How Parents Are Portrayed Among Educators

A. Y. "Fred" Ramirez

Introduction

It has been suggested that, in the field of education, what is not being taught in schools is as important as what is being taught. What is not being taught, consciously or unconsciously, is what Eisner calls the null curriculum (Eisner, 1994). We as teacher educators often tell our pre-service and in-service teachers what is or what is not important when we fail to teach a subject or give appropriate time to a topic. Such is true regarding the benefits of parental involvement within schools.

Researchers in various fields have documented the importance of parents in the lives of their children. Topics range from school psychologists discussing the importance of families on children's learning (Christenson, 1995), perceptions of remarriage (Cobla & Brazelton, 1994), and positive sexual development (Baldwin & Bauer, 1994) to clinical psychologists describing the importance of parental factors on treatment for children with autism (Chambliss & Doughty, 1994), inclusion of parents in the developmental process of children born with substance exposure (Poulsen, 1992), and family issues related to female adolescence (Pipher, 1994).

There are many educators professing the benefits of parental involvement in their children's education: James Comer, Joyce Epstein, and Luis Moll, to name just a few. Comer developed the School Development Program to improve the educational experience of low-income minority youth. Building and supporting the agents who have the most at stake within a school obtain that improvement: parents, community members, teachers, children, and school staff (Coulter,

1993). This process began in 1968 when Comer and a team of mental health professionals—a psychiatrist, a social worker, a psychologist, and a special education teacher—began to work in a New Haven public school. The school ranked 32nd out of 33 schools on standardized tests when the team first began to work with them, and by 1984 it had tied for third in academic achievement among the 26 schools in the city (Comer, 1986). The team's work led to the "Comer Principle" of education, and today over 250 schools have adopted the Comer Principle in 19 states and the District of Columbia. Research studies have been conducted in these schools that suggest that by increasing parental involvement in schools, a child's academic performance increases.

Joyce Epstein assisted in establishing the Center on Families, Communities, Schools and Children's Learning at the Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland. One of the many contributions that Epstein has made to the field of parental involvement is her "six-type" framework for elementary, middle, and high schools. Epstein's six types of parental involvement include parenting/adolescent development, communication, volunteering, learning at home, shared decision making, and collaborating with community. This framework aims to help build stronger partnerships between the school, the community, and the family. Hundreds of schools and districts nationally and internationally have developed Epstein's framework within their schools (Sanders & Simon, 2002).

Research by Luis Moll and his associates (1990, 1992, 1993, 1997), promotes the idea of collaborating with teachers to conduct field studies regarding their language minority students. When classroom teachers conduct field research on their students, they become the learners and not the facilitators of knowledge that they are accustomed to being. Moll and Gonzalez (1997) state,

> Once teachers entered households as "learners," as researchers seeking to construct a template for understanding and tapping into the concrete life experiences of their students, the conventional model of home visits was turned on its head. No attempt would be made to "teach" parents or to visit for other school-related reasons (p. 101).

Moll demonstrates that teachers develop a different perspective when they are in the field researching families. Moll (1992) also suggests that parents whose primary language is not English desire to become more involved in their children's education by requesting Saturday school to learn more in their own language as well as in English.

Parents are being asked to provide more services within schools due to programs such as Head Start, Goal 8 of Goals 2000, and Title I. Schools are actively recruiting parents to become more noticeable on school grounds. The importance of parents within the education of their child is readily seen in national policies and current research. Teachers are being trained to work with parents, yet questions

remain regarding teacher education and parental involvement: why is there a lack of educational planning in promoting parental involvement in teacher education programs? As a graduate student I wished to study parental involvement in schools based on my own parents being actively involved in my PreK-12 education, and the negative comments that were made about parents when I was a high school teacher in both parochial and public schools. When a teacher educator was informed of my intentions she snickered, "so you wish to study the enemy?" It was at this time that I started to question the role teacher education has in parental involvement training.

The null curriculum regarding parents and educational journals

It didn't take long to recognize why my faculty member made this comment. The teacher educators at this particular institution seemed to have deep-seated impressions and attitudes regarding parents and parental involvement. As I started researching parents and schools, I noticed cartoons dealing with the issue of parents in respected educational research journals. Within a two-year span of looking at the journals, I found several cartoons that depicted school-home relationships as strained or even antagonistic. At first I found the cartoons amusing. Then I questioned if there was any parallel between the attitudes of educational journals, teacher educators, and teachers (see Ramirez, 1999a). This paper will not suggest that teachers' attitudes or their professors' attitudes toward parents stem from cartoons, or that cartoons cause negativism. Rather, it will be suggested that the editors of educational journals share certain attitudes with many higher education personnel (who comprise the majority of their contributors and readership). If these editors choose to publish cartoons depicting strained or nonexistent school-home relationships, then it also seems likely that our pre- and in-service teachers are receiving messages that may be construed as anti-parent and parental involvement.

Cartoon 1: Barriers to Involvement

In a cartoon published in 1994, the parents are seen as wanting to remove all the negative aspects of school life by waving their hands frantically. Yet, when asked, "who is willing to devote their time, energy and aid in this removal," the parents are shown running away. On the surface, it is a funny cartoon, perhaps reflecting our general culture's unwillingness to work. As a former high school teacher, I have come in contact with families that do not wish to participate in extracurricular activities outside the home for various reasons. However, as a researcher, I found

that many parents do wish to be involved but are prevented from doing so for many reasons (Ramirez, 1999a; 2000a, b). While questioning parents on their involvement for school-sponsored events, many indicated that they wanted to be involved, but are limited or excluded from participation due to one or more factors:

- Work schedules (many Open House nights were during the week),
- Lack of day care,
- Lack of transportation,
- Teachers not wanting them (parents) on campus,
- Not wanting to go back to the school campus (some parents had difficult times as high school students),
- Lack of sufficient information sent by the school,
- Inadequate communication between the teachers and parents,
- Not feeling they (parents) have a right to come onto the campus,
- Lack of self-esteem,
- Teachers "speaking down" to parents,
- Lack of trust for the school officials,
- The school atmosphere is always negative, or
- Scheduling school events during the workday (awards, meetings) (Ramirez, 2000b).

Used with the permission of Mike Thompson/State Journal-Register

Maybe an alternative cartoon would include the arms of teachers being waved when asked, "how many of you want parents to be more involved?" Then watching the teachers scatter when asked, "Ok, now, how many of you will call all your parents and say something positive, change the Open House to a Saturday, and make a home visit to those parents you are unable to contact?" Teachers were often critical of parents and parental involvement at the secondary level (Ramirez, 1999a; 2000b). Many of the teachers in the study reported they did not have specific knowledge or training on parents and parental involvement during their credential programs. Goodlad (1990) reported that teacher education programs nationwide often provide inadequate training to prepare pre-service teachers to work with parents. Also, inadequate in-service training for parental involvement was reported in some schools (Ramirez, 1999a). At the very least, teachers need to be made aware of parents true feelings toward involvement and the obstacles that prevent parents from becoming involved.

Cartoon 2: Proactive, Positive Communication

"I'm only in first grade, and already you're invited to see the principal."

Used with the permission of Art Henrikson

This cartoon published in 1998 depicts a child returning home on the first day of school and telling his mother, "I'm only in first grade, and already you're invited to see the principal." In this cartoon the mother does not look too impressed, but looks rather upset. Why is this? When you saw this cartoon, did you think that the child had a stellar day in school, and the principal wanted to discuss the kids good behavior or outstanding achievement? Probably not. When I asked my pre-service students what they, as high school students, would think when they saw a parent walk onto the school campus during the school day, 100% of the students stated that the parent's "kid was in trouble."

Most communication between the teacher and the parents revolves around disciplinary actions or student grades (Ramirez, 1999a, 1999b, 2000a, 2000b). When this type of communication continues, it may foster mistrust on the part of the parents toward the teachers, and the teachers toward the parents. At times, teachers are encouraged not to phone parents (Ramirez, 1999a).

Communication is a key in Epstein's six categories in developing stronger home-school relationships. Teachers can expand on this by phoning all their students' families. Should a high school teacher have over 150 students, this may seem daunting. However, it can be done by scheduling phone calls within the preparatory period and staying on the phone just long enough to introduce yourself and make one positive comment about the student, and both the parent and the student will become allies (Ramirez, 2000b). As a high school teacher, I felt I would never be able to call all my parents. I soon realized that if I scheduled my phone calls during my prep period, I was able to contact all 160 of my student's families. Often I left messages on answering machines, and at times parents would call me back to ask questions, or to thank me for introducing myself. I found that by making positive contacts with parents, I was better able to communicate other issues later on during the school year should the need arise. Also, the parents did become an ally for me in my career as a teacher when administrators questioned my unorthodox teaching. I attribute this toward my positive communication efforts with parents and families.

When I was a student, I cringed when I needed to tell my parents something about my negative performance or bad behavior in school. As a teacher, I was taught to try to find one thing about each of my students that was positive. At times it was difficult. When a student of mine was told to bring his parents for a parent-teacher conference with other teachers, I was asked to join. Showing up to the meeting late, I noticed the parents distraught, kids running around, and my student, Doug, visibly upset. The teachers took turns commenting on Doug's performance and "negative attitude." When the principal asked me if I had "anything to share about Doug," I stated, "Doug? Yes, he's a great student! I love having him in my class. Sure he could do better, but so can every student." The parents looked at me with a surprised look on their face, and Doug turned and his jaw dropped. These parents were called into the school during the day, and both parents had to take time from their duties. The mother couldn't find daycare for the meeting, therefore she was trying to control the younger children (one was age 2, the other age 5) and listen to the teachers at the same time. Schools often have meetings that are convenient for the teachers, not the parents, who at times sacrifice crucial dollar-earning hours. By scheduling meetings at appropriate times for parents and for teachers, maybe schools would be looked upon as more caring.

If we find positive characteristics in our students, we may be better able to focus on the positive, then work on the areas that need to be worked on. Doug went on to pass my class with flying colors. At the time of his meeting, he was averaging a "D." By taking the advice of a seasoned veteran, I was able to find good qualities within all my students. This assisted in my communication with students, and with their parents. Before I did this, my communication with parents was often negative. By communicating effectively, hopefully we will start to change the perceived hysteria when a parent walks onto campus. As schools demonstrate more open and positive communication between the school and home, students and parents will look upon the school as friendly instead of confrontational. As we build community within our schools, the students will have positive things to communicate with their parents. Also, teachers taking the initiative in positive communication and building rapport with the parents will reduce or eliminate the need for the kind of "invitations" mentioned in the cartoon above.

"We don't have school tomorrow. It's time
for parent/teacher confrontations."

Cartoon 3: Open House and Parent-Teacher Conferences

This cartoon (published in 1999), shows two children walking either to or from school, and one tells the other, "We don't have school tomorrow, it's time for parent/teacher confrontations." The first time I saw this cartoon I did laugh. The memories of my own parents going to Open House was vivid in my mind. I also remember as a former high school teacher I heard horror stories from my colleagues about "unreasonable" and "uncaring" parents who "ask too much" of them (teach-

ers), or who don't show up to Open House or conferences. When I interviewed parents about teacher-parent conferences, most cringed. Some (4 out of 11) mentioned they didn't mind going to school, but most (6) stated they would rather not go. One male parent stated, "Why should I go and listen to the teacher bad mouth my son? I know he (son) isn't doing well, and I am working with him."

Open House at the two schools where I taught involved having the parents go to their child's classroom for 5 minutes (what did parents do if they had 2-3 kids at the same school?), and listen to the teacher tell about the class, or all the parents would meet all the subject specific teachers in one classroom … only to have other parents hear about this or that student when the teacher would speak to a parent. Parents that had a child that was not performing well or was a discipline problem often left the classroom dejected, knowing other parents overheard the teacher talking about their child.

There does need to be a place where teachers and parents could meet privately; it would also be good for parents to meet collectively in a positive setting. Maybe schools could arrange to meet parents off campus at a central location. Or perhaps schools could give teachers two half days off during the week, so they could come back on a Saturday, and both the teachers and parents could bring their families and have an informal gathering filled with food, games, and shows put on by the students.

Parents and teachers do wish to communicate with one another, but often one party wishes the other party to make the "first move" (Ramirez, 1999a). Some teachers would rather not communicate with parents, while some parents only wish for teachers to communicate when their child's grades are slipping (Ramirez, 1999a). Parents are often reluctant to communicate with teachers, out of fear of retaliation from the school on their child (Ramirez, 2001). The parents' fear is real. The confrontation that the cartoon offers as a humorous wordplay is unfortunately a reality that occurs too often within schools. As educators, we need to look at avenues to create better communication and relationships, and fewer confrontations.

Home Visits

Another cartoon, dated 1999, shows a teacher at the front door of a home, telling the woman who answered the door, "I'm Kevin's teacher, and I came to meet the cruel step-mother who won't let him do homework." My first reaction to this cartoon was "at least the teacher is making a home visit!" Anyone who deals with kids knows that getting to the truth of the matter (whatever the matter is) often requires the concerned adults to have some face-to-face communication.

As part of a multicultural course that I teach, students are asked to make a home

visit in pairs and interview a parent in an urban community. The students are reluctant at first to make the home visit, but most find valuable information from parents during their interviews. Many students have stated, "we (teachers) need to do more to enable parents to have an active role within schools." After writing her interview, one student reported "horror" stories from parents concerning the parent's dealings with schools. Another student was grateful for making the trip to the home for she felt she would have never realized that some homes do not have room for a student to do their homework in private. Other students found parents willing to speak with them about their child's school, and hoped to become more involved but were unable to do so due to work, lack of daycare, or language, transportation, and scheduling conflicts. All the students who conducted this exercise realized the need for enhanced school-home communication, and wished to implement strategies to do so.

Conclusion

As teachers and educators we can encourage our students to have their parents be their role models. Parents are the child's first teachers, and the involvement of parents in the education of their child does not end when the child enters first grade. Parents need to be a part of their child's education both at school and when the child comes home. This means teachers and schools need to do their part by keeping open and clear communication between the school and home. This may include finding interpreters for parents with limited English, creating parent-friendly schedules for Open House and parent/teacher conferences, and providing other opportunities for communication and interaction to assist parents in becoming an integral part of their child's education.

Education journals provide their readers with current strategies and research in the field of education. Cartoons within the journals are meant to be light-hearted, and to give the reader a break from the educational articles. When we see a cartoon about parents and schools, we will probably laugh. However, when we see well-respected educational journals repeatedly insert cartoons that reflect negative stereotypes of parents or negative home-school communication, we may need to question what attitude toward parents is being conveyed within these publications. And as the journals' readers and contributors (and sometimes the editors) are also professors of education, we may need to further Goodlad's research and investigate what is being taught regarding parents at the teacher education level. Are teacher educators knowledgeable regarding current research in parental involvement? As a mere graduate student doing research on parents and schools, I was told that I was the "resident expert on parental involvement," so "teach us." More than one

teacher educator at my university made these comments. Professors of education need to take seriously the unique opportunity they have to establish positive attitudes toward parental involvement. By teaching effective and reasonable strategies teachers can use to facilitate positive, ongoing communication, they can encourage all parents to be involved in their child's education.

References

Baldwin, C., & Bauer, K. E. (1994). Teaching sexuality: Schools supporting families as primary sex educators. *Journal of Humanistic Education and Development, 32*(4), 162-72.

Chambliss, C., & Doughty, R. J. (1994, February 26). *Parental response to love as treatment of childhood autism.* Paper presented at the Annual University of Scranton Psychology Conference, Scranton, PA.

Christenson, S. (1995). Families and schools: What is the role of the school psychologist? *School Psychology Quarterly, 10*(2), 118-32.

Cobla, D. C., & Brazelton, E. W. (1994). The application of family drawing tests with children in remarriage families: Understanding familial roles. *Elementary School Guidance and Counseling, 29*(2), 129-36.

Comer, J. P. (1986, February). Parent participation in schools. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 442-446.

Coulter, P. (1993, September). *The Comer school development program.* **(**Education Consumer Guide Number 6). Retrieved from Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI), US Department of Education Web site: http://www.ed.gov/pubs/OR/ConsumerGuides/comer.html

Eisner, E. W. (1994). *The educational imagination: On the design and evaluation of school programs.* New York: Macmillan College.

Goodlad, J. I. (1990). *Teachers for our nation's schools.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Moll, L.C. (1992). Bilingual classroom studies and community analysis: Some recent trends. *Educational Researcher, 21*(2), 20-24.

Moll, L.C., & Diaz, S. (1993). Change as the goal of educational research. In E. Jacob & C. Jordan (Eds.), *Minority education: Anthropological perspectives.* Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

Moll, L.C., & Gonzalez, N. (1997). Teachers as social scientists: Learning about culture from household research. In P.M. Hall (Ed.), *Race, ethnicity and multiculturalism: Vol. 1.* New York: Garland.

Moll, L.C., Velez-Ibanez, C., Greenberg, J., & Rivera, C. (1990). *Community knowledge and classroom practice: Combining resources for literacy instruction.* Arlington, VA: Development Associates.

Pipher, M. (1994). *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the selves of adolescent girls.* New York: Ballantine Books.

Poulsen, M. K. (1992). *Schools meet the challenge: Educational needs of children at risk due to prenatal substance exposure.* Sacramento: California State Dept. of Education, Office of Special Education.

Ramirez, A. Y. (1999a). *Teachers attitudes toward parents and parental involvement in high school.* Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Indiana University, Bloomington.

Ramirez, A.Y. (1999b). Survey on teachers' attitudes regarding parents and parental involvement. *The School Community Journal, 9*(2), 21-39.

Ramirez, A.Y. (2000a). Latino and African-American school-home communication. In Rios &

Mohamed (Eds.), *Brown & black communication: Latino and African American conflict and convergence in mass media*. New York: Greenwood Press.

Ramirez, A.Y. (2000b, Summer). A secondary school: Teachers' and their view on parents. *American Secondary Education,* 27-42.

Ramirez, A.Y. (2001). Parent involvement is like apple pie. *The High School Journal, 85*(1), 1-9.

Sanders, M. G., & Simon, B. S. (2002). A comparison of program development at elementary, middle, and high schools in the National Network of Partnership Schools. *The School Community Journal, 12*(1), 7-27.

Fred Ramirez is an assistant professor of education at California State University, Fullerton. His research interests include parents and schools, school reform, teacher education, and multicultural education.