

Reflections on Theory and Practice in Parent Involvement From a Phenomenographical Perspective

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Abstract

After defining phenomenography and its appropriate application for examining a culture of parents, we will relate our discoveries utilizing the parents' own voices. Our phenomenographical study of a 26-member involved-parent culture unearthed the conception that involved parents take part in their own and other children's lives both inside and outside of schools. Compelling insights revealed through the conception's five categories (family background, gender-related expectations, reaction to crises, occupational identification, and class/culture) insisted on a redefinition of parent involvement to encompass non-school-related activities. In so doing, the portrait of an involved parent becomes more multicultural than theory and practice currently portrays. Perhaps a greater appreciation of the motivations for and the myriad ways in which diverse people are involved with their own and other peoples' children will inspire educators more positively to welcome all parents into school life.

Introduction

As a student, teacher, administrator, professor, and parent, we have observed some schools' concerted efforts to dissuade parent involvement (Henry, 1996) while many educators claim that "certain" (non status quo) parents are not much interested in their children. Because the literature

restricts its definition of parent involvement (acknowledged key to the success of a child) to school and school-sponsored activities, such prejudices are easily justified. Yet we knew a multicultural array of parents who were active in policy making, school-sponsored activities, home projects, and other *unrelated* school affairs. Therefore, we reasoned that an in-depth qualitative analysis of such a parent-culture would enrich the literature and ultimately have an effect on practice (Conners & Epstein, 1994, 1995; Epstein, 1987, 1992; Lewis & Nakagawa, 1995; Nardine, 1991; Sarason, 1995; Schneider & Coleman, 1993; Southwest Educational Development Lab., 1986; Steely, 1994; Wheeler, 1991).

Thus we asked 26 of these parents from one geographic region to participate in a phenomenographical study, asking how and why they were involved. Our findings engendered in us a profound appreciation for parents' heartfelt commitment to youngsters both in and out of school. To represent these parents, the literature should expand its definition of parent involvement to include all positive interactions with children, and in so doing, the perception of such a parent will become more varied than many had formerly imagined.

Appropriateness of Phenomenography

Because we sought insights about a phenomenon (parent involvement) as certain parents experienced it, we initially considered phenomenology as a research design (Tesch, 1988). The phenomenologist attempts to describe the participants' "life world, the world in which they are immersed" (Marton, 1996, p. 2). Yet, departing from the traditional anthropological or sociological view of culture as evidenced by common "behavior and customs," our largely unacquainted participant pool fit a more modern definition of culture as sharing an ideological commitment—a "knowledge" or "belief system" (Bennett, 1999, p. 38). This enticed us to consider an ethnographic study (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986; Comer & Haynes, 1991; Dym, 1988; Henry, 1996). We could interview selected parents as informants; become participant observers, indeed, as we had already been for years; and collect pertinent documents, triangulating findings to verify results (Bogdan & Bicklen, 1992). Yet, when conducting exploratory parent interviews, the participants themselves compelled us to focus on them, making phenomenography the only choice.

Description of Phenomenography

Founded during the 1970s by a Swedish educational research team comprised of Marton, Dahlgren, Svensson, and Säljö, phenomenography offered

the perfect design. By 1995 at least 50 dissertations and between 500 and 1,000 phenomenographic research reports had been conducted (Sandberg, 1995). Essentially, phenomenography examines the ways in which a culture of participants in a localized setting conceptualizes some aspect of reality as expressed through descriptive analysis categories (Marton, 1981, 1996; Svensson & Theman, 1983).

Phenomenography utilizes phenomenological methodologies, such as interviews, and ethnographic categorization of data to understand a culture of individuals. Also, individuals provide the only source of data. It is not the purpose of phenomenography to describe the culture within its natural setting, as is the case in ethnography. Nor is it the purpose of phenomenography to describe only individual experiences with a phenomenon as in phenomenology. Instead, phenomenography collectively views individual's perceptions as a conception understood through descriptive categories of the group's responses.

A conception represents a relation between the participant culture and a part of its world (Ekeblad & Bond, 1994; Svensson & Theman, 1983). In our research, the relationship consists of the motivations for and experiences with involvement not only with schools, but also with school-age children in general. In describing the conception(s), the researcher identifies categories of description for each, expressed through the culture's ideas and self-reported actions. This process involves differentiation, organization, and synthesis of data (Hasselgren & Marton, 1982; Marton, 1981, 1982; Svensson & Theman, 1983).

To describe conceptions in the form of categories demands that the analysis of data focuses on "what the most fundamental characteristics of conception are" (Svensson & Theman, 1983, p. 38). Phenomenographical conception categories represent a more abstract level of the phenomenon's (parent involvement's) explication compared to that of phenomenology and ethnography, which focus on specific content. Therefore, the purpose of phenomenography is to create a picture of the phenomenon, not a contextual picture of the culture (ethnography), although the various parents' motivations and experiences can sometimes be attributed to classic ethnographic descriptive categories such as race, ethnicity, gender, or class.

Participants and Sources of Data

Our culture consisted of 26 involved parents (according to our expanded definition), but, coincidentally, the resulting culture did resemble the larger community. Nine of the participants derived from a parent-involvement survey that we distributed to each patron in five schools within a selected city. Each school contained equal numbers of students receiving free lunch,

and, together, the recipients represented the city's demographic variety of parents. The remainder derived from our knowledge about certain involved people. The total sample of six men and twenty women ranged in age from late twenties to early fifties. The median age was mid-forties; three of these were outliers—one female in her late twenties and one in her mid-thirties, and one male in his early fifties. All but one had received a high-school diploma. Eighteen had attended a college or university. Seventeen of these had obtained a bachelor's degree. Eight had attended graduate school with seven receiving a master's or terminal degree. Marriage and multiple dependents were accepted norms. Twenty of the twenty-six were married, and most attended church and made some sort of spirituality an integral part of their families' lives. The predominant race was Euro-American; two participants were American Indian; two were African American; and one was Mexican American. Relying largely on occupational position, education, income, and subjective class identification, we determined that the culture was dominated by White, middle-class females, as typically portrayed in parent involvement studies, but the group also included other active parents. Four were working- and one was under-class (Gilbert, 1998; Kohn, 1977), while, regardless of race, ethnicity, or gender, several of the middle- and upper-middle class participants had grown up in under- or working-class families.

We conducted a one- to two-hour interview with each of the participants. Conversational and exploratory, the interviews produced a life history, which focused upon family involvement in the participant's education and rearing. Although additional questions focused on the participants' involvement in school and school-related activities, the respondents told us many stories and related perceptions of events and activities far beyond the school's purview. The rich data from these discourses produced our somewhat serendipitous research findings.

Several factors helped us establish reasonable trustworthiness or fidelity of the interview data, questions such as "Did the participants honestly portray their own parental histories, involvement with their and other people's children, and motivations for and feelings about their involvement?" First, we transcribed the interviews, noting the participants' openness concerning their mistakes and failures as well as their parental successes. Each of us independently analyzed the transcriptions and compared notes, discussing and resolving any points of interpretive disagreement. Second, we consulted participants when confusion about intended meaning arose. Third, we knew and had worked with many of these people, and our continuous observance of them in past years compared their actions with their intentional perceptions (Sandberg, 1995). Fourth, to ensure anonymity and privacy, we renamed all individuals mentioned in all writing regarding the study.

Resulting Conception and Its Descriptive Categories

Initially we were struck with the enormous obstacles that each parent faced when deciding to become and remain involved, especially with adolescent children's lives (Eccles & Harold, 1993). As White middle-class participants Doris and Norma, respectively, exemplified:

In junior high . . . Brian . . . went through a spell where he did not want us around. It was a time when he was finding himself, and we were infringing on his space. I was glad to have friends who had older children, so they would help understand what was going on. I can remember Brian wanting to run away from home.

Or:

One time John was even going to run away because he did not like us bothering him. . . . I think . . . [all of the children] started realizing [near the] . . . end of junior high that she's (mom's) always going to ask where we're going, what we're going to do, who we're going to be with, what happened at school?

The interviews testified that the term *involvement* was almost ever-present, insisting that the main conception was: Involved parents take part in their own and other children's lives both inside and outside of schools. Five descriptive categories illustrated the motivations for and various forms of involvement mentioned in the introduction. The first category, "family background," unearths the motivations for the culture's dedication. The second and third, "gender-related expectations" and "reaction to crises" describe reasons for and types of non-school-related familial involvement with numerous children. Having established a foundation for the culture's involvement, the fourth and fifth categories, "occupational identification" and "class/culture," illustrate the various forms of school activities, social and political, of which the culture was an active part. Often, parents became involved not at school officials' request but because they, alone, identified unattended problems.

The Example of One Participant: All Categories Evident

Kelly's story illustrates each of the analysis categories. A one-time attorney, Kelly, middle-class and White, became a nurse midwife after having her two children. "Giving birth to and rearing children has been the most authentic, spiritual experience I have ever had," she explained. Kelly was doggedly determined to be involved in her two daughters' lives, inside and

outside school, because her parents had not been. They "paid good money to let other people educate me. I only remember my mother going to school one time to protest any of her three children being put in a certain English teacher's class. Dad was never there." Isolated at first, Kelly began attending the gatherings of a neighborhood parent (largely women's) school support group. Also she began "showing up" regularly in both of her daughters' elementary classrooms. The "teachers just got used to seeing me."

When Kelly's older daughter's school decided to neglect the gifted magnet program of which Tilly (daughter) was a part, Kelly became involved in policy making. She and a multicultural array of parents (consisting of Hispanics, African Americans, and Euro-Americans) formed a support group. Members of the group "spend twenty hours a week, and some people in the group more than that time, involving themselves in the school lives of their child to try to make the gifted experience in the public school system a quality one." As a result, Kelly arranged protests, spoke at school board meetings, and met with the site principal and various central office personnel. Becoming frustrated by the principal's lack of commitment and support, she "and another mother called a meeting of parents and students." A letter was drafted to the principal and Kelly "hand-delivered" it. Still gaining no support from the principal resulted in a:

...mass blitz of the superintendent getting faxes and phone calls from lots of parents saying we object to her (the principal's) decision, and we want him (the superintendent) to meet with us to talk about this and other larger concerns.

Although Kelly and her family eventually moved out of the district to escape the problem, the result was a closer bond with her daughter than she had ever had before. "Mom, thank you so much for fighting for me like you would have for yourself," was Tilly's resounding comment concerning the fray. Looking back on her life as a parent, Kelly, the only self-professed agnostic in the culture, confessed that having and rearing her children, "is the closest I have ever come to knowing God."

As Kelly and the other participants told their stories, they created logical reasoning sets (Dahlgren & Marton, 1978). Kelly's own parents' lack of interest in her led Kelly to be dedicated to her own children's lives. Empowered by her Euro-American upper-middle-class background and her professional training as an attorney, Kelly had a sense of efficacy that buttressed her and her parent group's attack against the school system. Kelly's dedication as a mother and nurturer helped her sustain the grueling pace, and one of the byproducts of her work (which for some parents was also a motivation) was a spiritual reward for her efforts. Listening to each participant's story, we mapped "the collective mind" which, like Kelly's, evidenced the descriptive

categories (Marton, 1998).

First Descriptive Category: Family Background.

Other examples of a family history's motivational importance came from participants such as John, a White father who was inspired to reverse his own poor parenting. He described the origins of his commitment this way:

If my father had done something that was really hurtful, or if my mom said something . . . and I knew they didn't realize how much it bothered me, I'd swear to myself I will never do that to my own children. I remembered it and I did [spend] part of my growing up life taking notes of what I didn't like, what happened to me, and what I did like. And . . . because I knew I am going to be in that same boat someday, and I surely didn't want to do what they did to me.

Margaret, White and under- to working-class, had become pregnant as a teenager and decided to have her baby. Although Margaret eventually earned a GED and married her son's father, after having the baby she was alone and dependent on welfare for a time. Margaret envisioned a different experience for her son, Martin, and was adamant about his finishing high school.

I bounced back between three cities in high school. And . . . my dad really wasn't into [me]. . . . When I got older, [Mom]. . . pretty much let me do what I want[ed]. . . . So I skipped school. . . . Martin will go to school, or he is going to be grounded all the time.

Inspired by positive parental models, other participants remembered both of their parents always being involved in their lives. "Dad went to everything," Sarah, a White middle-class participant, recalled. Poor and African American, Wesley's parents were not formally active with his schools, but they played an integral part in the home. He remembered:

Mom and Dad taught so much on the spiritual side of life—what was, and what is, and the possibilities of life. I'll never forget on Friday nights, especially in the wintertime—and we didn't have a TV—we had some wood burning stoves. And it was cold—and light from nowhere so it was dark. And the only thing we'd say, 'Mom and Dad, tell us some of those old stories.' And we sat there with no distractions and—pictures burned in my mind.

Second Descriptive Category: Gender-Related Expectations

Regardless of class, race, or ethnicity, nurturing children was a crucial part of each parent's life. Examples of mothering and fathering largely characterized non-school-related involvement. The culture's female members accepted the larger society's social norms and values that designated them the primary caretakers and nurturers of children. Six of the seventeen married women claimed motherhood, not gainful employment, as a vocation. For example, Sarah had been married to her husband for twenty-three years. An interracial couple, they had faced discrimination, but Sarah's wholehearted dedication to her four children strengthened her over the years and seemed, in many ways, to define her. One interview passage described her perceived role:

On any given night there could be a lot of kids over here. . . . I don't need this house. When we built, we got like a game room upstairs with a pool table and several games in it with the intent that we would open our house to kids that needed to be over here. [We] try to have some place for them to go so they wouldn't be out running around, getting in trouble. . . . I don't know how many people will be [here] for dinner. I really don't mind. . . . I usually plan for ten or twelve.

Two more married, middle-class, Euro-American mothers had also been housewives for a time. Moreover, the other nine married and three single women reorganized their work lives to accommodate their parental role. One White woman, Megan, revealed why:

I hated it. . . . I was petrified of schools. I cried every day coming home. . . . I hated to go to school, and I was determined they [her children] weren't going to. So . . . [As a single mother] I worked a minimum wage job so I would be with my kids, and I don't regret it for one minute. I've owned my own business, and I love that; but I did that after my kids were out of school. And if I had to do it all over I'd . . . go back and work [for] minimum wage to have that time with my kids, to have that closeness. And it's paid off as far as my kids' education.

Grace, a single African American, had five children, one of whom was autistic. Nevertheless, she managed to be a homeroom mother to her children when they attended grade school. But the lack of a car kept her away from middle and high school much of the time, although Grace remained active in her children's lives outside of the actual school environment. Such

efforts went largely unnoticed at the children's schools.

Evidencing less traditional gender-related expectations, fathers were also determined to nurture their children. White and middle-class, Fred became a highly involved parent with the birth of his second child. After experiencing a divorce from his first wife, he moved to another state and did not see much of his first child, a son. Fred eventually met another woman to whom he had been married for eighteen years. They had two children, a girl and boy, with whom he was highly involved. Fred took trips with both of them (individually), helped with homework, attended all of their school functions, and even served on a citizen's advisory committee for their school district. Taking many hours each month, he worked tirelessly for at least six months on the project. Much of the reason for his dedication was making up for what he lost through his divorce. Believing that he had been given a "second chance" and coming full circle with his parenting role, Fred and his current wife have taken his older son's child (Fred's grandchild) for several days at a time. These times were extremely fulfilling for him, almost an atonement of sorts.

Other fathers were also quite willing to assume somewhat non-traditional tasks. For instance, Derek, a Native American participant exclaimed, "I had no problem with picking the Brownies up, having the Brownies at the house, [or] taking desserts." Single men's motives were sometimes questioned, but this did not dissuade them in the least. Chet, one Euro-American, discussed the pressure from hosting:

sleep-overs . . . which . . . [have] been really challenging as a single parent. I always have to—I always clarify, and especially at first, that was difficult, there were mothers that would come to Sally (his daughter) and say, 'What's wrong with your mother?' You know, when she was sleeping over with them. There must be something wrong with your mother for your father to have custody of you, basically was the insinuation. . . . And I take real offense. . . . I know that we're in a male-chauvinistic society, but I feel the reverse. I feel discriminated against by women that look at me and . . . [say], 'You cook and you clean and blah, blah, blah, blah?'

Third Descriptive Category: Reaction to Crises

Also, related more to familial, rather than school-related involvement, traumatic events made parents more dedicated to building strong, nurturing families. When Derek's eleven-year-old daughter was diagnosed with cancer, it was as if he and the entire family were sick. For five years they lived with the fact that her illness might be terminal. They traveled to hospitals

together and stayed in Ronald McDonald houses. Through it all they cried, hoped, prayed, and laughed. Derek remembered:

We always knew [when] we had a big examination and we always all got to stick together. . . . I mean many times we were going into the leading oncology, one of the leading oncologists in the world, where all four of us are tromping into his office. And we just said, 'You know if we're going to get some bad news, then we're going to receive it together.'

Fatigued but persistent, Glenn, a White, single father also responded positively to family crisis. With a divorce, Glenn became the sole caretaker of his son, Adam, who had ADHD, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. Although Glenn did perform a mother/father role, attempting to be a nurturing, understanding parent with each passing year, he longed to share his burden.

I have not, had really, had much of a life, to start personalizing it, in three or four years. The involvement centered around him (son). We had him late in our association, largely because my [ex] wife initially could not have children. . . . I am starting to tire a lot faster than maybe a 37-year old, late to be about his age for a father. I get angrier faster on occasion. . . . I had a hard day at the office or whatever and come home and you want a little let down or something else, a transition period for yourself, and sometimes I don't get it. I would love to have a partner to help me out here, but I don't.

Despite the struggle, Glenn spent much of his time in schools, educating educators and loaning them books about ADHD.

Fourth Descriptive Category: Occupational Orientations

Parents' vocations definitely related to the manners in which they were involved with their own and other children, often moving them directly into school life as volunteers and, rarely, policy makers.

Beginning the discussion, we refer to Vera, White and middle-class, who noted, "It's pretty easy for me to do (help her daughter with homework) because she's in my major, so it's not as difficult. And it's kind of neat because, she's doing what I would like to do, so it's kind of fun to help her . . . give her some ideas." If asked, Vera would gladly have helped other students within a formal school setting.

Bill, a White, middle-class teacher, may have explained some teachers'

hesitancy to invite such participation. And it is through Bill's educational training that his perceptions may be fully appreciated, as he expressed deep concern over one high school's seeming disregard for students:

There was no involvement for parents that I could see at the high school level. Northridge High School, I will speak in past tense, it wasn't run like a high school. It was run like a junior college, like this, 'Well, we don't care if you show up for class or not. Because, frankly, if they don't want to come, we don't want them there.' That is their attitude. So I was greatly distressed at that. Because I couldn't get straight information from teachers, because they literally had no clue.

Jan became a spokesperson for just such youth. White and currently middle class, she had known economic hardship, and allowed that even those who are seen as "lousy [parents] wanted to be involved but didn't have the resources or know how to be. But their neglect and their intentions were not due to a lack of love for their children, a lack of concern for their children." Jan's concern led her to run for and become a school board member.

Ron, a White teacher, helped some parents understand the school policy of placing some children in transition, a year long class sandwiched between kindergarten and first grade.

When they tested him (Andrew) for this transition, I thought it was terrible. I thought they were telling me that my son was stupid. They were telling me, 'He can't go on to first grade after kindergarten;' when I know he is a bright young man. . . I finally saw the light after talking with the teacher and talking with my wife, too. . . They, (the elementary school) have a parent's meeting every year. . . I am invited to speak about my kid who was in transition.

Other examples from the culture illustrated how, through extensions of their work, they drew more patrons into school life, and in so doing, developed a wider understanding of the system's workings. Estelle, a nurse, volunteered her time to perform sight and hearing tests for a group of elementary students.

Last year, being involved in Healthy Youth, where we went out to the schools and screened . . . all the kids in Center City Schools and grade schools. . . Then [we] worked with the kids to get follow up care. . . Our community services actu-

ally organized it, but we trained the nursing staff and there were a lot of volunteers. It was a huge effort. This year we're going to do it again.

Fifth Descriptive Category: Class/Culture

Certain participants were part of a sub-culture within the culture that was determined to bring a multicultural understanding into school life. One such parent, Rosa, had been reared in a traditional Mexican American community, and she took it upon herself to educate teachers concerning differences between Anglo and Mexican American culture. She had grown up in a city with an excellent public transportation system, so her parents did not take her many places. Moreover, it was the entire community that reared each child, not just individual parents. She explained that this tradition could easily be interpreted as noninvolvement, but looked at more collectively, each person was a part of the whole group that seemed to take responsibility for its children. Elaborating further, Rosa said:

[Anglo] people sometimes think that [non-Anglo] . . . parents were not supportive because they would not come (to the school) or they might not get involved as much. But to them, they did not come because they *were* so supportive. That was their way of showing support because they thought that was the school. You do what the school says, [but] . . . they were supportive at home. But . . . they weren't like what the Anglo people would see as supportive, as running up there and getting involved. They thought that was disrespectful to start saying what they thought should happen.

Having grown up in a desperately poor black family of twelve, Wesley (first introduced in category two) viewed the home, school, and community more as one than as separate institutions. Without invitation, he routinely showed up in his children's elementary school classrooms, to tell the stories he had heard countless times at his parents' knees.

Other white participants seemed to defy stereotypical expectations that privileged whites want schools to favor their children and use their influence exclusively to further that end (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). For example, Jan, the formerly mentioned board member noted that, "I can take care of my kids. I could teach my kids if I had to. My kids will do fine. What about these other kids? That is a lot of why I do what I do."

Conclusions and Possible Outcomes

Understanding the culture's conception of parenting was the focus of this phenomenographic research. The participants explained and we came to view their thoughts and actions through their family backgrounds, gender-related expectations, reaction to crises, occupational orientations, and class/cultures. There existed both similar and diverse reasons for and types of parental involvement.

As illustrated in categories one and two, parents like John and Margaret were determined to reverse bad parenting while Sarah and Wesley vowed to replicate and expand on the good models that they had observed. Gender-related expectations often directed involvement which serendipitously expanded certain parents' own self-perceptions. Gainfully employed and homemaking women were dedicated to traditional motherhood in many respects, but their commitment often lead them to expand their own horizons: Kelly became a midwife, Jan a board member. Moreover, men like Derek and Chet were uncommonly nurturing, and in so doing expanded the notion of fatherhood to incorporate stereotypical female traits into their conception of fathering.

Illustrating the third, fourth, and fifth categories, both men and women evidenced variations of response. Crisis seemed to accentuate Derek's and Kelly's parenting skill. Meanwhile, the culture as a whole envisioned its legacy not only through the physical and emotional survival of its own children but other peoples' as well (Lightfoot, 1989). Irrespective of ethnicity or race, such dedication often catapulted parents into schools, participating on an informal and formal basis. Middle- and upper-middle-class participants such as Kelly, Fred, Jan, and Ron used their education, resources, and occupations to help make school policy. Glenn, Grace, Wesley, and Rosa insinuated themselves into school life in more informal ways, educating teachers and students.

As we conclude this report we hope that it will encourage readers to reconsider the all-to-common bias that only certain parents are involved with school-age children in any capacity. Educators might then be willing to monitor more closely the overwhelming presence of wealthier white women in schools and reach out to parents formerly assumed to be disinterested. In so doing, everyone could learn more about the rich mosaic that characterizes many communities, so necessary to the success of schools (Nieto, 2000). And it will have been a phenomenographical approach that began to bring such cultural realizations to light.

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Reflections on Theory and Practice in Parent Involvement

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