

# Introduction

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## Why Build a Relationship Between the School and the Family?

In North America, family involvement is considered an essential component of successful schooling for students. Family involvement initiatives can be demanding for both the school and the family, yet the benefits of successful programs make such initiatives worthwhile. When the family is involved in their child's schooling, the child's academic achievement improves, absenteeism is reduced, teacher efficacy improves, and the child is more confident and better behaved (Fine, 1993; Lawson, 2003). Family involvement programs enable educators and the family to work toward a shared goal that benefits the child.

## What is Family Involvement?

Family involvement is not a clearly defined term and is often contextually determined. Usually schools define family involvement and determine how and to what extent parents and caregivers participate in school-related activities. Problems arise when the school's and family's perceptions of the meanings and functions of family involvement are different. Joyce Epstein's (1986) typology of family involvement categorizes six forms of parent involvement. Furthermore, she emphasizes that effective family involvement is largely a collaborative partnership between the family, the school, and the community.

Epstein's (1986) typology can be summarized as follows:

### 1. *Providing for the child's basic needs*

Each family has a 'basic obligation' to support its child's education by developing parenting skills and by providing a home environment that is conducive to learning.

### 2. *Communicating with school staff*

Schools have an obligation to communicate openly and regularly with families about school programs and curricula and about the child's progress.

### 3. *Volunteering or providing assistance at their child's school*

Family members can become partners with the school by volunteering in classrooms or school activities and by taking part as audiences during such activities.

### 4. *Supporting and participating with their children in learning activities at home*

Families can be involved by organizing regular learning activities at home.

### 5. *Participating in governance and advocacy activities*

Governance and advocacy refer to the way in which parents and the community can influence decision-making in a school system. Governance activities include school-appointed advisory committees, and advocacy activities are conducted independent of the school (e.g., a citizens' group formed to lobby curriculum changes).

### *6. Collaborating with the community to meet the needs of children*

Schools can collaborate with community groups and service providers who support families and children (e.g., settlement workers).

Epstein (1986) cautions that not all types of involvement lead directly or quickly to achievement gains for students and not all types of involvement are feasible or possible for all families. This is particularly true for newcomer immigrant and refugee families who are not able to participate in governance or advocacy activities so soon after their arrival in a new environment. Schools and teachers need to have clear and realistic expectations regarding the level of involvement that different families are able to engage in. Similarly, they must recognize time constraints and resources that are at the families' disposal.

### **What are the Different Forms of Family Involvement Activities?**

Family involvement initiatives encompass a range of activities, serve various functions, and vary in their degree of effectiveness and overall success in achieving the objective of involving the family in their child's schooling. According to Epstein (1986) the most effective forms of involvement are those that are least expensive and least public. Epstein promotes activities that contribute to the child's learning at home, such as supporting good homework practices and talking to the child about school. According to Epstein, such family involvement activities allow all parents to participate in their child's schooling and strengthen the connection between the home and the school.

Delgado-Gaitan (1991) describes conventional activities, such as parent-teacher conferences, and less conventional activities, such as involving preschool children's families in bilingual activities. Delgado-Gaitan explains that for both conventional and less conventional activities, it is essential for schools to inform families about the school and how it functions, and to maintain a continual dialogue with families that support the schools in their efforts to participate in the children's schooling.

In comparing conventional and less conventional family involvement activities, Delgado-Gaitan (1991) found conventional types of family involvement activities to represent a domination of power on the part of the school in their attempt to make the family conform to the school. Conversely, less conventional family involvement activities represent an attempt by the school to share power with the families and to include families' agendas in decision-making about programs, policies, and practices related to the education of their children.

The context of the activities is essential for families who are normally underrepresented in parent-school initiatives. Schools have more success in involving families in less conventional activities that validate the parents' social and cultural experiences. This allows "...parents to feel a part of and be active in their children's schooling, thus becoming empowered" (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991, p. 42).

Lawson (2003) explains that teachers feel a lack of ownership over many family involvement programs and policies, which in turn results in their hesitancy to become involved in family-school partnerships. According to Lawson, teachers are eager and willing to participate in reform initiatives and support change in the school. However, because they are not included in the planning of programs in which they are expected to participate, they do not believe that real change in the school can result from such initiatives. Thus, the school needs to include the voices of all stakeholders, and work towards true collaboration at all stages of the family-school initiative. Lawson also emphasizes the importance of positive role construction for families that encourage involvement.

Lawson (2003) cites Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) , who suggest that the following conditions and preconditions are necessary to successfully involve families in their children's schooling:

(a) parents have developed a parental role construction that is affirming to parent involvement in education, (b) parents have a positive sense of efficacy for helping their children succeed, and (c) parents perceive positive opportunities and invitations to become involved in their children's school (p. 124).

Without these conditions, families will not believe that their engagement in the school will result in positive outcomes for their children. Nor will they feel that the school is genuine in its invitation to involve them (Lawson, 2003).

## **What Factors Limit Parent Involvement?**

There are various reasons why parents appear to be uninvolved in their child's schooling and education. Four factors will be addressed here: 1) socioeconomic status, 2) race, 3) ethnicity, and 4) English proficiency.

### **Socioeconomic status**

Lawson (2003) elaborates to explain how family involvement is both a limiting and a limited concept in low income, ethno-culturally diverse school communities, where the level of family involvement is dependent on the family's race, ethnicity, social class affiliations, and the school's expectations of families. Researchers have suggested that low parent involvement of low-income families is the result of families prioritizing their needs, with the fulfillment of basic needs taking precedence over additional involvement activities (Lawson, 2003).

According to Lawson (2003) many schools have significantly lower expectations of low-income parents as compared to middle and high-income parents for participation in family-school initiatives. A school with low expectations of family involvement will have a low level of involvement by parents. Conversely, a school that values parent involvement and has high expectations for parents to engage in home-school activities will have high family involvement.

Gill Crozier (1999a) contends that family involvement becomes ineffective when teachers adopt the same strategies for promoting family involvement irrespective of socioeconomic status, parental needs, and individual differences. Crozier explains that by not taking account of differences, the school remains inaccessible to some families and in particular to low-income, working-class families. Crozier's research demonstrates that working-class parents are committed to their children's achieving educational success. However, working-class parents in Crozier's study viewed the school as separate from their everyday social and cultural worlds, with some parents recognizing a division of class between themselves and their children's teacher.

Many working-class parents in Crozier's (1999a) study deferred to the teacher's knowledge, feeling that their child's teacher was in a better position to make decisions about the education of their child. Parents in Crozier's study expressed feeling powerless to advocate on behalf of their children and did not regard their knowledge as valuable in influencing the school in any particular way. Margaret Finders and Cynthia Lewis (1994) explain how educators neglect to consider how a parent's own school experiences may influence school interactions and relationships. Finders and Lewis contend that parents who dropped out of school or have limited schooling lack confidence in school settings, with many such parents being low-income and working class.

### **Race**

In addition to socioeconomic status impacting family involvement in the schools, race also plays an important role in framing the terms of the family-school relationship. In their case study, Annette Lareau and Erin McNamara Horvat's (1999) found that it is more difficult for black parents than for white parents to comply with the institutional standards of schools. They argue that this occurs because the black parents in their study did not possess the cultural and social resources of interaction to communicate with their children's teachers, who were predominantly white and middle-class. Lareau and McNamara Horvat found that white parents were more easily able to create a relationship with the school, and thus were in a privileged position to advocate on behalf of their child. Lareau and McNamara Horvat explain the privilege that being white has in regards to parent involvement. They write,

In the case of parental involvement in white dominant schooling, being white is an advantage. Whiteness represents a largely hidden cultural resource that facilitates white parents' compliance with the standard of deferential and positive parental involvement in school. Even when white parents approach the school with suspicion and hostility, they are spared the concern over historically recognized patterns of racial discrimination of black children in schools (p. 46).

Crozier (2001) supports Lareau and McNamara Horvat's (1999) argument that being white is a hidden cultural resource. White parents are in a privileged position to not only access social and cultural capital, but to voice their opinions without questioning whether racism is a mitigating factor in the school's response to their concerns, questions, and overall relationship.

## **Ethnicity**

Concha Delgado-Gaitan (1991) explains that in addition to race, ethno-cultural diversity of minority groups can affect family involvement in schools, with families from minority ethno-cultural groups feeling shut out from participating in family involvement activities because they do not possess the specific cultural knowledge that is required. Delgado-Gaitan asserts that for students from cultures and social groups that differ from the white mainstream group, schooling becomes a discontinuous process because of language, values, and practice differences. According to Delgado-Gaitan, schools facilitate the exclusion of minority families and students by establishing activities that require specific majority culturally-based knowledge and behaviours about the school. Moreover, schools do not provide families with access to the socio-cultural knowledge that would encourage their participation in formal school activities. This is especially true for new immigrants who have a low level of English proficiency.

## **English proficiency**

Finders and Lewis (1994) describe how families with low English skills feel inadequate in school contexts and avoid attending all school-related activities because of the cultural discomfort experienced when having to communicate with teachers and English-speaking parents. Rebecca Huss-Keeler's (1997) ethnographic study of Pakistani English as a Second Language (ESL) parents in Britain revealed that the parents demonstrated an interest in their child's education in a culturally different way than did middle class native English speaking parents. According to the researchers, this difference resulted in teachers misinterpreting the parents behaviours as indicating a lack of interest in their child's learning.

The parents in Huss-Keeler's (1997) study did not possess the linguistic proficiency or social and cultural capital to communicate with their children's teachers in a way that the teachers deemed effective. The parents who spoke English and came to the school regularly had the most access to their child's teachers, and were perceived by the school as interested and involved in their child's education. Conversely, parents with low levels of English who were hesitant to go to the school were viewed as disinterested in their child's learning. The teachers in Huss-Keeler's study had a narrow definition of literacy and were not aware of the various literacy practices in the home that were supporting the children's learning. Furthermore, the children of ESL parents were not afforded the same opportunities or access to educational initiatives because the teachers perceived their parents' low school involvement as indicative of the child's inability to succeed academically.

## **What about the Family's Knowledge?**

Kimberly Daniel-White (2002) explores how a narrow definition of what it means to be involved in school can lead to school-defined perceptions of what it means to be a "good" and involved parent. Daniel-White (2002) explains how the historic definition of family involvement meant parents engaging in more school-like activities at home, such as reading to children, helping them with their homework, and buying educational materials such as flashcards to use at home. Through this definition families were called upon to take on the role of being their children's teacher at home. Families who did not

take on this responsibility were viewed by the school as negligent and uncaring (Daniel-White, 2002).

To rectify this problem, some schools implement programs that teach families how they should interact with their children. Daniel-White (2002) describes how such programs take a cultural deficit approach to families, especially those belonging to cultural and linguistic minorities, by not recognizing or valuing the families' interactional patterns with their children. Family involvement that does not conform to the school's expectations is ignored and regarded as irrelevant. As a result, the family's cultural values and practices are diminished. According to Daniel-White (2002), schools "...see parents as entities that need to be fixed for the benefit of their children...parents' own interactional patterns are not valued, and they are taught to interact with their children in ways that are not valued by their home cultures" (p. 31).

This definition of family involvement disregards the knowledge that parents possess, and discounts the idea that learning can occur outside of the school. Daniel-White (2002) cites Auerbach (1989) and Gonzalez et al. (1995) to explain how the funds of knowledge paradigm and social-contextual models proposed by these researchers are alternatives to the cultural deficit model of parent involvement.

Through the social-contextual approach and funds of knowledge paradigm, educators can empower families in their home activities rather than make them feel as though they are inferior. Auerbach (1989) describes the socio-contextual approach to family literacy as a model that promotes activities that are congruent with the literacy needs and goals of families. The author asserts that a broader definition of family literacy is needed to include a range of activities and practices that are integrated into the fabric of daily life (Daniel-White, 2002).

Similar to the socio-contextual approach, the funds of knowledge paradigm expands the definition of family involvement (Daniel-White, 2002). Daniel-White cites Gonzalez et al. (1995), who explain that funds of knowledge "...refers to those historically developed and accumulated strategies (skills, abilities, ideas, practices) or bodies of knowledge that are essential to a household's functioning and well being" (p. 35).

Thus, both models view the home as an important resource that can support school-related academic efforts, and value a family's knowledge as important regardless of whether or not the knowledge found in the home replicates the knowledge found in the school. A broader, more inclusive definition of family involvement more fully encapsulates Epstein's (1986) argument that effective family involvement requires collaborative partnerships in which the school acknowledges and respects the home cultures and the contributions made by all families.

## **What are Some Other Obstacles to Collaborative Partnerships?**

Although collaborative partnerships are worthwhile endeavours, family involvement activities are not always truly collaborative. Michael Lawson (2003) asserts that families and teachers must have similar and compatible meanings and functions of family

involvement in order for there to be a true partnership between the home and the school. Misunderstandings and conflicts loom when teachers and families have different, and at times competing, perceptions of the meanings and functions of family involvement.

Lawson (2003) explains that most family involvement activities are school-centric, and are thereby structured and defined for families by schools. Lawson (2003) uncovers how school-centric definitions of family involvement further disconnect the home and school environment. Lawson argues that this divide occurs because for many families the orientations for involvement start in the community and move into the school. The dominant school-centric model, on the other hand, begins at the school and then branches out to the child's home environment.

The underlying goals of the family involvement activities are questioned when they lack relevance to the lives of students and parents, which may result in conflicts between families and teachers. According to Lawson (2003), when negative parent-teacher interactions occur, children associate family involvement with an indication of negative student behaviour. In such a case, the disciplinary role of the parents takes precedence over any other contributions to their children's learning. The result is children not wanting their parents to be involved with the school.

The barriers that exist between families and teachers become even more impenetrable when teachers feel as though their professionalism is being challenged (Crozier, 1999a, 1999b). Crozier (1999b) interviewed teachers in the United Kingdom about their views of family involvement and found that teachers regarded middle-class parents as being more involved than low-income parents. However, the teachers also felt that family involvement infringed on their professionalism and questioned the lay-professional divide that teachers wanted to maintain. The teachers in Crozier's study wanted parents to respect their authority in subject knowledge and pedagogy. Consequently, teachers preferred the compliance of low-income working-class parents who did not interfere or question their professional judgment. However, the same teachers viewed the low-income and working class parents' compliance as a sign that these parents were uninterested in their children's schooling and were indifferent to family involvement (Crozier, 1999b). The possibility exists that some teachers may want to maintain a professional distance from their students' families and may therefore prefer families who are not overly involved in their child's schooling to avoid an infringement on their academic judgment.

## **What Does a Successful Family-School Partnership Look Like?**

The term partnership connotes a relationship based on equality in power as well as in access to resources. Yet this is not the case for many family-school relationships. Despite the benefits reaped from family involvement activities, many home-school initiatives are created for families who have specific characteristics. As a result, unique attributes of families are disregarded, leaving many families excluded from feeling comfortable and capable of engaging in family involvement activities. Michael Lawson (2003) explains

that there exist “...assumptions, selectivities, contingencies, and silences that may undergird school-centric parent involvement practices and activities” (p. 80).

Finders and Lewis (1994) identify specific conditions that are necessary for successful family-school partnerships, including the importance for schools to clarify to families their role in family involvement activities and the reasons why it is essential. Families also need to know their rights as participants in their child’s education, the most important of which is the right to advocate on behalf of their child.

Developing trust and establishing a personal relationship with families is also necessary for successful family involvement activities, as it diminishes the fear and intimidation that many families have in new and unfamiliar school settings (Finders & Lewis, 1994). Furthermore, schools need to utilize families’ expertise and assess their funds of knowledge to confirm to parents that they can contribute to the development of their children’s learning.



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