

How Teachers Come to Understand Families

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Abstract

The building of connections between family, school, and community can benefit children from before the time they enter Kindergarten until after they have left our schools. Through an analysis of 13 in-depth teacher interviews, this study explores the role of the teacher in the home-school partnership and how teachers come to understand families in a rural New England community. Findings suggest that two key processes to understanding families include gathering information through communication and observation and making meaning of the information through comparisons to other families, one's own family, and the particular family over time. Implications for research, practice, and professional development are discussed.

Key Words: family involvement, parent-school relationships, teacher outreach, teacher beliefs, teacher attitudes, understanding families, low-income families, elementary school

Introduction

Tim Kelly¹, a second grade student in a small school in a rural New England town, has a good disposition, but struggles academically and is prone to angry outbursts. His teacher Terri suspects that issues in Tim's home life are deterring his success in

school, namely that his mother is overwhelmed by depression, a swing shift job, and a large family. She collects information about the family from a number of different sources, including the school guidance counselor, his mother and siblings, and the child himself. She also networks with other teachers. Beyond communicating with other people, she also makes observations about Tim's appearance as he comes to class unprepared physically and academically. "He's not coming in clean. He wears the same clothes over and over again...I couldn't send books home with him, unless I didn't need them any more, because they didn't come back or they came back destroyed."

Terri makes meaning of the information she gathers by thinking about the family over time. Observing various interactions leads her to see a number of significant family strengths. Because Terri has been in the school for over ten years, she has family knowledge from teaching Tim's two older siblings. She has also worked with Tim for two years in a row. Ultimately, Terri is able to use her understanding over time to take action by finding support for Tim's mother through the school guidance counselor and by making a number of classroom modifications to support some of Tim's nonacademic needs.

This case illustrates a process by which teachers can come to understand the families that they work with. More than thirty years of research has established the positive effect that family educational involvement can have on student success. Yet, a recent Public Agenda survey reported that lack of family involvement is among the biggest problems facing public schools today (Public Agenda, 2002). There is a clear gap between the known benefits of family involvement and its low occurrence in schools. To help close this gap, a better knowledge of the process of forming home-school links is needed. Research shows that teacher outreach and invitations are one of the main reasons parents get involved (Epstein, 1991; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). In other words, teachers are key to family involvement.

The development of relationships depends on an individual's capacity to understand the other person. This paper begins to look closely at the early processes and elements involved in teachers forging home-school connections, namely how teachers first come to understand families. The assumption presented is that teachers' understanding of families impacts the visions they have of their students and those students' families, their conceptualization of the family-school relationship, the actual interactions they have with families, and their expectations for children's academic and social development. By exploring how teachers understand families, this paper will contribute to the existing body of research that suggests the importance of fostering teachers' skills and capacity to connect home and school.

In the context of one small rural community in New England, this exploratory study maps how teachers collect information about families and then process this information. The paper reviews literature on teachers' role in family involvement

and analyzes findings from 13 ethnographic teacher interviews conducted over the period of 1997-1998. The subsequent discussion considers conditions and factors influencing teachers' understanding of information about families.

Literature Review

Research has shown the benefits that family educational involvement² has for students, their families and schools. For children, research has established the positive influence family involvement has on children's achievement (Chavkin, 1993; Eccles & Harold, 1993; Epstein, 1991; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995). Beyond increases in learning and higher test scores, research also demonstrates that family involvement benefits students' social and emotional development, as measured by student behavior, motivation, social competence, and student-teacher and peer relationships (Adams & Christenson, 2000; Palenchar, Vondra, & Wilson, 2001; Sanders, 1998).

Although many studies highlight outcomes of family involvement, the partnering process and teachers' role in family involvement are less well-studied. The existing literature in this domain focuses on teacher attitudes about and outreach to families, and their influence on family involvement practices.

Teacher attitudes and beliefs about families and family involvement directly relate to their family involvement practices. When teachers hold parents in high regard and view them as a child's first teacher, they are more likely to invite parents to become active participants in their children's education (Epstein & Dauber, 1991). Eccles and Harold (1996) identified several domains of teacher beliefs that influence parent involvement efforts: beliefs about the role(s) parents and teachers should play in children's education, beliefs about what influences parent involvement (e.g., why parents become involved), and efficacy beliefs regarding their own knowledge and ability to promote parent involvement.

Unfortunately, research suggests that teachers may hold preconceived attitudes about families and believe they are indifferent to their children's education (Bloom, 2001). Teachers may hold biased and often negative perceptions regarding the values, attitudes, and abilities of less educated and low-income parents in particular, which serve to reinforce stereotypes related to social class and level of education and impede efforts to involve families (Comer, 1980; Davies, 1987). Further, teachers often do not hold the positive beliefs and attitudes needed to reach out to and partner with families of cultures other than their own (Derman-Sparks, 1998; Fueyo, 1997; Trumbell, Rothstein-Fisch, & Greenfield, 2000).

Research also suggests that teacher outreach relates to family and community involvement. When teachers openly encourage families and develop program

initiatives that support family involvement, families are more involved (Epstein, 1995). In a study by the Urban Institute, highly involved parents reported that their level of school involvement depended on the degree to which teachers and administrators encouraged them to serve as advocates for their children (Ruiz & Fix, 2000). Moreover, in a study of high-performing Hispanic schools researchers found that when schools fostered communication and facilitated involvement, families were more involved (Scribner, Young, & Pedroza, 1999).

Teacher outreach also encourages home involvement practices, such as reading with children and homework help, which are important predictors of student achievement (Izzo, Weissberg, Kasprow, & Fendrich, 1999; Lee & Croninger, 1994; Nord, Lennon, Liu, & Chandler, 2000). For example, a longitudinal study by the U.S. Department of Education (2001) found that reading and mathematical achievement improved when third grade teachers were active in outreach to parents of low-achieving students. Outreach encompassed face-to-face meetings, materials on ways to help children at home, and telephoning when there were problems and when there were no problems. Further, outreach and study of children's family life may lead teachers to better know the cultures from which their students emerge, allowing them to integrate these family funds of knowledge into their curricula (Allexsaht-Snider, 1995; Moll & Gonzalez, 1997).

Parent perception of teacher outreach is also a predictor of family involvement in education. Patrikakou and Weissberg (1998, 2000) gathered data on parent involvement attitudes and practices in inner city schools and explored the relationship between perceived teacher outreach and parent involvement at home and school. They found that the more parents perceived their child's teacher as valuing their contribution to their child's education, trying to keep them informed about their child's strengths and weaknesses, and providing them with specific suggestions to help their child, the higher the parents' involvement was both at home and at school.

Teachers who are familiar with strategies to involve families and are positive about the benefits of such involvement are more likely to encourage parent participation in children's learning (Dauber & Epstein, 1993). Conversely, teachers who lack knowledge regarding effective involvement strategies and are ambivalent about the outcome of such efforts are less likely to promote parent participation (Epstein & Dauber, 1991). Further, discrepancies often exist between schools' and parents' reports on whether schools used various practices to involve parents in their children's education. An analysis of two large-scale surveys revealed that public K-8 schools were more likely than parents of children in such schools to indicate that schools used a particular practice to involve parents. These findings suggest that schools and families are not on the same page when it comes to acknowledging efforts schools make for outreach (Chen, 2001). Research suggests that many

of these discrepancies and the lack of teacher knowledge may stem from lack of teacher preparation in family involvement (Shartrand, Weiss, Kreider, & Lopez, 1997). In fact, many pre-service teachers feel that they have not been prepared to work with families and know few strategies to communicate appropriately with families about their children's academic progress (Morris & Taylor, 1996).

Research on interpersonal relationships stresses that understanding a person with whom you have a relationship is critical to the partnership. In order to "know" a person, one must be able to assume his or her perspective and understand his or her thoughts, feelings, motives, and intentions (Selman, Levitt, & Schultz, 1997). Drawing on this perspective, this paper explores the question, "how do teachers come to understand families?" The process of how teachers come to understand families may influence teacher attitudes about and outreach toward families, families' consequent involvement behaviors, and children's consequent school success.

Method

Data for this investigation were drawn from the School Transition Study (STS), a five year longitudinal study of approximately 400 ethnically diverse, low-income children, their families, and schools from kindergarten through fifth grade. Children resided in three sites: an area in rural New England with a predominantly European American population, a city in the Northeast with a predominantly African American population, and a city in the West with a predominantly Latino population. In-depth case study information was collected for a subset of 23 children over first and second grade.

Sample

This exploratory analysis is based on in-depth data from the case study subset of 23 STS children over first and second grade. Specifically, this analysis focuses on seven children from the rural New England site, using data from a total of 13 in-depth interviews with the children's teachers in first grade (6 interviews) and second grade (7 interviews). In many cases, children had the same teachers both years due to multi-age classrooms and looping (in which the teacher follows the child from one grade to the next). Note that one child had three teacher interviews due to a move to a new school, and two teachers were interviewed about multiple children.

All teachers interviewed, except one, were female. All teachers were European American ranging in age from 23 to 55. Interviews lasted on average from one to one and-a-half hours, were tape recorded, and then transcribed. All interviews were

conducted face-to-face in the school building. Ethnographers recorded associated field notes for interviews conducted during the second grade year, following uniform formats. To build rapport, first-year interviews with teachers were less structured and more exploratory than those in the second grade year. In the first year, teachers were asked about relationships, roles, responsibilities, barriers, communication practices, and concerns related to family involvement; child strengths and weaknesses (e.g., math and literacy skills); school context including available school services; school, familial, and societal factors influencing the child's success; and teacher resources for and role in supporting the child.

Second-year semi-structured interview questions that directly related to the home-school relationship addressed teacher beliefs and desires about the importance, content, and means of parent contact with teacher; school opportunities for family involvement and families' response to these opportunities; examples of parent help with a child's learning or behavior problems; and processes for coming to understand families (i.e., Are there other ways, besides talking directly to the parent, that you have learned about the child's home life, about his or her family, or other important information? Which ways have felt most comfortable to get information? Why? How have these different *ways* of getting information helped you make decisions about [child]?).

Analysis Method

The 13 teacher interviews were thematically coded using the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software package NUD*IST N4 (Qualitative Solutions and Research Pty Ltd, 1997). The coding schema consisted of: 1) 73 broad coding categories representing settings; people; relationships; child, parent, and teacher characteristics; actions; speaker's values, beliefs, and attitudes; problems and solutions, demographics, and other background variables; past or present; change; and assessment; 2) inductive conceptual categories, such as teachers' understanding of families; and 3) 66 detailed codes for home-school communication such as topics, method, patterns, style, barriers, facilitators, and consequences.

During coding for home-school communication, the process of teachers understanding families emerged as a common theme throughout the teacher interviews. It then became an inductive conceptual category defined broadly as "the ways in which teachers come to understand families." Teachers were commonly using communication as a tool to understand family situations, childrearing practices, and involvement roles. Hypothesizing that teachers come to understand families through other avenues than communication, we expanded from the instances of home-school communication in the transcripts to also review any instance in which teachers spoke about home, families, and home characteristics. Open coding pro-

duced a more refined set of conceptual categories for how teachers were obtaining and making meaning of information about families, and patterns within and across these categories were examined.

Findings

Teachers described coming to know families in two steps. First, they used various methods to gather information, such as through communication and observation. Then they made meaning of that information by weighing it against knowledge based on prior work with other families, personal experiences within their own families, or that particular child's family. It is important to note that not all teachers made use of the same methods to gather information or made meaning of information in the same way. Instead, the findings represent a set of processes and strategies that teachers as a whole utilized.

Gathering Information

Communication

Communication and observation were the two most common methods employed by teachers to collect information about families. Families, other school personnel, and the child were all important sources for directly communicating information about a family. Teachers often used formal face-to-face opportunities to communicate with families, such as parent-teacher conferences and other events like portfolio and curriculum nights, art and math celebrations, and school meetings. Teachers also collected information directly from parents in informal school settings. Often teachers described parents who "just come in." For example, one teacher said, "She came in one day and talked to me for probably a half an hour while the kids were at a special [gym class]...and she just said she really needed a new apartment."

Parents and teachers also communicated outside of the school setting through more casual "run-ins." One teacher described her interaction with a family member at the local store, "He works right up the street here. So I go in there, he's always coming up to me. They're very friendly. In fact I see him a lot." Communication also took the form of written notes, phone calls, and structured information sharing such as running notebooks back and forth between home and school. Although the method, topic, and style of communication varied, these direct communications served as an opportunity for teachers and parents to learn about each other.

Yet when teachers could not interact directly with parents they often turned to a number of other people for information. In most of the cases, teachers relied on

other school personnel and the child for answers. First teachers talked with other teachers at their school. Terri Kline explained,

I get information about the family from different sources. They all hold equal weights. It's wonderful and easy to talk with Shellie [the school guidance counselor]. I mean she's a wonderful resource. I can't say that one is more appropriate or more informative than others.

Some schools developed more formal structures for this sharing to occur. One first grade teacher reported, "We meet at the end of the year with next year's teachers . . . and that makes such a difference . . . [other teachers] don't have to go through it again." School administrators also passed information along, while some teachers expressed reliance on existing school staff with professional links to the family as part of their job, such as school psychologists, family liaisons, and guidance counselors. "The principal and the guidance counselor made a home visit and they started putting some things into context for me about what's going on, why this child is like he is."

Perhaps most importantly, teachers recognized the child as an important source of information (see also Weiss, Kopko, Vaughan, Mayer, & Kreider, 1999). Teachers learned about the family when children spoke or wrote about issues such as their siblings, homework helpers, parents' fighting, family pets, and out-of-school time experiences. One teacher said, "I feel like my main connection is with the kids. There's hardly any time for parent connection." Teachers in this study valued and listened to children's spontaneous reports about family experience and developed ways to ask questions of children about their home lives.

Observation

Observation was another important method of obtaining information. Teachers made observations about the appearance of the child or materials brought from home. They made note of clothes, general body cleanliness, and the quality of homework and library books as they were carried back and forth between home and school. Several teachers were also able to observe the child and parent interacting in the school environment. One teacher noted affection and hugs between mother and son and said, "His mother volunteers in the school and she would go by and he would show her his writing and everything. I see the mother constantly and from what I've seen her relationship with her son is great." Teacher observations of families relied on parents' ability to come to school, teachers' ability to visit the home, or chance encounters in the community. Drop off and pick up time were important times of day for this type of information gathering.

Through communication and observation teachers collected information about families' situations, childrearing practices, and family involvement practices. Specifically they learned about the family structure, family strengths and needs, status in the community, and parent employment status and work schedules. Parents' educational levels, their goals and expectations for children, and cultural beliefs about childrearing also constituted important aspects of a teacher's knowledge of family contexts. Finally, teachers discovered how families helped their children with homework, how they planned their children's life outside of school time, and the other educational supports they provided.

Meaning-Making Processes

As teachers collected information about families they also made meaning of what they collected. Teachers weighed the information against their own knowledge, values, and perceptions derived from three reference points: other families they had worked with in the past, their experience within their own family, or long-time knowledge of the particular family or child. By comparing information against one or more of these points of reference teachers began to understand (whether accurately or inaccurately) families with whom they worked.

Other families as point of reference

First, by comparing and contrasting family information with knowledge, values, and perceptions derived from experiences with other families they had worked with in the past, teachers came to understandings that either challenged or supported their working notions of the family at issue. Many teachers in this analysis clearly had pre-existing perceptions about the low-income families with whom they had worked, their support networks, and their children's outcomes. In general, these perceptions and impressions tended to be negative: that low-income families had low educational expectations for their children, were overwhelmed, had few skills, and stressful lives. Teachers used these impressions to make meaning of information about a particular family. For example, one teacher stated,

In some of the low-income families I've worked with over the years there doesn't seem to be a well-developed view of what can be, of what they could work toward. I'm pretty sure that both [other parents] are high school graduates and that in itself says something about their understanding of education. I know that [the mother] went back to school and is a hairdresser now.

This teacher held a belief that low-income families might not have advanced educational levels and parenting skills to effectively engage in their children's

education. In this case, the teacher collected information about the parent's educational level, contrasted it to her current belief system about low-income families, and created an understanding of the family that went beyond her prior view.

In other instances, teachers corroborated their existing beliefs. For example, one teacher stated,

What I see with Mom is patterns that I've seen over the years, the people who don't come to open house, who don't come to conferences, who don't send forms back. When you do talk to them they really care about their kids... What I see with Mom is what, you know, patterns that have happened with other parents.

This statement illustrates the pervasive theme that teachers and parents in this analysis are socially distant. Although they share the same community, there is an undertone that the teachers are middle-income and view the low-income families as the "other."

Professional experiences with other families also help teachers make sense about family information. For example, one teacher concludes that a parent must be busy and not have major concerns about her child, because the parents she sees more often are those who do have major concerns about their child:

The parents I tend to see more of are parents who have concerns about their children. My feeling is that she doesn't have any concerns and so she doesn't have to spend time at school. She hasn't concerned herself with being in contact with me a lot this year and the fact that she's signed up to drive is an indication for me that she wants to participate, but I just get the impression she's been real busy.

Teachers' personal experience within their own family as point of reference

Teachers also weighed information about families against their own knowledge, values, and perceptions derived from their own experience as a child or as a parent. One teacher exemplifies this process well. She states,

Her parents came to neither parent-teacher conferences. It's hard to be supportive of the child when you get so little back from the parents. I think it's hard on anybody, ...but I keep doing it because that's what I have to do for [the child]... My mother was college educated and my father left college to join the army. My mother was a teacher. So I think where you come from has a lot to do with where you go... I think the kids do come with certain things.

If I look at my daughter . . . I gave her the basis to be able to believe good things about herself and make those beliefs.

This teacher clearly values education from her own childhood experience and believes that children's backgrounds heavily impact their school performance. These personal experiences and beliefs shape her interpretations of families' behavior and its implications for students. She sees her family as responsible for her success and she herself as responsible for her child's success. This teacher transforms her observations about a family into a conclusion that they do not act according to the same values of education and schooling that she herself holds.

A particular family over time as point of reference

Finally, teachers made sense of family information in the context of that family's development. School structures such as multi-age classrooms and looping, as well as having older siblings in their classrooms in prior years, appeared to facilitate this process. One teacher explained how she was able to have this continuity and reference point:

When you've had two or three of their children, and give the siblings to the same teacher, you do establish a relationship with the family. In such a transient world it's nice to have that stability.

In the case of Tim Kelly, his teacher Terri Kline also relied on analyzing the family – especially sibling relationships. She explained,

He seems really close with his younger sisters. The older sister has picked him up a few times and seems involved with him. I don't know how much she's around, but she's picked him up a few times. So I think that his family cares about him a lot.

Having taught Tim's older siblings in prior years also may bring a long-established reference point to her processes of understanding this family.

At times, teachers also developed understanding by following a specific child's patterns. For example, trends in a child's school absences and homework completion rates helped one teacher make meaning of parenting skills. She tracked the student's infrequently and inaccurately completed homework over time to conclude that the mother did not have the tools she needed to support homework assignments.

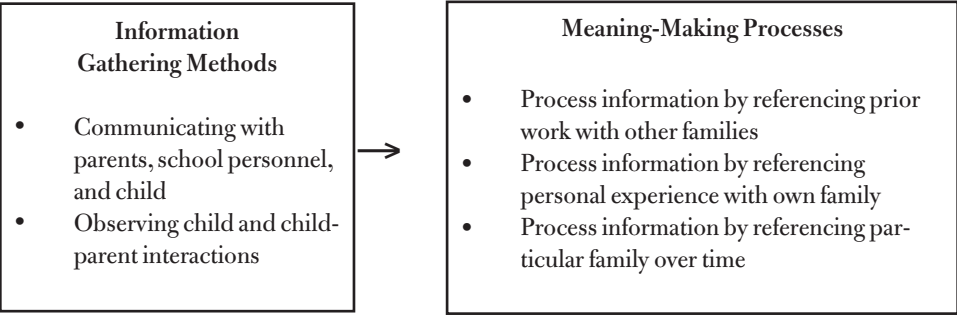
By following individual children and families over time, teachers measured

growth, discerned regular family patterns and strengths, and recognized anomalies in family involvement practices.

Discussion

This paper identifies gathering information and meaning-making as two key processes whereby teachers come to understand families. Figure 1 summarizes these processes.

Figure 1. Key Processes for Understanding Families



Several observations and questions can be posed about these processes. First, the methods and sources of information used by teachers and the points of reference teachers use to make meaning of this information about families lead to the kinds of understanding about families arrived at by teachers. Gathering information directly from parents may lead to pragmatic and accurate understanding of families, such as where to reach families, who to contact, what issues the families are facing, and what potential barriers exist to their involvement. Perseverance in gathering family information and combining varied sources of information may also lead to a more comprehensive understanding of families. Finally, making meaning of information about a family by referencing that child and family over time holds the potential for acquiring a developmental view of families and for dismantling inaccurate assessments rooted solely in class-based stereotypes or one’s own personal experiences.

Second, these findings raise certain questions about the individual characteristics and social contexts that might contribute to teachers’ abilities to collect adequate information and make accurate meaning of it. Beliefs held by teachers may influence the amount and kinds of information they gather, the way they go about gathering it, and the meaning they make of it. Specifically, when teachers believe that family information helps them better teach children, and that staying apprised of this information is part of one’s job, teachers may have greater receptiv-

ity to families and initiative in seeking out information. Nearly all of the teachers interviewed for this analysis believed that collecting family information is part of their job and this motivated them to work hard for it. They also believed that understanding families helped them to strengthen their relationships with families and children and connect students and their families to other forms of support, such as counseling groups for students and support groups for parents.

The school context also appeared to shape teachers' process of understanding families. Teachers interviewed for this analysis worked in three small schools in a rural New England community. The teacher-to-student ratio was relatively low in each school. As noted, several schools practiced looping or multi-grade classrooms, resulting in teachers having the same students and families for a two-year time span. Field notes from interviews and field observations depicted school climate in each school as friendly and open, with clearly articulated values regarding families and communities, such as the importance of teachers' supporting the whole child, meaning the child's academic, emotional, and social development. Safety concerns within these schools were minimal, and many teachers, administrators, and family members knew each other through connections in the community. The teachers, many of them veteran teachers who had worked at a particular school for many years, often did not work in isolation but rather collaborated easily with other teachers and school staff to discuss and support children and families. Interestingly, even under these supportive conditions, teachers did not always arrive at accurate or strength-based understandings of their students' families.

Perhaps most importantly, these exploratory analyses help uncover teachers' processes of understanding families that may serve as a precursor to outreach. A deeper and more comprehensive understanding of families may lead to outreach that is more individualized and targeted, in effect yielding stronger parental responses. A thorough process of coming to understand families may also serve to dismantle teachers' pre-existing negative beliefs about low-income families and create more accurate, sympathetic, and strength-based perceptions of individual families.

Implications for Practice and Policy

This exploratory analysis begins to sketch steps and processes through which elementary school teachers come to understand families. The analysis further suggests that individual characteristics and school conditions such as positive family beliefs, professional support, time, and a positive school culture may allow teachers to acquire a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of families. With future research to support these conclusions, the findings suggest several implica-

tions for educational practice and policy.

The fact that teachers' communication practices with children, families, and school personnel are a common source of direct and indirect knowledge of families suggests that teacher preparation and professional development courses that develop teacher communication skills and promote effective communication may be important. Likewise, school and classroom contexts in which parents are welcomed and have a chance to interact with their own and other children may give teachers valuable opportunities to observe and better understand families.

Teachers appear to make meaning of families in part by referring to other families with whom they have worked; this can result in the teachers holding negative perceptions of low-income families. Consequently, teachers need to critically reflect on their own values and judgments about families, especially their class-based assumptions, so that their basis for understanding families is rooted not in inaccurate stereotypes but in authentic relationships and culturally sensitive interpretations. The fact that teachers' own experiences as students and parents can influence their understanding of their students' families also supports the need for personal reflection in teacher preparation and professional practice. Finally, school structures such as looping, multi-grade classrooms, and small schools that allow teachers to develop close relationships with individual children and families over time hold potential for providing a developmental understanding not only of children, but of families as well.

Implications for Future Research

Prior research demonstrates the link between teacher outreach, family educational involvement, and student outcomes. The missing link then is how teachers' understanding of families serves as a precursor for outreach to come. Further research is needed to understand if and how teacher knowledge about families, and the process or processes by which they arrive at these understandings, leads to teacher beliefs about and outreach practices with families. Similarly, because not all teachers made use of the same methods to gather information or made meaning of information in the same way, it is important to further investigate the individual beliefs and structural conditions, as well as the geographic niches beyond the rural setting analyzed here, that shape teachers' processes for coming to understand families, as well as the effects of using particular combinations of processes.

Endnotes

¹ The full research-based case, *Tim Kelly*, written by Holly Kreider, Harvard Family Research Project, Cambridge, MA, can be downloaded from <http://www.finenetwork.org>. The longer case is designed for a teacher audience and contains discussion questions and instructor notes for the field.

² Family involvement in this paper is taken to mean any and all activities families engage in to support their children's learning both at home and in school.

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