sleep, attending extracurricular activities, and having fun; however, the parents are not interacting with their children to build interpersonal bonds. The differences between the involvements of these two families may have resulted from a lack of understanding of what parental involvement is, or not knowing how to interact with their children.

Participating in a child’s life is the main descriptor of parental involvement. Some parents, such as in Family B, are physically present but are not mentally and emotionally present. Family A shows that the parents are mentally and emotionally present by connecting with their children and taking part in activities that are important to the parents and children. Family B may not understand the true meaning of being involved; the key word missing is “participating.”

Not knowing how to engage and participate in activities with children may be one of the reasons that some parents are not as involved in school as others particularly parents who have fallen heir to the intergenerational legacy of institutionalized life in residential schools. Making an effort to attend extracurricular activities is important to children (“Eight Ways,” 2014). One-on-one time gives parents and children opportunities to connect and talk about their lives. Supporting children and cheering them on in endeavours that they pursue shows that they are believed in and encourages them to work hard and try new things. More specific suggestions of how to participate in activities with children include reading at home, limiting the amount of television that children watch, and setting routines (Friedel, 1999). Schools have a role to play in
teaching parents these strategies to build healthy relationships with their children. It is then up to those families to decide how they implement such notions into their lives. Involvement in home life and extracurricular activities is essential, as is parental involvement when children enter school.

Parental Involvement in Education

From September to June, children ages 5-17 spend the majority of each day at school. It is important for parents to show a high level of involvement in their children’s education by interacting with the school (Meador, 2014). School teachers and administrators have a responsibility to communicate with parents regarding their children’s learning and teach them how to talk to their children about their school experiences. This parental involvement shows children that education is important and motivates them to work hard and to succeed.

There are many ways that parents can become involved in their children’s education. While some parents maintain a high level of involvement by volunteering at school events, other parents cannot due to time and financial constraints. One of the most important ways to be involved is by communicating regularly with the school about student achievement and behaviour (Ireland, 2014). This involvement can be achieved through different means, such as phone calls, emails, parent-teacher meetings, and/or written notes. Of course, helping children with homework is important; however, going beyond completing the homework sends a more powerful message. Providing books for children to read at home and reading with them supports literacy development and sets the foundation for children to enjoy reading (Friedel, 1999). Parents can take note of what is being taught at school and extend learning into after-school and weekend activities. Examples of extending learning include visiting a museum or watching a movie based on a topic that the class is studying. Teachers can support these endeavours by recommending activities that parents can do at home to support their children’s in-school learning. Incorporating these suggestions is crucial in demonstrating to children that their parents value education, which in turn makes the children do the same. Supporting the disciplinary actions taken at the school level and enforcing discipline at home also shows children that their parents and educators are working together. Teachers see the effects of the levels of parental involvement through their students’ behaviour and academic performance.

Effects of Parental Involvement on Students

Teachers have students in their classes who come from families with a range of levels of parental involvement. As teachers learn about their students throughout the school year, they develop an understanding of how involved their parents are. Parents are in control of their participation in their children’s lives and education. These controllable factors “account for almost all of the differences in average student achievement” (Friedel, 1999, p. 11). Children whose parents have a high level of involvement generally have better behaviour records and achieve higher on standardized tests than children whose parents are less involved.

Children with involved parents typically follow school rules, respond respectfully to suggestions made by teachers, and achieve at or above level on standardized tests. Student behaviour is a direct result of parental involvement, because when parents are involved teachers use a humanistic control ideology, and use more conflict management strategies (Karakus & Savas, 2014). Teachers with a humanistic control ideology build connections with their students and run their classroom as a cooperative community. Students respond better to these types of ideologies and strategies, as opposed to dominating strategies. Teachers who use dominating strategies often do not understand their students’ needs, and are often impersonal, do not trust the students, and demonstrate a hierarchical approach to classroom management. Involved parents ensure that their children attend school regularly and complete their homework (e.g., home reading, sight word practice, math facts); therefore, their children
spend more time learning than children of parents who are not as involved. Furthermore, children with involved parents are more likely to develop the passion to succeed in hopes of making their parents proud.

Children with less involved parents often have behaviour issues and perform below grade level. Children with parents who do not see education as a priority learn not to value school. In some situations, teachers never meet the parents of their students. Teachers often use more dominating strategies to deal with these children (Karakus & Savas, 2014). Children with poor attendance and who do not complete their homework have less learning time than children who attend school regularly and return their homework to school. Parents who are disinterested and do not value education pass their beliefs on to their children, resulting in lower levels of student achievement.

Children who are interested in learning are eager to take part in activities and work hard to learn new concepts. Students who are disinterested in education often act out and sabotage learning activities. These disruptions jeopardize the learning of all students in the classroom. It is in these types of situations that teachers surmise which students have parents who value and encourage learning, compared to students with parents who do not. First Nations parents are often deemed lacking in their involvement in their children’s education.

First Nations Student Achievement

Many First Nations students perform below grade level. Some may wonder whether this level of performance is true of non-Aboriginal children as well, but research has found that Aboriginal students generally achieve lower than non-Aboriginal students on measured outcomes such as literacy rates (Congress of Aboriginal Peoples, 2010). The poor academic performance of First Nations students is often rooted in the lack of parental involvement in education.

First Nations parents attend school activities (i.e., celebrations, field days, performances, parent teacher meetings) less often than non-First Nations parents. Furthermore, due to their lack of participation, Aboriginal parents “are held partially responsible for the overwhelmingly negative statistics concerning Aboriginal education” (Friedel, 1999, p. 5). Educators blame the parents for their lack of involvement, and do not understand why these parents do not become more involved.

Lack of Involvement by First Nations Parents

First Nations parents are generally less involved in their children’s formal schooling than non-First Nations parents. Members of the educational system “see the participation levels of Aboriginal parents as a problem” (Friedel, 1999, p. 3). First Nations parents and educators at mainstream Western schools cite different reasons for this lack of involvement. Educators believe that Aboriginal parents feel that their influence is irrelevant because they do not know enough about education. They also believe that parents with low income “do not feel welcome or comfortable in the school” (Friedel, 1999, p. 12). First Nations people, however, have a different perspective concerning their lack of involvement.

First Nations parents have a variety of reasons for not participating in their children’s education. First, Aboriginal parents feel that the only time they are contacted by the school is when there are disciplinary problems (Friedel, 1999). Second, Aboriginal parents and non-Aboriginal staff have negative opinions toward one another, and negative encounters reinforce these opinions. This reinforcement makes it difficult for parents and educators to trust, respect, and understand one another. Third, First Nations parents are considered to be minority group parents in some schools. This group of parents “does not have access to the cultural knowledge of how to act appropriately or positively” (Friedel, 1999, p. 20). This lack of cultural knowledge results in parents not reacting at all, which makes it look like they do not care.
Lastly, residential schools have left survivors with damaging memories and negative feelings about schooling (Friedel, 1999). First Nations parents and grandparents do not want their children to repeat the experiences that they had in residential schools. However, the parents who have inherited these attitudes and memories remain unmotivated to “support or promote the school” (Friedel, 1999, p. 21), resulting in “low student achievement and lack of parental involvement” (Friedel, 1999, p. 24). The First Nations experience in residential schools produced negative opinions and attitudes, lack of trust, and lack of respect for the educational system. While educators have their own beliefs regarding why First Nations parents are uninvolved in their children’s formal schooling, it is important for them to learn about the First Nations experience in residential schools, and how these experiences affect children today.

History of Residential Schools

For over 150 years, First Nations children were forced to attend residential schools, where they were abused and deprived by religious and government leaders. Duncan Campbell Scott created such schools to “get rid of the Indian problem” (Legacy of Hope, 2014, “A Brief History,” para. 2). In order to assimilate Aboriginal people, children were taken from their families and communities (“Aboriginal Education,” 2014). The children who attended these schools were forbidden to speak their native languages and take part in cultural practices (Legacy of Hope, 2014). Some learning happened at residential schools, but the students were denied opportunities to participate in their traditional ways of life and were taught only how to live “in the lower fringes of the dominant society” (“Aboriginal Education,” 2014, para. 11). The system was “designed to kill the Indian in the child” (Legacy of Hope, 2014, “Establishment,” para. 1). The experiences at residential schools were traumatizing, and have had long-lasting effects on residential school survivors and their descendants.

Residential school survivors have negative attitudes toward the Western schooling system. Even though most residential schools have been closed for several decades, the residual effects still impact the lives of First Nations people today. Residential schools created a generation of people who do not understand “what it means to be part of a family or how to create a healthy family of their own” (Mussell, Cardiff, & White, 2004, p. 15). The First Nations students at residential schools learned abusive behaviours instead of parenting skills, which continues to cycle through generations of their offspring (Legacy of Hope, 2014). The intergenerational effects of this abuse causes First Nations children of today’s society to experience trauma themselves, making it more difficult for them learn. Residential schools tainted the concept of school to the extent that “school for many Aboriginal people is much more an object of fear to be avoided than a place of learning” (“Aboriginal Education,” 2014, para. 12). These negative perceptions of the formal educational system are passed on to today’s First Nations children through lack of parental involvement, resulting in the children having a lack of respect for their educators, and a disinterest to learn. Educators today need to take steps to address these negative perceptions and encourage First Nations parents to become more involved in their children’s education.

Increasing Parental Involvement

Since the closure of residential schools, First Nations people have been working through the effects of their trauma. It is the responsibility of educators to change their perceptions of formal schooling and encourage them to be involved in their children’s education. There are many different models of how the relationship between schools and First Nations people can be mended. Two models focus on involving parents in a multi-dimensional way, and including Aboriginal parents in building student success.

The first model involves multi-dimensional involvement in schools (Rapp & Duncan, 2012) by involving parents in a positive way through the roles of the principal, school staff, and
parents. The first suggestion is for the principal to encourage parents to share ideas and opinions, and also for parents to be part of the decision making process. It is important that principals make themselves aware of the different needs of parents in their school and take opportunities to meet those needs. The teachers also play a part in creating a “parent-friendly school environment” (Rapp & Duncan, 2012, p. 10). It is proposed that teachers learn about cultural practices and traditions in which their students participate. Also, teachers should be in contact with parents regularly about their children’s progress, and not just when disciplinary action is taken or when a child is struggling. In order to encourage parents to attend parent-teacher conferences, the teachers should provide a “relaxed, comfortable environment” (Rapp & Duncan, 2012, p. 11). A final suggestion for teachers is to communicate with parents proactively and treat parents fairly, equitably, and ethically.

Parents can complete the partnership between school and home by encouraging their children to be high achievers, setting learning goals, keeping track of their children’s teachers, and visiting their children’s learning environment. While the school may do an excellent job of relaying information to parents via letters, phone calls, or the school website, it is just as important for parents to “return communication back to the school” (Rapp & Duncan, 2012, p. 12). In order for this model to be successful, the principal, school staff, and parents must work together. If this model is successful, all parties will see an increase in student achievement as a result of increased parental involvement.

The next model is a program that is more specific to involving Aboriginal parents in education. The Building Student Success with Aboriginal Parents (BSSAP) program provides funding to support schools in “developing partnerships and programs with parents and the community” (Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning, 2014, “BSSAP Home,” para. 1). These partnerships contribute to Aboriginal student success. In order to be considered for the program, schools must submit proposals to demonstrate that their school plans make Aboriginal student and parental involvement a priority. Since the program started in 2004, the schools selected to receive funding have “formed and maintained effective family-school partnerships that positively influence all students’ learning” (Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning, 2014, “BSSAP Home, para. 4). These partnerships have increased student motivation, engagement, progress, attendance, and well-being. The funds provided by this program aid in the implementation of the practical applications suggested in the multi-dimensional involvement model.

Creating an environment wherein principals, other school staff, and parents work together is easier said than done when the school does not have the funds to support the application of such programming. The BSSAP program is an opportunity to access funds to implement the suggestions made in the multi-dimensional involvement model. By adopting suggestions made in the first model, accessing funds provided by the BSSAP program, or combining the two, educators can increase the involvement of parents in their schools.

Conclusion

Increasing student success is important for all students, but it is critically important for First Nations students. Low levels of student achievement are attributed to low levels of parental involvement. Thus, in order for student success to improve, First Nations parents need to become more involved in their children’s education. Residential schools have caused First Nations people to perceive the school system negatively. However, through the encouragement of educators, these negative perceptions can be reduced and parental involvement can be increased. When parental involvement increases, their children will experience higher levels of student success."
References


About the Author

Stephanie Frieze recently started her graduate studies in guidance and counselling. She loves working with children and gets a great deal of fulfillment from seeing students learn and grow to their full potential. Stephanie is passionate about supporting students throughout their school years.