Broadening the Myopic Vision of Parent Involvement

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Abstract

Parent involvement in schools – what do you believe about it? Disparate groups, like front office staff at a school, preservice teachers, teachers, school administrators, and parents respond quite differently to focus questions, which might include: What do you see as important aspects of parent involvement? What parents do you think would probably not want to be involved in parent involvement activities at the school? Do you know enough about parent involvement? Is it important to be informed anyway? Survey questions queried teachers, classified staff, parents, administrators, and preservice teachers on their perceptions of parent involvement. The purpose of this study was to unravel common threads within the data, which revealed a very narrow understanding of parent involvement. This narrow understanding needs to be broadened if, indeed, we ever want to see parent involvement as a systemic, important foundation for student learning. The study discloses that each group had a disparate view of what constitutes parent involvement. The least vocal group in this discussion is the parent; the most vocal is the teacher. The conclusion is that it is inherently important to provide training for preservice and current teachers to help broaden the often myopic vision of parent involvement.

Key Words: preservice teachers, administrators, teachers, parents, parental involvement, teacher candidates, perceptions, broadening myopic vision, family, families, office staff, elementary, middle, high schools, districts, surveys

The Disconnect in Looking at the Problem of Parent Involvement

Walk into a school and immediately one can sense the level of parent involvement. A sign in the hall warns those who enter to report to the office. The office is bustling with activity, and parents stand at the counter waiting to be recognized and welcomed. Classrooms have their windows covered in elementary schools so that parents cannot see inside. Is this a welcoming school? Are schools becoming more "fortress" schools rather than open to parent visits and involvement? (Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007). Is there a chasm of misunderstanding between the home and the school? What creates this lack of understanding? Administrators, teachers, and front office staff create the climate of the school. Teachers and clerical staff, which include front office staff, project the climate of the school and set up the level of the responsive tones of welcome or rejection (Berger, 2008). Preservice teachers enter the classroom with a fixed perspective on what roles parents should play in their instructional day. The problem also lies in an inverse reality – parents are choosing not to come to school. Parents are not visible in many schools, especially during critical times like conferences or schools events (e.g., Lott, 2001). Or is it rather that parents are seen as intrusive? Parents, especially those who are from diverse cultures as compared to the dominant culture at the school, report that they do not feel welcome; consequently, they avoid coming to school and sometimes take on an adversarial stance with school faculty (Lott, 2001).

Stating the Problem

Many studies on parent involvement attempt to capture facets of parent involvement through a focused perspective – the parent (e.g., Olivos, 2004), the teachers (e.g., Shartrand, Kreider, & Erickson-Warfield, 1994), or the administrator (e.g., Rishel, 2008). A broader understanding of parent involvement, however, is not limited to disparate groups but rather open to multiple voices responding to similar questions and sharing their perceptions about the importance and the challenges of parent involvement. As a final and perhaps more significant point, once the crux of the matter is identified, what can be done about this common finding?

The purpose of this study was to look at multiple disparate groups who play an integral role in parent involvement, to explore what perceptions these groups have in common, and in which areas there are discrepancies. This narrow understanding needs to be broadened if, indeed, we ever want to see parent involvement as a systemic, important foundation for student learning (Henderson et al., 2007).

Building on the Research

There are many perspectives about parent involvement. Common threads within the data reveal a very narrow understanding of parent involvement within the education community. We need to broaden this understanding to promote student learning.

From a global perspective, we learn from researchers that there are multiple positives of parent involvement in schools. For one thing, parent involvement increases students' academic achievement (Henderson, 1987; Henderson, Jacob, Kernan-Schloss, & Raimondo, 2004) and, equally important, it promotes positive student attitudes and behaviors (Jeynes, 2007). Researchers also found that when parents are involved in their children's education, there is an increase in students' school attendance and an increased sense of positive feelings of self (Berger, 2008; Fan & Chen, 2001; Mendoza, 2003). These findings provide credible evidence to support a school faculty that strives to promote students' academic excellence with the involvement of parents in multiple roles in the school.

Ironically, this is not the norm. Many parents are unsure of their roles in the school and this feeling of "un-connectedness" grows stronger as their children move from grade to grade in middle and high school. Even though mother and father are the child's first teachers, the role of the parents as the support teachers in the home fades quickly once the child enters school (Epstein, 2001).

Preservice teachers and teachers tend to develop their own sense of parent involvement from their cultural backgrounds (Shartrand et al., 1994). Teachers in the field also influence candidates during practicum and student teaching experiences. Classroom teachers will readily admit that they have had very little training, if any, in working with parents (e.g., Baker, Kessier-Sklar, Piotrkowski, & Parker, 1999). Even today, there is limited professional development at the school or district level that incorporates the importance of the role of parents and how classroom professionals can harness this parental power as a means of improving and sustaining student learning (Hiatt-Michael, 2001; Shartrand et al., 1994). These barriers to effective parent involvement are fortified and upheld in a school environment that places little value on the participation of parents and even less on parent roles that go beyond the traditional roles such as attending conferences.

Parents also may not be encouraged to participate in school activities, especially if teachers perceive parents as not knowledgeable or experienced enough for teaching tasks. Demographic fences that surround many of our local schools present challenges to meaningful parent involvement. These barriers place parents in environments of cultural differences that foster shame and feelings of

failure (Miretzky, 2004; Olivos, 2004). Economic demands (e.g., both parents working to make ends meet for the family) also limit parents' availability to come to the school (Ritblatt, Beatty, Cronan, & Ochoa, 2002).

The role of the principal is critical in shaping the perceptions of teachers and staff in a school. Flessa (2008) writes that principals attribute students' unsatisfactory results of academics or social mores on parents: "They say what parents are not doing – not attending school functions, not helping with work at home" (p. 18). Principals tend to rely on the deficit model – what parents are not doing – rather than looking at what means are in place to encourage parents to be more involved in schools.

The clerical staff is as critical as the other players in parent involvement. The simple phrase "Office staff are friendly" is the first criteria for an open-door school. An unfriendly barrier may be created by staff perceptions that parents are intrusive, do not speak English, and come without an appointment. In reality, parents may not understand school protocol (Dunlap & Alva, 1999).

The total picture of parent involvement is one that is crafted from these multiple visions and helps explain the harmony and disharmony of focus in parent involvement perspectives in education. Can these visions – these perceptions – be brought together into one vision of understanding so that schools, families, and the community will indeed work together to contribute to children's academic and social success (Henderson & Mapp, 2002)?

The Methodology

Research Design and Data Instruments

A research team from the local school district designed this study in collaboration with this university researcher. A pilot study had been conducted the previous year by the school district team. An analysis of the pilot survey helped the research team design each question using more specific language and more alignment with each of the National Parent Teacher Association (PTA) standards (2005-2006) that served as the guideposts for the surveys:

- Communication between home and school is regular, two-way, and meaningful.
- Responsible parenting is promoted and supported.
- Parents play an integral role in assisting student learning.
- Parents are welcomed as volunteers in the schools.
- Parents are full partners in the decisions that affect their children/families.
- Parents, school, and community collaborate in order to enhance student learning, strengthen families, and improve schools.

The research team worked through focus group meetings with the Parent Involvement Council to redraft the survey questions that were sent to parents, clerical staff, teachers, and administrators. The Council is a representative group from the school district, the university (education and medical departments), the community, diversity groups (e.g., Hispanic League), and special interest groups (e.g., gifted education).

The administrator survey involved two areas of interest – a checklist of a variety of parent involvement activities (e.g., family night, Morning Mug). The second half of the survey attempted to capture the principals' awareness and knowledge of parent involvement, their attitudes toward parent involvement, and the current state of parent involvement in their respective schools. The principals were from three levels – elementary, middle, and high school. The teachers in each school, who were either certified (teachers) or classified (front office staff and teacher aides), also were asked to rate how well their school involved parents. As in the principals' survey, the first set of questions related to each of the six PTA standards of parent involvement. The second half of the survey was similar to the principal survey.

The university researcher also designed a survey that was administered to preservice teachers about their perceptions of parent involvement. They completed these surveys at three points in their teacher preparation coursework – in their introductory courses, their methods courses, and during their internship. This study captures preservice teachers' perceptions during their sophomore and junior years. The questions in the preservice teacher survey focused on assessing perceptions of which type of families (e.g., traditional, single-parent) and family variable characteristics (e.g., degree of education, level of English proficiency) were likely to be more involved in their child's education.

Data Distribution

A parent survey (n = 18,509) was mailed to each parent whose child/children were in an elementary, middle, or high school in the district; English and Spanish versions were available. The respondent rate for the parent surveys was over 88% (n = 16,288). Surveys were sent to each teacher, clerical staff member, and administrator at each high school, middle school, and elementary school through an email. Participants answered these surveys through Zoomerage.com; the surveys were then distributed through a center for program evaluation outsourced by the school district. Each participant had an opportunity to add comments as text for each question in the survey.

Surveys were also distributed by the university researcher to preservice teachers (n = 125) in their introductory or in their practicum courses in the teacher education program. The items in these surveys aligned to the PTA

standards and provided opportunities for preservice teachers to share their perceptions about various kinds of parenting systems and parent participation in their children's education. As in the school district survey, the surveys of preservice teachers were in their two levels of teacher preparation – elementary and secondary (middle school and high school). Surveys were tallied by frequency and mean scores.

Sample Population

Parents

Overall, the parents demonstrated the highest respondent rate, 88%, as compared to that of principals, teachers, and clerical staff. Not surprising, more than three-quarters of the surveys (13,021) were completed by mothers (80%). The highest responses were from parents of middle school students (31%) and the majority of the respondents (80%) completed the survey in English. The survey respondents also indicated that 47% have lived in the school district 20 or more years. These data seem to indicate that parents have had many years of experience working with and under the local school system.

Administrators

Figure 1 shows the breakdown of administrator survey responses. Out of the 92 elementary, middle, and high school principals, 50% of the school principals (n = 46) completed the survey. Just over half of the administrators from the elementary schools responded (n = 33), and 54% of the middle school (n = 7) and 46% of the high school leaders (n = 6) responded to the survey. At first glance, this could be reported as a respondent rate of 48%. The confusion with this number is that typically an elementary school has one to two administrators and the number of administrators increases at the middle school level (typically 3) and the high school (typically 5). As the number of potential administrators increased from elementary to high school, the respondent rate for the survey decreased rather than increased. In actuality, the respondent rate was 35% when the total number of administrators was taken into account. Therefore, the study actually shows a clearer picture of the perception of an elementary school principal.

Figure 1. Administrator survey responses
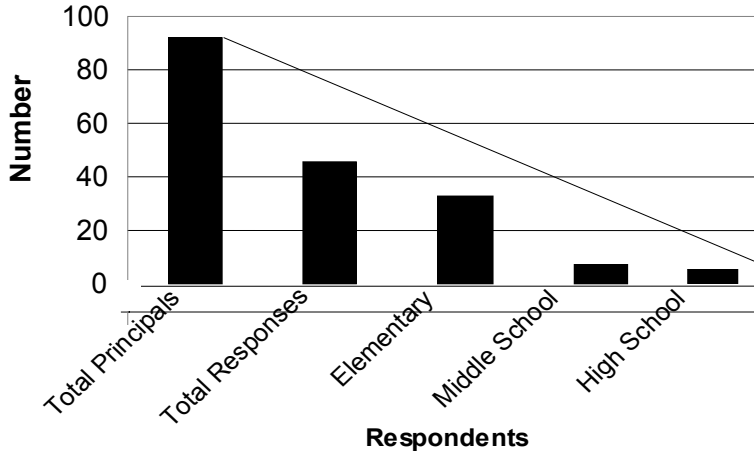
Teachers and Clerical Staff

In the survey, the word "staff" included both teachers (certified staff) and front office or support faculty (clerical staff). Some schools had accepted response rates (55%) and in other schools, there were no respondents. Overall, only 14% of the teachers and 35% of the classified staff in the district, a total of 1,200 out of 5,580, completed the survey. Most of the respondents were from the elementary schools (57%), followed by the high schools (30%), and the middle schools (12%).

Preservice Teachers

Surveys for the preservice teachers were administered in a course prior to an activity that focused on parent involvement. The respondent rate was high, as attendance is part of the grade in the course. The students in the courses were typically white females (80%) and had lived in the state for most of their lives. The 125 preservice teachers in the mixed sophomore course ($n = 60$) and secondary teachers in the junior general methods course ($n = 65$) represented a cross section of all students in the teacher preparation program. The sophomore course included a mix of elementary, secondary, and special education majors.

Hearing the Voices of Each Group

Parents

Many of the questions in the survey were aligned either to the PTA standards or to items on the School Friendly Standards. Parents overall reported that they felt welcomed into their children's schools by the front office staff (89%, 80%, and 78% of elementary, middle, and high school parents, respectively) or when they called the school (90%, 87%, and 86%).

Table 1. School Interaction with and Feedback from Parents

	Elementary	Middle	High
I feel welcome at the school			
% Agree	89%	83%	81%
% Disagree	4%	6%	6%
I feel welcome by other parents			
% Agree	64%	47%	51%
% Disagree	7%	7%	8%
Front office employees are polite to me			
% Agree	89%	85%	85%
% Disagree	5%	7%	7%
School employees are polite when I call			
% Agree	91%	87%	87%
% Disagree	8%	11%	10%
School wants my ideas to make school better			
% Agree	57%	43%	39%
% Disagree	23%	46%	48%
Parents are important partners			
% Agree	85%	75%	71%
% Disagree	4%	7%	9%
When I need help, I know whom to talk to			
% Agree	85%	75%	71%
% Disagree	6%	11%	14%
Ever volunteered?			
Yes	70%	44%	55%
No	38%	56%	46%
Never volunteered but want to			
Yes	60%	56%	48%
No	40%	44%	52%
Willing if asked to volunteer			
Yes	69%	50%	56%
No	31%	50%	44%

Table 1 reflects that parents responded favorably to five of seven questions regarding interpersonal relations with school personnel and the feeling of being wanted and respected for ideas about the school. Surveyed parents did not feel generally welcome at school by other parents and seemed to believe that administration and faculty did not want their ideas for school improvement.

Most parents believe that as school partners, they are important to the success of the school. Approximately 77% believe this to be true. There is also a high percentage (78%) of parents who are confident that when they need someone at the school to talk with, they know whom to contact. However, 46% do not believe that their ideas to improve the school are accepted as worthwhile.

The data shown in Table 1 also reveal untapped parent involvement opportunities. Over half of parents surveyed – 2,027 respondents among the three school divisions – indicate that parents want to volunteer. When asked about their level of involvement at the school, 38%-56% of the parents acknowledged that they did not ever volunteer in their children's school. When further probed to see if they would like to volunteer, 48%-60% of those parents said they would be willing to volunteer. Elementary parents were willing to volunteer (69%) more frequently as compared to middle school parents (50%) or high school parents (56%). Given these data, it behooves the school administration and faculty to make concerted efforts to utilize this valuable resource. The data resurface the question that should be asked: Why are so many parents reluctant to volunteer in the schools?

How do parents gain information about what is taking place at the school? Table 2 shows some of the typical ways that parents reported on how they keep abreast of school events.

Table 2. Parent Responses to Query on Sources of Information about School

	Elementary	Middle	High
Children's Folders	43%	14%	11%
Flyers from School	14%	10%	8%
"My Child Tells Me"	10%	18%	18%
Phone Calls from School	10%	15%	14%
Newsletter	8%	8%	14%
Edline	6%	29%	28%
Teacher Tells Me	5%	3%	2%
PTA	2%	1%	.2%

The data in Table 2 show several sources for parents' information about their children's schools. The reported use of children's folders as sources of information in middle and high schools is not based on what actually happens in these schools, as folders are generally not used at these levels. Elementary school parents generally do not use Edline, the district's Internet data reporting program, but middle and high school parents did report it as a source of information, albeit less than 30%. However, when parents were asked, "Do you use Edline to track your child's progress?," 15% of the elementary parents

responded, "Yes," whereas middle school (57%) and high school (62%) parents indicated they use Edline to track their children's progress. These data appear to be inconsistent with data responses to parents' sources of information and Internet access. It should be noted that Edline is not available on the elementary level; elementary parents who responded affirmatively may be confused about this program.

On average (77%), parents from all school levels agree that the schools keep them informed about their children's grades and learning and that they understand the meaning of report card grades. Also, 85% agree that the school is diligent in providing assistance with homework and learning. Overall, there is a slight decrease in support as the child moves into high school in terms of grades and report card interpretation. The Edline program appears to be supporting students and their parents to some degree, but later questions brought some issues with Edline to closer scrutiny, as reported below. Most parents do report they have Internet access in their homes. Table 3 shows the frequency of parents' attendance at school events which were publicized via Internet (using parent e-mail addresses) and frequency of contacting the school online, as these are related to home Internet access. The percentages of interaction decrease as the child moves to middle school and then high school. Home Internet access is high.

Table 3. Parent Interaction: Attendance, Contact, and Home Internet Access

	Elementary	Middle	High
School Events Attended			
1-2	23%	28%	25%
3-5	46%	42%	35%
6-10	19%	15%	17%
11+	7%	8%	17%
Parents Contact the School			
1-2	17%	19%	17%
3-5	40%	43%	41%
6-10	27%	25%	27%
11+	12%	11%	12%
Home Internet Access	79%	84%	88%

Traditionally, parents of children in elementary and middle schools attend many of the school's functions. As students progress through the system, parents attend fewer functions than when their children were in elementary school. High school parents more than likely attend many of the athletic events, especially if their children are participating or if the teams are in a winning season. A survey question asked, "In the past school year, how many times have you

contacted the school, for any reason?" The parents' responses show a general reluctance of parents to call the school. It seems that they called the school more often if their children were in trouble or failing their subjects.

In a closer inspection, given the high Internet access, there is an alarming number of parents who are not accessing Edline. The data seem to indicate that parents do not know how to access and use the Edline website. Another point that is clear with a closer inspection of the data is that parents from non-Title I schools who had lived in the district more than 20 years were more likely to have Internet access at home (87%) than Title I parents (55%). Also, more parents who are white (93%) as compared to non-white parents (64%) had Internet access at home. If the schools' administration and faculty are using Edline as a means of communicating with parents and increasing parent involvement, they need to reevaluate the use of this program. The posting of information on Edline by teachers should be 100%, and parents should know how to access it via home computers or through sources such as the library.

As the student moves through a K-12 system, it is less likely for parents to contact the school on an average of 3-5 times a year (46%, 42%, and 35%). Typically, 69% of the elementary school parents attend between 1-5 school events a year, which is similar to the level of attendance for middle school parents (70%). High school parents attend events less frequently (60%). In an analysis from the pilot study about what opportunities are afforded parents at school, only a one-night event, such as a multicultural night or meet the teacher night, is listed as a way to attract high school parents into the school beyond sports events.

Administrators

The vast majority of the principals who responded to the survey noted that they provided their parents with a calendar of events for school activities at the beginning of the school year, provided information about standardized testing and about assistance to low-income families, and invited parents to participate in school committees. Likewise, the majority of principals invited parents to a "Back to School Night" and provided parents with an access number to contact the school. When principals held a parent night, 41% responded that they had an interpreter available for Spanish-speaking parents.

What principals were missing, however, was how the parents were an essential resource in the school and how the school could provide learning for parents. Fewer than 20% of the principals overall found a way to include parents in the school as partners in academic programs or in school governance. Parents were not taken into consideration for workshop opportunities and technology skill development.

Table 4. Administrators Reports of Volunteer Opportunities for Parents

Parents Assist with Music Events	8%
Staff Training in Parent Involvement	11%
Parent Involvement in Staff-related Issues (Hiring)	15%
ESL Courses for Parents	15%
Parent Organization Workshops	16%
Computer Courses for Parents	17%

Interestingly, Table 4 depicts that less than 20% of the principals indicated that their school had some of these opportunities for parents, opportunities that parents cited on previous surveys as areas in which they would like to be involved, including parent education and decision-making. Administrators, on the other hand, felt that parent involvement activities should be social events, like an ice cream social, family game night, or multicultural night. The district team developed a Parent Strategic Plan the previous year, and it was shared with the administrators before the survey was administered. Even though 83% of the administrators reported that they received a copy of the plan, only 27% reported that they had shared this document with their staff. Less than half (37%) of the principals surveyed had participated in any district-level meetings, training, or orientation for the Parent Strategic Plan. When asked their opinion of the potential effectiveness of the district's plan, over 40% of the principals indicated that "IF" the plan became a reality, it would lead to an increase in parent involvement. However, almost the same percentage indicated they are not familiar enough with the plan to have an opinion about the parent initiatives in it.

Most principals reported that the majority of their teachers and other (non-teaching) staff communicate effectively with parents at their school. When asked what the greatest barrier was to increasing parent involvement at their school, almost half of the principals said parents' work schedules or other events prevented parents from participating.

The principals rated three of the six standards on how they would like to see parents involved and how the school district team can provide support – student learning, volunteering (especially tutoring), and decision making and advocacy (such as more involvement in PTA, PTO, or PFA). Some just wrote that they wanted parents to show up and attend events. A few others believed that there was no need for change. When administrators were probed about how they could improve parent involvement in their schools, they addressed the needs of teachers. The common response is that the teachers have too much already "on their plate" and they would like to increase parent involvement without "too much additional burden" on their teachers.

Staff Data

Staff, including teachers and support staff, generally reported that their initiatives fared well in increasing parent communication and involving parents in students' learning. The staff did not believe that parent participation in school governance or volunteering was strong. Staff at the elementary schools perceived that their schools were stronger in parent involvement strategies than staff at the middle and high schools. The opinions of staff contrasted to the principals in that staff wanted to see more parents volunteering, mostly expressed as the desire for parents to help as tutors or with clerical work such as photocopying. Some respondents mentioned parents serving as crossing guards or patrol helpers, or assisting with non-classroom activities such as lunchroom, recess, and field trip supervision. The second area, mentioned with less frequency, was help with student learning. Specifically, staff wanted parents to make sure their children were completing their homework and using good study habits. To a lesser degree, teachers and staff wanted to have improved or increased communication with parents. This included calling or contacting teachers and using Edline for students and parents to access grades and homework assignments. Related to school decision-making and advocacy, staff wrote they would like to see a parent organization such as the PTO formed or simply that parents should "take back the PTO." Another theme indicated the staff would like to see more responsible parenting practices. These practices may include getting children to school on time, helping children take more responsibility for their behaviors, and ensuring that responsible adults provide for children's basic needs such as clothing and nutrition. Though it was not mentioned with as much frequency, some staff wanted parents to have a welcome, safe environment. These expressed desires included helping parents feel welcome at school and the feeling of being safe in the work of the classroom.

Most negative comments in the set of surveys came from certified teachers who expressed frustration about parent involvement, for example, "I don't believe it is our responsibility to teach parents how to be parents." Some believed that the Parent Outreach Coordinator should assume the responsibility of coordinating parent involvement activities. There were also comments, interestingly enough, about teachers who were going to try to find a copy of the Parent Involvement Strategic Plan or their School Improvement Plan and read more about what the school and school district had stated about parent involvement. These comments appear to show that these teachers had little, if any, involvement in writing the School Improvement Plan. A final note is that teachers who did respond to the survey also wrote positive comments. Most of the teachers' positive comments expressed the belief that parent involvement is

"the most important factor in creating their child's academic, social, and emotional success in school and life."

Preservice Teacher Data

Two groups of preservice students received a survey to ascertain their awareness of, their knowledge of, and their professional judgment about parent involvement. At the time of the administration of the survey, preservice teachers had minimal coursework in parent involvement strategies. Their previous course of study only included one module on the relationship between the No Child Left Behind Act and parent involvement. The preservice teachers also had completed a 30-hour field experience helping a teacher in a classroom. Most preservice teachers' coursework taken later, at the end of the junior year and in the senior year, includes integrated parent involvement activities.

Table 5. Preservice Teacher Perceptions: Degree of Involvement by Parent Structure and Communication

Parent Structure and Communication	Mixed Sophomores	Secondary Juniors
Predicted Level of Involvement		
Parents Employed Full-Time	39%	61%
Elementary Parents	96%	89%
Middle School Parents	85%	78%
High School Parents	38%	54%
Single Parents	58%	61%
Young Parents	46%	32%
Did Not Complete High School	42%	25%
Other Adults	46%	60%
Anticipated Methods of Communication		
Memo	81%	85%
Telephone	89%	77%
Informally at School	81%	68%
Individual Conference	31%	55%

As shown in Table 5, the students in the mixed sophomore education law course reported that if they needed to contact a parent, it would most likely be through a memo or through a phone call (85%) rather than in an individual conference (35%). This may reveal some hidden fears of meeting with parents on a one-to-one basis or, perhaps, it is just a desire for expediency.

The students further reported that they predicted that parents who would most likely be involved in schools are those who have children in elementary school (96%) over those who had children in high school (34%). Parents who would be less likely to be involved would be those who are single parents (54%), young parents (42%), those who did not complete high school (38%), or those who are working two jobs (35%).

A similar survey administered to preservice secondary education teachers in their junior year showed varied results. The students reported that if they needed to contact a parent, they most likely would do so through a memo or a phone call (78%) rather than informally at school or through an individual conference (45%). The students further reported that they predicted that parents who would most likely be involved in schools are those who have child in elementary school (89%) over those who had children in high school (54%). Parents who would be less likely to be involved would be those who are single parents (61%), young parents (32%), or those who did not complete high school (25%).

Both the mixed group (with elementary, secondary, and special educaiton majors) and the secondary education group reported that parent involvement is not the answer to major school problems (27% and 32%, respectively). Furthermore, the preservice teachers perceive that parents do not have the training to be involved in school governance (39% and 35%, respectively). The interesting finding with the preservice teachers is that, even before these candidates enter the classroom, they report perceptions about which parents are most likely to be involved in their child's education. It is perhaps disheartening to note that preservice teachers are already forming a style of how they will communicate with parents. They tend to profile the same responses that practicing teachers prefer – a more formal setting or an impersonal memo.

Pulling Together the Common Threads

How can change in perceptions be made in this complex set of findings? Parents who respond to surveys tend to be white, long established in the district, and typically have elementary children in the program. Administrators typically complete the survey as a school rather than as an administrative team. One is left with the question – is this the voice of the administrative team? Teachers and clerical staff give little time to complete the survey and in some cases, no time at all. Preservice teachers already are developing fixed beliefs about which parent will more likely be involved even before they are awarded their license. Is parent involvement stuck in multiple perceptions and lack of interest?

The surveys were instrumental in raising awareness of areas that were not as positive – the perceptions that the staff (teachers and clerical) and principals did not value parent involvement highly. Each school was given the outcome of the multiple surveys as part of the fall faculty meeting, at a strategic time before the school improvement plans were to be submitted to the district. Did this make a difference? Did the school team look at the outcome of the surveys to see the perceptions of parents, teachers, and administrators about parent involvement in schools, especially as volunteers or as members of the school improvement team process? In most cases, change did not happen – yet.

The results are not all dismal. As a point of consideration, even the limited responses or imbalance in the responses shows that there is a start in this district to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how all the disparate groups define parent involvement. Baseline data provide a way to set a professional development agenda, and in this district, that is what has now happened. Since the survey was administered, the research team has met with parent groups, administrators, and teachers to discuss the findings. One area that appears to have some movement toward change is communication. Parents report that they feel comfortable in schools and that the office staff provides a friendly environment. Since the release of the study, teachers have considered in workshops how they are communicating with parents and also if there are ways for parents to communicate with teachers. One teacher realized that her newsletters had sentences that were too difficult for parents to understand. Another teacher found that she wrote a letter home introducing herself but now realizes it is also important for parents to write a letter back introducing their family – not just the student in the class.

The staff survey also provided negative responses about parent involvement such as "I don't think it is really my job or the district's job to teach parents how to parent correctly." Another wrote, "I believe our plates are already full as is, to not add on another program or responsibility, but to allow us the time to teach our students." Others thought parents should be required to spend a certain number of hours in the classroom volunteering. Negative comments strengthen the belief that parent involvement in schools is not well understood. If it is just another task to the countless lists of tasks, it will not be well received by those who have a limited set of strategies, time, and energy. Parent involvement needs to become a natural source of energy that helps the school community flourish. Tools evolved from these negative comments; teacher workshops in the next year used the comments by having teachers "debunk" each statement from a three-point perspective. Take for example the statement, "Parents don't care about what their child is learning in school." In workshops teachers were asked to look at this statement from three viewpoints – "I agree because…,"

"I disagree because…," and "A personal example of this is…." Ironically, when teachers were asked to take a three-sided perspective they tended to have a stronger stance on disagreeing with statements that were negative about parents and supported their beliefs with personal examples.

In the survey, the responses about what roles of involvement parents can serve in schools was as diverse as the responders. Administrators saw parents as tutors, while teachers saw parents as crossing guards or helping with lunchroom duties. Subsequent staff development at the schools have helped teachers broaden their understanding of parents as playing a role at home in helping with student organization or their work, listening to what the student learned in school, and making sure the student is ready for school and has homework completed.

What is not well understood at this time is that parents also are an essential part of school governance. When asked to rate the types of parent involvement preferred in schools, staff and administrators chose parents as volunteers to a much higher degree than parents as advocates or involved in decisions. There seems to be some gap in how parents perceive that they are willing to be involved and how others regard them as not willing to be involved.

A frequent observation often cited from the staff and administrators was a need for more professional development initiatives. It was also apparent that there is a lack of communication and understanding among school staff, teachers, and administrators about parent involvement goals as written in the School Improvement Plan. Preservice teachers also lack professional development exposure, especially if they have not taken a specific course or studied specific parent involvement modules provided in their teacher preparation coursework. Another group who received minimal staff development in parent involvement is administrators, who typically were not required to learn parent involvement strategies in their programs of study. Parents also have a need for training in how to be involved in school governance and how to play a supportive role in the school.

One of the powerful contributions of this study is that is was formulated on the previously cited six PTA standards that provide a structure for the perceptions of various groups. This helps the school district and the university work together with what is currently in place – both perceptually and visibly. The common types within the PTA standards were then used to design teacher workshops to raise teachers' awareness of parent involvement and to broaden their perspectives on how parent involvement in today's world looks different than it did in the generation in which they attended school. The standards also helped in clerical staff workshops in which "front office" staff were given time-efficient strategies to help collect parent data in a friendly and supportive

manner through forms that were written in simplified text and in multiple languages. Above all, the staff used role play to "get into the shoes" of parents and then used these insights to develop a more welcoming environment in the entrance and office of the school.

Breaking Perceptual Barriers

The first step in breaking perceptual barriers is gaining an understanding of the beliefs that are in place. The second step is to provide sufficient evidence to help dismantle teachers' perceptual barriers – the earlier in their preparation, the better. The final step is to bring parents closer to a school environment that works from a positive model of creative acceptance and away from a model of negativity. Can a broader vision be realized that creates a strong model that blends with teacher preparation, teacher education, parent education, and administrator preparation? Perhaps, assuming more adjustments are made in the perception of what effective parent involvement is.

Preservice teachers, teachers, and principals value parent involvement and acknowledge the connection between parent involvement and children's academic success, but it is not a high priority. Communication is important for all of those interviewed, but the template for understanding communication – the parent involvement plan – is not one that is frequently communicated to teachers and staff. It appears that there is a lack of understanding about what the strategic plan is; it also appears that only a few are involved in writing this plan. This, indeed, is a sad commentary on how schools continue to see parents as non-essential members of the school team.

A common theme with those involved in schools – principals, teachers, and clerical staff – is the crying need for professional development. Many of the staff rated their schools low in terms of offering parent involvement-related trainings or development opportunities. Many wrote that the school district should provide training opportunities on what constitutes effective parent involvement. It is time to move the spotlight off of parents and what they are not doing in terms of involvement and move the focus to what we – those in teacher preparation and those preparing in-service professional development – need to start doing in terms of parent involvement training. The workshops that are now being provided have been able to begin to disrupt perceptions that have been held by teachers. Teachers are asked to rewrite their definition of parent involvement three times during a workshop, and by the end, the analysis shows that teachers have broadened their understanding of parent involvement to activities beyond the classroom. That is only a start. In the future, it is hoped that the schools in the study will continue to "dig deeper" into what parent

involvement is – through team level discussion, book studies, and workshops that include parent and even grandparent participation.

One in-road is that preservice teacher education is essential if the teachers of tomorrow – be it the next semester or the next year – are to "hit the ground running" with an understanding of critical points of parent involvement. They need to understand that parents are interested in their child's education whether they are a single parent, a gay parent, a foster parent, a grandparent, or a traditional parent. Preservice teachers need to understand the six types of parent involvement and the opportunities for roles that parents can play in the home, in the school, and in the community.

Parents, too, need to become more vocal, especially in communities like the one in which this study took place. They need to become active members in parent councils, be a presence in schools, and help schools understand that they are not just volunteers but can be essential members on the various governance committees in the school and in the district. To become more inclusive, the IN of "involvement" needs to be all of us – administrators, teachers, office staff, and preservice teacher preparation institutions – as well as parents.

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