

Having Their Say: Parents Describe Why and How They are Engaged in Their Children's Learning

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to identify factors that lead to successful educational partnerships between school staff and families. The method for this investigation focused on asking parents how and why they were involved in their children's education and what factors influenced their participation. The study was conducted at the Patrick O'Hearn Elementary School, in Boston, MA, where, according to yearly survey data collected by the school, at least 90% of the parents participated in one or more of the home- or school-based family engagement activities, despite the school's urban, low socioeconomic setting. By gathering parents' *own* descriptions of their participation in their children's education, this research study sought to develop a deeper understanding of the parents' perceptions of involvement and explored whether their descriptions would match existing typologies or fall outside existing definitions. Another goal of the research was to investigate factors that influenced parents' involvement in their children's education.

The findings from this study strongly support prior research showing that the majority of parents want their children to do well in school and have a desire to help their children succeed. The findings also indicate that O'Hearn parents understood clearly that their involvement helped their children's educational development.

The most significant findings from the study indicate that, according to the

eighteen parents interviewed, several social and school factors influence why and how they are involved in their children's education. According to the parents, when school personnel initiate and engage in practices that welcome parents to the school, honor their contributions, and connect them to the school community through an emphasis on the children, these practices then cultivate and sustain respectful, caring, and meaningful relationships between parents and school staff. While many schools place the emphasis on the programming portion of their family involvement initiative, the data from this case study reveals that when parents have caring and trustful relationships with school staff, these relationships enhance their desire to be involved and influence how they participate in their children's educational development.

The intent of this study was to yield an understanding of factors that contribute to the development of partnership between families and schools. This study provides critical information for parents, teachers, policy makers, and school officials attempting to design and implement family involvement initiatives, as well as implications for further research.

Key Words: home-school partnerships, family involvement, parent involvement

Introduction

In the last decade, there has been a renewed national focus on the role that families play in their children's educational development. More than three decades of research show that, regardless of economic, racial/ethnic, and educational backgrounds, there is a strong link between educational benefits to children and various forms of family engagement such as encouragement to succeed academically, involvement in at-home activities such as help with homework, volunteerism in schools, and participation in governance activities (Cochran & Henderson, 1986; Eagle, 1989; Epstein, 1996; Epstein, Simon, & Salinas, 1997; Gotts, 1989; Henderson & Berla, 1994; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Hewitt, 1978; Ho & Willms, 1996; Jordan, Orozco, & Averett, 2002; McDill, Rigsby, & Meyers, 1969; Melnick & Fiene, 1990; Mowry, 1972; Schweinhart & Weikart, 1992). The educational benefits to children include higher grades and test scores, better school attendance, higher graduation rates, greater enrollment in postsecondary education, and more positive attitudes about school (Henderson & Berla, 1994; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). As a result of this link between family engagement and student outcomes, several of the current whole-school comprehensive reform efforts identify school, family, and community partnership as a component of successful schools. For example, the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Program (Obey-

Porter Act of 1998) identifies “parent and community involvement” as one of its eight design requirements for strategies used by schools committed to achieving high standards for all students.

Despite this emphasis on partnership between schools and families, teachers, principals, and parents attempting to coordinate family involvement initiatives express frustration at low levels of success in creating programs that forge meaningful and lasting connections with families. In some cases, the failure of these programs to take hold is attributed to low levels of involvement on the part of families. This claim of minimal family involvement is particularly heard in school systems serving low-income and minority families (Chavkin & Williams, 1993; Comer, 1980; Davies, 2001; Lareau, 1987; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1978; Lopez, 2001).

Purpose of the Study

Given the new focus on the role of families in their children’s educational development, the purpose of this study was to identify factors that lead to successful educational partnership between school staff and families. The method for this investigation focused on asking parents why and how they were involved in their children’s education and what factors influenced their participation. (Please note that in this study the term “parent” refers to any adult caregiver.) The study was conducted from 1996 to 1999 at the Patrick O’Hearn Elementary School in Boston, Massachusetts. According to yearly survey data collected by O’Hearn, at least 90% of the parents participated in one or more of the home- or school-based family engagement activities. This urban, full inclusion K-5 school served a student body of 220 students in which approximately 67% of the students, based on family income, qualified for free or reduced-price lunch. The school population was racially diverse. Fifty-five percent of the students were African American, 34% were Caucasian, 6% were Hispanic and 5% were Asian. Twenty-five percent of the 220 students were categorized as special needs children. Between 1989 and 1995, the O’Hearn School’s average median percentile scores on the Massachusetts Achievement Test for students in grades one through five rose eighteen percentage points in English (from 44 to 62) and thirty-one points in math (from 48 to 79).

The O’Hearn Elementary School offered a rich setting in which to ask low-income parents about why and how they were involved in their children’s education and to explore factors influencing their participation because the majority of its school population is eligible for free or reduced lunch, it boasts a 90% rate of family involvement, and has demonstrated improvement in student achievement. Such a strong family partnership initiative combined with the urban, low socioeconomic setting provided a unique opportunity to conduct this study, given that the “hard to

reach” or involve label is often bestowed on parents from such communities. The goal of this research study was to develop a deeper understanding of these parents’ perceptions about their involvement in their children’s education. The lack of involvement on the part of low-income parents is often attributed to their “lack of time, interest, or competence to be involved, and that some do not value education” (Davies, 1988, p. 53). By gathering parents’ *own* descriptions of their participation in their children’s education, the study explored whether parents’ descriptions would match existing typologies such as Epstein’s (1988, 1991, 1994) six types of involvement—parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and involvement with the community—or fall outside existing definitions, requiring a more expanded and/or culturally inclusive definition of family involvement (Delgado-Gaitán, 1990, 1994).

Another goal of the research was to investigate factors that influenced parents’ involvement in their children’s education in an attempt to understand the motivations, incentives, expectations, and apprehensions influencing parents’ participation in their children’s educational development and/or in family involvement programs (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995, 1997).

This paper will provide a description of the family involvement initiative at the Patrick O’Hearn Elementary School, a summary of the research methodology, and a presentation of the major findings, followed by implications of the findings for both practice and research.

The O’Hearn School and the Evolution of its Family Involvement Program

Early in 1989, the Patrick O’Hearn Elementary School was selected as the first school in Boston to house a K-5 full inclusion program. In the summer of 1989, William Henderson was appointed the new principal of the Patrick O’Hearn Elementary School (hereafter referred to as O’Hearn).

At the beginning of the school year, Henderson surveyed the teaching staff to identify issues to be addressed as top priorities for the school. The results of the survey overwhelmingly identified the need for an increase in family involvement. Henderson asked the teachers to identify a group of parents from a wide spectrum of backgrounds and experiences as possible leaders. The O’Hearn teachers identified a group of approximately ten parents, and these parents formed an O’Hearn family involvement committee. The committee was racially and socioeconomically diverse, and also represented differences in family composition: single parents, grandparents, and parents of children with and without special needs became members. The committee began to meet regularly to strategize how to reach out to families to encourage their involvement.

Parents' Participation in School Governance

In addition to the formation of the family involvement committee, with the support of Henderson, parents began active engagement in the governance of the school. In 1990, a policy went into effect in the district that allowed Boston schools to voluntarily adopt school site councils as a governance structure. (By 1993, the district policy became mandatory, and councils of principals, teachers, and parents were required to reflect the racial balance of the school population they represented.) Henderson, following through on the staff's request for more family involvement at the school, encouraged staff and members of the parent involvement committee to form a school site council. The teachers and parents agreed, and in 1990, O'Hearn was one of approximately thirty-five schools out of 117 to voluntarily adopt the school site council system of governance. A racially mixed group of seven parents and seven teachers, along with Henderson, began to meet each month to concentrate on issues of teaching and learning at the school.

The Formation of the Family Outreach Program

In the fall of 1991, O'Hearn received a grant from the Institute for Responsive Education to assist the school's efforts to enhance programs of partnership between themselves, their families, and the community. The grant called for the school to form a team consisting of parents, teachers, and the principal, charged with the task of expanding and strengthening the O'Hearn family involvement program. As a result of the funding, the O'Hearn "Family Outreach Team" was formed, consisting of new parents recruited to join the team, members from the previous family involvement committee, a teacher who volunteered to serve on the committee, and Henderson (Palanki & Burch, 1995). The group continued to be diverse, with approximately fifteen volunteer parents and grandparents of African American, White, and Latino backgrounds, and included some parents of special needs children. The grant also provided for a facilitator to work with the group one day a week.

The new O'Hearn Outreach Team was particularly interested in developing relationships with parents who rarely, if ever, made contact with the school. The Outreach Team decided that face-to-face, parent-to-parent contact was a way to begin building relationships between families and the school. The team developed a program of home visitation to families as an outreach strategy. Home visits were not designed to lecture parents on how they should be involved in their children's education, but to deliver the message that families were respected and welcomed into the O'Hearn community.

As a result of the home visitation program, families who had never come to

O'Hearn began coming to the school for the first time (Palanki & Burch, 1995). In the summer of 1992, the Outreach Team met and decided on a new policy for home visits. To develop positive relationships right from the start with families new to the school, the team decided to make home visits to families new to the school at the beginning of each school year. Beginning in the fall of 1992, families of every new child attending the school received a visit from an Outreach Team member.

The Opening of the Family Center

Working in collaboration with Henderson and teachers, the parent committee raised funds and organized the opening of a family center in the school library. In the spring of 1991, the "O'Hearn Family Center" was opened as a comfortable place for families to come and feel welcome in the school, to gather for refreshments and informal conversation on various social and educational topics. The Center was equipped with furniture, a refrigerator, and supplies for coffee and refreshments. As time went on, the Center was used regularly by both the parent group and teachers for events such as special breakfasts, parent/teacher conferences, and welcoming activities for families at the school.

Additional Components of the Family Involvement Program

The Outreach Team members continued to reflect on their work, meeting once a month to share their experiences. One outcome of their meetings was the team's establishment of a community resource area in the Family Center for information on social service agencies and organizations in and around Boston that provided assistance to families. Several other family involvement projects branched off from the work of the Outreach Team, such as the publication of a school newsletter and the creation of an "O'Hearn Family Leadership Team." The Leadership Team was designed to bring together the coordinators of the various projects of the Outreach program, such as the newsletter, the family center, and the home visitation program. Teachers were also members of the Leadership Team, and the group met monthly to continue to work on developing an inclusive and welcoming environment for all O'Hearn families.

Outreach Team members held additional workshops to improve on their own skills as outreach volunteers. Working collaboratively with the O'Hearn staff, they developed new strategies to encourage and welcome families to the school and to offer educational information and assistance to families.

Teachers and parents stated that the involvement of parents early on in the establishment of the inclusion program at O'Hearn helped create a culture at the school that was open to and accepting of *all* levels of family participation. This culture supported a climate where all families, in whatever way they could, were encouraged to be active members of the school community.

Study Methodology

The research methodology chosen for this study was a qualitative, case study design. This case study strategy made it possible to explore, in an in-depth and intimate fashion, why and how parents from the O'Hearn School were engaged in their children's education.

O'Hearn was chosen as the site for the study based on two important criteria. First, the school selected had to have an active family engagement program, with at least 40 to 50 percent of the families being involved in some aspect, either at home or at school, in their children's education. Such a documented rate of participation would offer a pool of families engaged in a range of activities. Second, the school site had to have a population that was diverse racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically.

The centerpiece of the data collection strategy took the form of one-on-one, in-depth interviews conducted in 1996-98 with eighteen O'Hearn parents whose children, based on family income level, qualified for free or reduced-price lunch. Sixteen women and two men were interviewed for the study. The group included nine African Americans, eight Whites, and one Hispanic American. Family composition was diverse and included two couples (wife and husband), five married mothers, and nine single mothers (three were divorcees). Five of the families had children with special needs enrolled at the school.

The majority of the parents agreed to have the interviews conducted in their homes; one parent made arrangements to conduct the interview at her job location. Each parent was asked to sign a consent form indicating his or her agreement to participate in the study and granting permission to have the interviews tape-recorded. All parents were informed that pseudonyms would be used in all write-ups of the study to ensure confidentiality.

The average duration of each interview was two to three hours. Interviews were also conducted with seven members of the O'Hearn School staff, the principal, the secretary, the custodian, and four teachers, to gain important contextual information about the school's culture and history. Observations were done at activities such as special events held for parents, school plays, and various school committee meetings.

Memos, field notes, and interview transcripts were analyzed to identify clusters of experiences and events that contributed to and defined coding schemes. Codes emerged both from the research questions and from the data itself. The data was organized for analysis using Folio Views, a data based management system.

Major Findings

Five major themes emerged from the parents' stories about why and how they are involved in their children's education and the factors that influence their participation. The first three themes shed light on why and how parents are involved. Themes Four and Five address factors that influence parents' involvement.

Theme 1. Parents wanted their children to do well in school, and they had a genuine and deep-seated desire to help their children succeed academically.

The stories told by the eighteen parents interviewed for this study strongly support the research stating that the majority of parents, regardless of race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status, are intensely interested in their children's education (Chavkin & Williams, 1993; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Hidalgo, Siu, Bright, Swap, & Epstein, 1995; Rich, 1988; Ritter, Mont-Reynaud, & Dornbush, 1993). Parents expressed a genuine and deep-seated desire to help their children succeed in school. Parents wanted their children to succeed academically and were motivated to do what they could to ensure their children's academic success. Many parents stated that they wanted to instill in their children a joy for learning and a sense that school is special. Betty Washington, a single mother with six children, three of whom were attending O'Hearn, and Sandi Pinsky, married with one of her three children attending O'Hearn, spoke about their desire for their children to understand the importance of a good education and of doing well in school.

I want [my children] to start knowing that they have to go to college and high school. School's not an experiment. [Our kids] know how important it is to learn. Learning doesn't stop at school. It's also being reinforced in the home.
Betty Washington

It's [the parents'] job, too. You can't just send [your kid] to school and think your child is going to learn on their own. You need to get involved and help out. You can't just plant the seed and expect it to grow on its own. It's not going to happen that way. I'm trying to get more involved for my daughter. I want to make sure that my kids do well. If my daughter needs help, I want to be able to give it to her or get it for her. I feel it is important. I'd like them to be able to do the best that they can so when they get older, they have options and choices and need not to just think about surviving. *Sandi Pinsky*

The notion that lower income parents "don't care" about their children's education was challenged by the stories told by the O'Hearn parents about their desire to

do what they could to help their children succeed academically.

Theme 2. Parents understood clearly that their involvement helped their children’s educational development.

Parents described seeing differences in their children’s behavior and feelings about school as a result of their at-home and/or at-school involvement. Their children’s reactions to their involvement served as a motivating factor for parents’ continued support. Charlene Ewing, a single parent with two children at O’Hearn, spoke about the connection between her involvement and her children’s future academic success:

Parents who feel that their lives are too busy to really get involved—I’m sure they have hectic schedules. But what’s more important than your child’s education and the training that they’re going to receive? Do you really want someone else to mold your children and determine what they’re going to be like? Being involved with what’s going on with [my children] in school, to incorporate things at home with what they’re learning in school, knowing their teachers, the students they’re with, and the students’ parents, I think, will help me keep them interested in school and help them to enjoy learning. I think with a little bit of guidance and the parents’ involvement, it can make a world of difference about what the kids are going to learn and how they’re going to view learning.

Theme 3. Parents were involved in their children’s education both at home and at school. Many were involved in ways not recognized by school staff with a narrow vision of what constitutes legitimate participation.

All of the parents interviewed for this study were involved purposefully in some way with their children’s educational development. The involvement of parents captured a wide range of activities taking place both at home and at school.

At-Home Involvement

Verbal Support and Encouragement to Do Well in School. All of the parents interviewed for the study engaged in this type of activity. This type of at-home involvement included verbal encouragement and support to perform well in school, as well as frequent reminders to their children about the importance of receiving a good education. Parents made statements similar to the following:

We tell them, “You have a lot of school and you don’t stop school until you

get your undergraduate degree.” They’re getting the foundation at O’Hearn, which is a good one. We’re putting them in the right direction and trying to teach them how to grasp what they need to grow up to be good men. *Patty Harris*

Other examples of this type of verbal support included asking the children how things went in school that day and praising them for good academic performance. Rosette Lincoln, who has two special needs children at the school, and Kelly Ferena, a mother of three with one special needs child at O’Hearn, talked about the importance of giving their children verbal support and encouragement:

I find out what they’re doing in school. Every day when they come back from school, I ask them how was school today, [and] what did they do. You can learn a lot from the child by doing that. They’re always going to tell you something. If something happened, they will always tell you. Even if you don’t hear it from the teacher’s point of view, you can hear it from [the children]. The best thing to do is just to ask them every day after school, “How’s school, what did you do, and what did you learn?” *Rosette Lincoln*

Samantha comes home and she gets so excited about something she made at school. When the notebook comes home and she shows me, I’m always looking at her and saying, “This is fantastic, Samantha, you’re doing the best!” I have to keep doing that, I have to keep reassuring [her]. *Kelly Ferena*

Charlene Ewing also talked about how she employs verbal support to help with her children’s academic development:

I try to be involved in talking about what they’ve done during the day and then try to take things that they’ve talked about and done in school and incorporate it with things we do at home.

Many of the parents stated that this type of verbal encouragement was important as an indicator to their children that they, as parents, were serious about the importance of school and receiving a good education.

Verbal Support and Encouragement to do Homework. All of the parents described providing verbal support and encouragement for their children to work on homework. This support included firm directives to their children to do their homework, setting specific time schedules for homework completion, verbal support and coaxing the children not to “give up” and to complete the work, and providing space for the children to work on homework.

“Do your homework. Do your homework.” I say it all day. All day, all night. I tell them, “You’ve got to do it now, because this is your education.” When they don’t want to do it, I say, “I don’t care what your attitude is, you’re staying in school and you’re going to do good.” *Jean Handy*

Direct, One-On-One Help with Homework. In addition to providing verbal support for homework, many of the parents, thirteen out of eighteen, provided direct one-on-one coaching and help with homework. These parents described helping their children with assignments in reading, math, and science. Patty Harris, a divorcee with two children at O’Hearn, and Sandi Pinsky discussed how they provide direct help to their children with their schoolwork.

We are involved in every aspect of their education, both me, and their father. At home, by reading to them and helping them with their arithmetic, every possible aspect that has to do with education, both he and I are very involved. *Patty Harris*

I just basically try to take the time out with my daughter to try to help her out with her reading, and I work with her on her math. I just basically show her how to do things, and then try to give her the space to do them. *Sandi Pinsky*

It is important to note that many of the parents in the sample expressed a desire to be more effective in helping their children with schoolwork. Some parents stated that they felt unable to provide their children with helpful feedback because they were stumped by the assignments and/or were unclear about how to be helpful to their children. Jean Handy, a single mother of two with one child at O’Hearn, described how she sometimes contacted O’Hearn teachers when she needed advice on how to help with her child’s homework. On other occasions, however, she admitted being at a loss to help with schoolwork:

Some things they do at school, I forgot how to do. That’s why I’m going back to school. Sometimes I write the teacher a note, but the parts of the work I don’t know, I ask her. Other times, I call the teacher and ask her, “How do I do this, because my son is stuck, and my memory is gone.” I tell you the truth, sometimes I just look it over and I’m like, “Okay, I’ll check it,” but truthfully, I never have time to check and there’s nobody to really help me out on that.

Some parents stated a desire for teachers to provide more information to parents

about how to help their children with schoolwork.

Another form of direct one-on-one involvement was parents' help with motor or auditory exercises for their children with special needs. Four of the six parents in the study whose children had special needs discussed providing one-on-one assistance to their children with special movement exercises or other specific activities. For example, Barbara Fisher discussed the one-on-one assistance she provides to her son, who is autistic:

I do all sort of exercises with my son, on the weekends, after school. We do ABCs, we talk in signs. I do as much research as I can on my own on the different therapies that will help him, any learning techniques that might help him.

Involvement in Outside Activities. A few of the parents described involving their children in outside activities such as Bible study, Boys' and Girls' Clubs, sports teams, or after-school enrichment programs. They felt that these activities enhanced their children's educational experiences and fully supported their children's involvement in these activities. For example, Betty Washington talked about how her husband's way of being involved with her children's education includes working with them on Bible verses as well as their homework:

He just started this this year: he would put up a Bible verse up on the board that we have in the living room, and [the children] have to learn the Bible verse. When we have devotion three to four times a week, we go over the Bible verse that he puts up. When he's home, once a week on his day off, he may ask them a question about it, "What does that verse mean?" He [also] helps them with their homework. When he is here, he takes the role of taking up the slack for me so I don't have to do it alone.

Other parents reported involving their children in outside activities:

My children have always loved books, so we've always encouraged reading with them. They also do a lot of things, other things to help their learning. They go to art classes outside the school, and they've been doing Suzuki violin since they were three. They're both very involved in that now. My oldest son is in an orchestra group as well. So, they do a lot of activities outside of the school. *Ellen Martin*

I try to get my children involved in cultural activities in the community. They go to the Boys' and Girls' Club. I'm just trying to get them off the street and

have something for them to focus on. *Jean Handy*

The Role of Extended Family in At-Home Activities. It is important to note the role of extended family members in at-home activities. Parents interviewed for the study described how extended family members, such as grandparents or siblings, play a key role in many of the at-home supportive activities. Of the parents interviewed for the study, three had extended family members living with them. All three described how extended family members also provided verbal encouragement or support to children to do well in school and verbal support with homework. Extended family also provided a type of indirect support by providing childcare while parents attended school activities. This role of extended family is often overlooked in studies of family involvement and is a topic that requires further research.

At-school involvement

At-school involvement ranged from attendance at school events and volunteering at the school to participation on school governance committees. Many of the parents commented that their participation in at-school activities fluctuated over time as a result of scheduling and time constraints.

Attending School Events. The most consistent form of at-school involvement reported by the parents was attendance at O'Hearn school events such as orientation, held at the beginning of every school year; O'Hearn open houses, held twice a year; and large-scale school performances, also held twice a year. Parents stated that the orientation and open house events offered them opportunities to meet with teachers to talk about their child's progress and also to meet and talk with other parents. Many reported that it was at the orientations and open houses that they received support and encouragement from other parents and school staff to participate more actively in other school activities. Parents reported that sign-up sheets were always made available at these events to solicit parents' participation or interest in future school events.

Many of the parents stated that they attended the two large-scale school performances held each year. They said that the performances were enjoyable and their children insisted on their attendance at these events.

Informal Visits to the School. Many of the parents took advantage of the school's open door policy and described their informal, unannounced visits to the school. Parents stated that, for example, when they came to the school to pick up their children, they would come by early enough to stop by the front office, speak to the school secretary or principal, glance into their child's classroom, or chat with parents and teachers in the hallway or in the Family Center. Because of the open door

policy, several of the parents made statements similar to the following about feeling free to drop by the school:

The O'Hearn is like open doors. Any time you want to come visit, be our guest. So Friday, I haven't told [my son] yet, I'm going up to the school Friday. I'm just going to see what my kids are doing when I'm not there, to see if they listen to the teachers or what. "Surprise, Mommy's here." *Jean Handy*

Communication with Teachers. All of the parents who were interviewed reported having phone or face-to-face communication at least twice a year with O'Hearn teachers. Approximately half of the parents had regular contact, at least once a month, with O'Hearn teachers. Parents stated that the O'Hearn's open-door policy, the frequent events at the school, and teachers' willingness to have flexible schedules to meet with parents created opportunities to have regular contact with O'Hearn teachers.

Visits to the Family Center. Although many of the parents stated that they were unable to visit the Family Center because of time constraints, several reported that they had, at one time or another, frequented the Family Center to meet other parents, attend workshops, or gain educational information of benefit to themselves and their children. Many reported that their visits to the Family Center occurred more often when they were new parents to the school. Parents reported being attracted to the Family Center because of the support and knowledge they gained there from other parents and staff. This activity provided networking opportunities for parents to meet and speak with other parents concerning a variety of issues. Charlene Ewing described how the Family Center gave her a place to share information with other parents in a comfortable and supportive setting.

Some parents here encouraged me to come to the Family Center. I was under a lot of stress and things were kind of crazy at home. When my daughter first started coming here in 1992, my son was about 6 months old. He was a very, very active child, very demanding, and this behavior was new for me, because my daughter was nothing like that. I would come for a little peace of mind at the Family Center. It really helped me. I got ideas from parents on certain problems I had with my children. One of the parents that I enjoyed talking with gave me a lot of good ideas. I met her through the Family Center, and that was real nice. I enjoyed the association with the parents. Also, there were other young children there that my young one could interact with. That was also exciting; most other schools I had been to, he couldn't come with me. So here was a place where he could come and be comfortable and I could relax.

Volunteering. Some of the parents reported being active as volunteers either in the classroom or as chaperones for school field trips. Parent volunteers served as classroom helpers to teachers, working with small groups of children on reading assignments or assisting with recreational activities. Volunteering of this kind was heavily dependent on parents being available. Most of the parents who described participating in this type of activity were mothers who worked part-time or were not employed outside of the home. Among the mothers who described volunteering either sometimes or often, the group was racially diverse (four African American, two White, one Hispanic). A few of the mothers interviewed stated that their husbands had occasionally volunteered to act as chaperones on school field trips.

Participation in School Committees, Governance Groups. Most of the parents in the sample reported attending at least one school governance meeting—such as a parent council or school site council meeting—per year. Most of the parents who seldom attended these meetings cited scheduling conflicts and home responsibilities as the main reasons for their inability to attend. A few parents stated that lack of interest in school governance affairs kept them from attending the meetings on a regular basis.

Some of the parents reported that they had, at one time, been members of O’Hearn committees and attended meetings regularly, but because of scheduling conflicts, had to discontinue this level of participation. Two parents reported that, after years of sitting on school governance committees, they became “burnt out,” and therefore “retired” to give other parents a chance to do committee work.

Of the six parents who stated that they often participated in school governance, five had been or were officers or chairpersons of governance committees at the school at the time of the study. The group of parents holding committee positions was diverse (three African Americans, one Hispanic, one White).

Connections Between At-Home and At-School Involvement

The analysis of the data presented by parents about how they were involved indicated a link between parents’ at-home and at-school involvement. Parent volunteers or parents who reported having some contact with school staff through phone conversations with teachers, informal visits to the school, attendance at school activities, or visits to the Family Center, were among the group of thirteen parents able to provide direct, one-on-one homework help to their children. The five parents not providing direct one-on-one help were unable to participate in at-school activities other than attendance at plays and open house events. The parents in this latter group were also most vocal about wanting advice and help from school staff about assisting their children with homework. The at-home activities of those parents who had some regular exposure to the school community tended to be

more directive, more focused, and more in line with the types of work being done at the school. These parents exhibited a knowledge of what was taking place in the classroom.

This finding raised the possibility that parents who had regular informal or formal contact with various members of the school community—other parents, teachers, and other school staff—were exposed to subtle and direct cues and information that increased their capacity to help with learning activities at home. Informal contact included activities such as seeing the children's completed work on the walls of the school, overhearing conversations by parents and teachers about homework assignments, stopping by the classrooms to observe what the children were learning, and having conversations about the children with other parents in the Family Center. Formal contact included scheduled appointments to talk to teachers about their child's academic performance, as well as attendance at scheduled workshops at the Family Center. Both kinds of activities contributed to building parents' capacity to assist their children at home with educational activities. This apparent link between parents' capacity to provide assistance to their children at home and their connection to members of the school community highlights the impact of on-going communication and the existence of sound relationships between families and other members of the school community, particularly school staff.

Theme 4. Social factors emanating from the parents' own experiences and history influenced their participation.

The eighteen parents' stories revealed a significant influence of social factors affecting why and how they were involved in their children's education. For each parent, social factors such as their own educational experiences in school, their own parents' involvement while they were in school, their beliefs about family involvement as shaped by cultural norms and values, and additional responsibilities and time commitments influenced the manner and style of their involvement. Each parent constructed a unique role in his or her children's education shaped by the combined influence of these various factors.

Parents' Own School Experiences

Several parents described how their own performance in school had a profound influence on their desire to be involved in their children's education. Many of the parents stated that they did not make the most of their K-12 or higher education experience.

I didn't have a very good attitude about [school]. I felt like, "Get over and get out," and that's what I did. I'm going to make things different for my kids.

Charlene Ewing

Some parents stated that, while in school, they focused on their social lives and did not take their education seriously. Others said that they were lured into the workforce before graduating from high school; some dropped out of school to raise children; some said that they missed out on higher education opportunities.

Their Own Parents' Involvement

Parents described how their own parents' level of participation in their education was a major influence on why and how they were involved in their children's educational development. Forty-four percent of those interviewed described their parents' involvement as active, 17% said that their parents were marginally involved, and 39% reported that their parents were rarely involved. Whether their parents' participation was extensive or nonexistent, all of the O'Hearn parents reported that this factor influenced their own involvement.

Rare or Marginal Involvement. Of the parents who reported that their parents were involved rarely or marginally, many stated that they believed that their parents were supportive in spirit, but for various reasons, their active, visible support was absent. Several said that their parents were too busy working and/or raising families to get involved in school affairs. Others speculated that their parents were intimidated by school personnel.

My mother, she wasn't able to be involved. I know she did the best job she could; she was more into working to make sure we got into the decent schools. I think spending time with my daughter is more valuable than any gift I can give her. I'm not saying what my mother did was wrong, that's the way she decided to do it. But I remember as a child, I wished she was there for some of those extra activities [the school] had. I knew she couldn't be, but that didn't help me or stop me from wishing that she could be. For that reason, I think I get involved a lot. *Bernice Lindsay*

My mother and father, they never really made major time to be involved. You know what I really think it was, I think they were afraid to come into the school. I really do. Maybe their parents didn't come into their school when they were coming up either. There was no reason why neither one of them couldn't take forty-five minutes, an hour, or two hours to come in and see how we were progressing. They never did that. I really feel like they were intimidated or they felt afraid to approach the teachers, because the teachers had a degree. "They are teaching our children how to read and write and so

who are [we] to come and look over their shoulders?” I really feel like my parents had that kind of attitude. *Alma Dixon*

Despite understanding the reasons for their parents’ lack of involvement, some expressed disappointment that their parents took so little interest in their education. No involvement on the part of their parents appeared to intensify the respondents’ own desire to participate in some way in their children’s education. Charlene Ewing and Betty Washington discussed the impact of their parents’ lack of involvement on their school performance as well as on their motivation to help their own children:

I don’t have good memories of school. My parents weren’t involved in my schooling at all, they didn’t even check to see if I had homework or anything. That helps me want to be more involved with my children and what’s going on. I think with a little bit of guidance and the parents’ involvement, it can make a world of difference about what kids are going to learn and how they’re going to view learning. *Charlene Ewing*

Because I didn’t see any involvement from my parents, because they were constantly working, I guess I kind of strayed away from education here, there, and everywhere. Because of that, I feel that if I constantly stay in my children’s education and show them it can be fun while you learn, then they will see that I’m involved in [their] education. Maybe that will give them a little more support. *Betty Washington*

Active Involvement. The parents who reported that their families were actively involved in their education described a link between the example set by their families and why and how they were involved. Parents described how their parents’ involvement planted a seed in them about the importance of participating in some way in their children’s education. Their family members’ involvement also provided them with models of parental participation.

My father really promoted education. He pushed us on to do our best. They always promoted education, my family. I have older sisters as well, and I had one particular sister whom I was very influenced by. She did a lot of activities with her kids at home. I think her kids were all reading at three. They were all reading at home when they were really young. She did so much for them. My sister was involved in a lot of things at home and within the school. My parents promoted [education], my father especially. They always promoted education in my family, so most of my [siblings] did something after high

school; they attended college or took some other courses. *Ellen Martin*

Most of the parents who reported that their parents were involved during their elementary school years noted that parental participation tapered off as they progressed through middle school and high school. Some parents stated that this diminished support contributed to their own poor performance in high school and/or missed post-secondary educational opportunities. Some said that this personal lesson made them committed to staying involved in their children's education:

At the end of my grade school education, I wasn't interested in going to college. I hated school. There was a lot of conflict for me in school, so I just said, "No, just forget it, I'm not going to college." I don't remember my parents ever arguing with me about that, or anyone ever saying, "Oh come on, you have to." I look back on that now, and I think that's crazy. My parents should have made me go to college. The opportunity was there. I was smart enough to go. As I see it now, I just never learned the discipline of making the commitment to my education and working hard and following through. I've been thinking about this a lot now with my son. I see a lot of that same stuff in him. I want him to have some pride in achievement and feel that that's important. I don't know how to create that in him, but it was never created in me. It gives me a desire to do it differently. *Kitty Jacobs*

An Intergenerational Dynamic of Family Involvement. The parents' stories about their own parents' influence suggest an intergenerational dynamic regarding how they formulated their role in their children's education. Parents reported that their own parents' involvement, whether extensive or minimal, as well as how their parents were involved, influenced their own drive to be involved, and in some cases, the way they chose to be active. This finding suggests that working with today's parents on how they can assist in their children's academic development may have long-range effects: how parents are involved today creates a model for how their own children will be involved in the future.

The Influence of Cultural Norms and Values

Five of the parents interviewed for the study were born outside of the United States, in the Caribbean, Latin America, or Europe, where they completed all or a portion of their schooling. These parents reported that the role expectations for family involvement were vastly different in their native countries than in the United States. In their countries, parents were expected to teach their children to have a

healthy respect for education and teachers. Parents were not, however, expected to get involved in the affairs of the school. In some cultures, at-school involvement, such as parent/teacher conferences or involvement in school governance, was unheard of and often seen as disrespectful to the teachers' and principal's authority.

In Haiti, there was not family involvement in the way it is here, with parents going to the school. The way I was raised was that my parents, especially my mother, always made sure that my homework was done. She made sure that I was doing well in school. She always checked my report card, things like that. It was different; there was no involvement like having to go to the school and stuff like that. If something was wrong, the school had the authority to correct it. *Rosette Lincoln*

My parents were quite involved in my education, but they weren't involved in the school at all. They probably went to a parent/teachers meeting, but they never had anything whatsoever to do with the school. That's the way it was. In my country, nobody ever had anything to do with the school. *Ellen Martin*

Some parents commented that they were surprised by expectations that they should attend school open houses or parent council meetings:

The one thing I've learned since I've come to this country is if you don't jump in, you're not seen. You can stay on the fringe forever. Unless you jump in and make yourself be heard and noticed, you can be on the fringe. We didn't realize that you had to walk in and sit in the classes to see what's going on. I was kind of surprised by that, that you could actually go in and out of [classes]. *Jack Martin*

Parents stated that the cultural norms they grew up with influenced how they envisioned their role with their own children here in the United States.

External Constraints

Work schedules, responsibilities of caring for children and elderly parents, and the lack of transportation affected parents' ability to be involved in certain types of family involvement activities. All eighteen parents reported that coping with personal demands and responsibilities influenced how they were involved. Day-to-day obligations such as employment, childcare, eldercare, and parents' own attempts to

go back to school were mentioned as challenges to participating in their children's education either at home or at school. Some parents expressed disappointment at not being able to maintain past levels of participation.

I used to go to the school when they had shows, dance shows—all the shows that they had at the school. I liked to go, but have stopped because I am working. One of my son's friends—his mother used to call me and get me involved with things. I'd always have to work. She said to me, "Oh, I wish you could be at the school." I said to her, "I wish I could be there, too." When my first one was going to O'Hearn and my second one went right after him, I was very involved with the school. I was always going up to the school. Oh my, I miss it so much. *Jean Handy*

Changes in personal circumstances also altered the extent and manner of parents' involvement. Many parents described how they went from being involved heavily in activities such as helping their children with homework, volunteering in classrooms, participating in Family Center events, or attending committee meetings, to very little direct involvement when circumstances in their lives changed.

Theme 5. School factors, specifically those that were relational in nature, had a major impact on parents' involvement.

An important finding that emerged from the parents' stories was how school factors, especially how the school community engages with families, influence why and how parents participate in their children's education. When school staff engaged in caring and trustful relationships with parents, recognizing parents as partners in the educational development of children, these relationships enhanced parents' desire to be involved and influenced how they participated in their children's educational development.

Parents described a process by which these relationships were formed. This process has been operationalized by the O'Hearn School, whereby the school community *welcomed* parents into the school, *honored* their participation, and *connected* with parents through a focus on the children and their learning.

Borrowing a concept from family systems literature, this "Joining Process" (Minuchin, 1981) of welcoming, honoring, and connecting with families created a school community in which parents felt like "members of a family." Parents responded to this culture by participating in their children's education in ways that they themselves had never foreseen and by becoming loyal members of the school community. The following section describes the Joining Process and outlines the impact of the process on parents' engagement in their children's education.

The Three Components of the Joining Process

Welcoming. Parents reported that the process of welcoming created a sense of belonging, one in which parents felt that they belonged to the school and also that the school belonged to them. This sense of belonging motivated parents to be more active in their children's schooling. Parents described several practices that illustrated how the welcoming of families was achieved and its impact on their involvement. For example, parents stated that the O'Hearn community—the principal, teachers, other staff members, and parents—communicated with them in ways that welcomed them and demonstrated a sincere desire to include parents in the life of the school:

When your child first starts the school, they have other parents call you up and welcome you to the school. That's really nice. Then they have a new parent breakfast, which they have every year. I managed to drag myself there with my screaming child. He was really good there, and I met many of the parents that I see all the time now, and everybody was very friendly. That started the interest for me, to see how involved everyone was. I felt like it was a "welcoming-into-the-school" kind of thing, and that made me feel like, "Look at all these people, doing all this for the parents." So I try to do whatever I can whenever they have parties, make food or something. I do something to help out. That [event] brought me out to go ahead and do what I could for the school, too. *Sandi Pinsky*

If [the school] is not a friendly place, you would have to push yourself into being involved. O'Hearn has given me the opportunity to be involved. By being a friendly place, it's been easy for me to do it. I'm not fighting for permission. Everything is there for me to know. *Rosette Lincoln*

Some parents commented that the actual physical environment of the school had contributed to their feeling welcome when entering the school building. The colorful walls decorated with numerous examples of children's artwork and the cleanliness of the school all added to the feeling of welcome.

The parents made clear the value of the welcoming process on the building of positive relationships between families and school staff and its influence on why and how they were involved in the school community.

Honoring. Parents described this second component of joining as one in which members of the O'Hearn community "honored" families by respecting and recognizing their strengths and affirming parents' efforts to be involved in their children's education. Parents described how they felt honored by members of the O'Hearn

community when any effort they made to be involved was validated and when they were treated by school staff as true partners in the educational development of their children. Parents also stated that they were encouraged and supported by the principal and other members of the school staff to work on various decision-making committees and projects and, in doing so, they were often paired with more experienced parent volunteers. This encouragement and support influenced parents' involvement, in some cases motivating them to become involved in ways that they ordinarily would not.

Parents stated that school staff asked for and gave information about the children's learning in a respectful and caring manner, and that parents' comments about their children were always listened to and heard by teachers. Many parents said that they felt respected and validated when their ideas and concerns were heard and taken seriously. Even if teachers and parents disagreed over an issue, most parents felt that teachers were always willing to listen and took parents' feedback seriously. Parents stated that relationships with staff were reciprocal, with ideas and feedback shared in a way that gave parents' contributions equal weight and importance. Parents spoke about the school staff's practice of honoring and respecting the voices of parents:

I chose the O'Hearn School because it was clearly the only public school available to me where parents got any respect and counted, and where teachers and parents and kids really worked together in a genuine way. *Kitty Jacobs*

The O'Hearn School asks for [parents'] participation and advice all of the time. It seems like the school lets the parents make the decisions and that makes the parents become more involved. [Parents] feel like they're really a part of it. At the meetings, it's just like a family. Issues [are] being discussed, parents talk about what we feel is best for our child or for the school as a whole. Then [we] vote on it. If you have any suggestions, they're always open to that. *Betty Washington*

The honoring component of the joining process focused on recognizing parents as equal partners in the educational development of their children. Parents reported being more likely to continue or even enhance their involvement in their children's schooling when their efforts were respected and validated by the school community.

Connecting. O'Hearn school staff and families put children at the center and connect on education issues of common interest designed to improve learning opportunities for the children. Parents reported feeling connected to the school

community through the school's emphasis on improved teaching and learning for all children. The focus of all of the family involvement activities, from school plays to open houses, was improved educational achievement for all the children. Parents stated that the O'Hearn School staff cared for and had high expectations for the children. This show of caring by O'Hearn staff for not only the educational achievement, but also for the overall welfare of the children connected the parents and school staff.

They made me feel like they were there to teach my son. They were always giving me little insights that they saw about him. I knew they were paying attention to my son, that they knew my son. That made me feel good. They knew what his strengths and his weaknesses were. They were telling me things about him that I would have told them, which was so cool. Before the words were coming out of my mouth, they were telling me about his strengths and weaknesses and what should and shouldn't be done. I said to myself, "They know my son." *Barbara Fisher*

I have three children at the O'Hearn School. The closeness the teachers seem to have with my children makes me want to be more involved in their lives. The teachers seem more concerned, more involved in the children's education. That makes you want to be more involved in your child's life, when it comes down to school. *Betty Washington*

The connecting component, which placed the children's education at the center, brought together parents and school staff. Parents and staff rallied around a goal that was meaningful and important to both. Parents became loyal advocates of the school when school staff demonstrated that they cared about and were committed to educating their children. The focus on the children was what kept parents connected, involved, and feeling like important members of the school community.

Implications for Practice

Dispelling the Myth that Parents Do Not Care

The O'Hearn parents' stories suggest that school personnel should not assume that parents from different ethnic backgrounds and/or socioeconomic groups (1) care less or have dismissive attitudes about their children's education, or (2) have little understanding of the importance of their involvement in their children's education. Schools adopting the attitude that parents "don't care" about their

children's education may be hard pressed to create environments conducive to cultivating effective partnerships between parents and schools.

Recognizing Various Forms of Family Involvement

One of the findings from the study suggests that parents may be involved in their children's education in ways not recognized by schools with a narrow vision of what constitutes legitimate participation. School staff that only recognize as legitimate forms of involvement school directed and sanctioned activities that center on involvement at schools, such as fundraising, volunteering in classrooms, or participating on school leadership teams, may limit the ways that parents can be involved. These school communities may overlook ways that families with diverse backgrounds and cultures are involved in their children's education. By not recognizing diverse forms of involvement that may take place beyond the school building and by not providing different outlets for family participation, schools may unwittingly restrict both the numbers of parents and the ways that parents can be involved in their children's schooling. The study findings suggest that the lack of options for rather than a lack of interest in involvement may limit parents' participation.

Understanding the School's Role in Cultivating Family Engagement

One of the most important findings to emerge from the O'Hearn parents' stories is the major role school factors play in influencing parents' involvement. The process of joining with families creates an environment where many of the parents' past negative school experiences and/or feelings of alienation are diminished. Validation of any contribution made by the parents helped them to feel like important contributors to the school community, increasing their efficacy and their sense of confidence in being able to help their child (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 1995, 1997). Connecting with parents by focusing on the children and their learning environment brought the eighteen parents together with school staff over common goals and objectives.

These findings suggest that all three components of the joining process—welcoming, honoring, and connecting—encourage active at-home or at-school involvement and foster relationships of partnership between parents and school staff. The ultimate impact of the joining process is the strengthening of parents' capacity to help their children, thereby strengthening the school's overall educational capacity. Parents become connected to a caring educational community in a manner that is empowering.

Even in caring school communities, conflicts and tensions arise between parents and school staff. Some parents reported that they did not always agree with Principal Henderson's style of participatory management and described their

arguments with him. Other parents reported being angry at school staff. However, the foundation of trust established between families and staff created a community where conflicts happened but were often resolved, supporting Epstein's (1995) assertion that schools that create caring communities by entering into relationships of partnership with families withstand conflicts:

In a caring school community, participants work continually to improve the nature and effects of partnerships. Although the interactions of educators, parents, students, and community members will not always be smooth or successful, partnership programs establish a base of respect and trust on which to build. Good partnerships withstand questions, conflicts, debates, and disagreements; provide structures and processes to solve problems; and are maintained—even strengthened—after differences have been resolved. Without this firm base, disagreements and problems that are sure to arise about schools and students will be harder to solve. (1995, p. 703)

This study suggests that parents' involvement in their children's education is influenced by a school culture that values and works aggressively to form relationships with families that are respectful and reciprocal. The language used by the eighteen parents interviewed for this study emphasizes relationship and trust as important influences on their involvement. Many school programs place their emphasis on the programming portion of their family involvement initiative and not the process of building relationships between home and school. At O'Hearn, however, the commitment to building relationships between parents and school staff goes beyond surface and superficial attempts at school/family collaborations. When O'Hearn parents and staff speak of being a part of the school family, this connection is deeply personal.

These findings also suggest that the commitment, support, and active involvement of the principal are required to create and sustain a school culture that embraces full participation on the part of families. According to staff and parents interviewed for the study, one of the most pronounced influences on the family involvement initiative at O'Hearn was the example set by the principal. When he arrived as the new principal, William Henderson embraced a high level of family involvement and demonstrated his commitment through his own actions. He also stressed the importance of family involvement to his school staff. This resulted in a school community in which its members were "on the same page" about parents' involvement in their children's schooling.

Too often schools pay lip service to the importance of family involvement and make half-hearted attempts to involve families. Some schools hire a lone parent or family coordinator to organize the entire family involvement initiative. Programs of this nature often disintegrate without the support and involvement of the leader-

ship and school staff. Often, the failure of the program is attributed to families' lack of interest. Data from this study suggest that the support of the school leadership and staff is the crucial ingredient for the success of family involvement initiatives.

Implications for Further Research

Given that this study was conducted in an elementary school, further research is needed to explore whether factors that the eighteen O'Hearn families said influence why and how they are involved apply to the experiences of middle and high school parents as well. Do the same kinds of social and school factors influence the involvement of these parents? In-depth studies conducted at middle and high school sites are needed to shed light on whether similar or different factors influence parents' involvement.

This study identified the support and involvement of the principal as key in creating a school environment and culture that supports family involvement. What kind of school leadership fosters the development of a caring school community? What are the skills needed on the part of the principal to create effective partnerships between schools and families? More research is needed to study the knowledge and skill base of those principals who lead schools with cultures that embrace family involvement.

In addition to identifying the skills required of the principal, what do teachers need to know and be able to do to foster partnerships with families? This information is needed to create teacher and administrator pre- and in-service programs that develop the competencies necessary to cultivate partnerships with families.

This study did not focus on the types of relationships existing among members of the O'Hearn teaching staff. However, it is interesting to note that a culture of partnership and collaboration among the teaching staff exists at the O'Hearn School. Classes are team taught with two teachers working in close collaboration with each other. Krasnow (1990) suggests

The ecology of the school has a profound effect on the sense of control, empowerment, and motivation of teachers. Creating schools that are positive learning environments for children may have to start with the creation of positive work environments for teachers. (p. 31)

Does, therefore, the culture of collaboration between the O'Hearn teachers influence the dynamic of partnership with families? Can schools with no history or culture of collaboration and partnership between staff members engage in effec-

tive partnerships among families? One would intuit that the answer is “no.” This raises yet another important and interesting question for further investigation.

Conclusion

The eighteen O’Hearn parents interviewed for this study want their children to succeed in school and understand the importance of family participation in their children’s education. In addition, the parents report that social and school factors influence their involvement. These parents also reveal that their involvement is significantly influenced by a school environment that “feels like family.”

The limits of this study—its focus on parents from one school site and the sample size of eighteen parents and seven school staff—make it impossible to generalize the findings beyond the research setting. However, these findings provide greater insight into family participation in urban schools. The study suggests that if school staff support a culture of family at their sites where all members of the school community are respected and honored, parents will respond by engaging in partnerships with staff that support students’ learning. The findings indicate that respectful relationships where power is shared between school staff and family members provide the glue that holds the community together and positively influences parents’ involvement.

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