

Parents: A forgotten treasure?

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This month's research paper focuses on an oft-unused resource in education: parents! In fact, the paper refers to them as 'a forgotten treasure'.

If you are fortunate enough to be teaching in a school which actively involves parents in the education of their children, then you may not need this paper. But in the large majority of schools in India, parents play a less-than-peripheral role in the education of their children.

For them, this paper offers rich reading.

The most familiar mode of parental involvement for most of us is in helping the child complete homework! Projects, portfolios, albums and record notebooks are often more of a headache for the parent than for the child. However, this research paper describes several other modes of parental involvement, which include shared decision-making. Instead of the perfunctory diary notes (emails/ WhatsApp messages today) that either inform parents of upcoming events or bring to their attention where their child is wanting, this paper suggests policies that draw parental involvement in far deeper and committed ways. Describing parents as 'full partners' in their child's education, the paper describes a US law that requires schools to have a written policy for parental involvement – and what's more, this policy should be jointly developed with the parents and the local community.

How does this relate to our context? Government schools in India do have SDMC's (School Development Management Committees) which have amongst their members parents and members of the

Paper: *Varieties of Parent Involvement in Schooling* Vincent A. Anfara Jr. and Steven B. Mertens

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local community. Private schools are largely free to evolve their own policies in this regard.

Who is a 'parent'?

Before going further, let me clarify that this paper uses the word 'parent' to encompass *any family member of the student who plays an important role in that student's life*. This could mean a grandparent, uncle, aunt, or even an extended family member who is an adult.

Historical role

The paper begins by describing the historical role of parents in education – in the early 19th century, parents played a significant role in the education of their children. You may be surprised to know that parents were involved in matters like the hiring and firing of teachers, drawing up the school calendar and even in developing the school curriculum. By the 20th century, schools had distanced themselves from parents and demarcated separate roles and responsibilities for the home and the school.



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Concomitant with this shift was a widely prevalent belief that parents were not qualified to involve themselves actively in education, as teachers had the expertise that parents lacked. As teaching began to be increasingly accepted as a profession, parents simultaneously began to be regarded as unqualified to contribute in more than a supportive manner at home. Paradoxically enough, this was happening along with well-documented evidence of the benefits of parental involvement in education, as seen in students' attitudinal changes as well as achievements.

Attending school events (like plays, shows and exhibitions) or joining in fund-raising for the school were as far as parental involvement was seen until the *No Child Left Behind* Act was passed in 2002. Definitions of parental involvement now began to grow wider: requiring partnerships of the school with the parents, so as to require regular communication and their participation in the planning of school improvement.

What does research say about parental involvement? None of it is surprising, as far as I could tell.

Findings

I am summarizing below the major findings, with references. In schools where parents become involved and offer meaningful support:

- Students learn more. (Myers & Monson 1992, National Middle School Association 2003, Fan & Chen 2001)



- Students' attendance and self esteem are enhanced. (Epstein et al 2002, Mapp 1997)
- Students' behaviour, emotional well-being and life goals are positively affected. (National Middle School Association 2003, Fan & Chen 2001, Epstein 2005)
- There results greater parental satisfaction with teachers (Myers & Monson, 1992, p. 14) – I found this last point to be particularly noteworthy. Until the parent gets *truly involved* in the child's education, there is not much chance of the parent empathizing with the teacher's lot. Naturally, this results in the frequently experienced chasm between the parent and the teacher.

Interestingly, these benefits were found to run across parent income and education levels.

Quoting from the paper: As Henderson and Berla wrote in the opening statement of their book, *A New Generation of Evidence: The Family Is Critical to Student Achievement*, "The evidence is now beyond dispute. When schools work together with families to support learning, children tend to succeed not just in school, but throughout life."

Although socio-economic status factors of parents were studied to a great extent, and they were definitely seen to affect parent-school relations, the results proved inconclusive with regard to the direction of this impact.

Teacher efficacy

Another remarkable finding was that lower levels of teacher efficacy were linked to lower levels of teacher-parent contact. Teachers were found to draw in parental involvement to a greater extent in lower grades, or when class size was large. In formal schools which were rule-driven or largely hierarchical, it was found that parental involvement was not sought out by teachers to a significant extent. Doesn't all that sound familiar?

Challenges

Most of us would admit that there are numerous obstacles to involving parents, to a greater extent, in the education of their children. This paper, too, reports that while such involvement needs to be legislated or mandated, the real obstacles to it being made more common are not yet clearly understood. It has, however, been acknowledged that parents and educators do not see eye-to-eye on the roles of parents in the education of their children.

Now bring it into the school!

1. List out occasions when your school typically communicates with parents.
2. Take note of the methods of communication: what is the tone? The medium? The frequency?
3. Note if the parents are being asked to be mere witnesses or some meaningful engagement is also being sought from them.
4. Now add to that list other occasions for (and methods of) communication with parents. Extend the scope of involvement beyond mere 'audience' parents to more participative parents.
5. Examine the existing obstacles for carrying out your added action points. Is it lack of time? Resources? Management support? Any other reason?
6. Discuss with your principal/staff/peers how any/all of these obstacles could be overcome.
7. Attempt surmounting the obstacles in the ways that you have arrived at.
8. See what happens!

Send in your findings to
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To sum up, these obstacles include:

- Different perceptions (of parents and teachers) of parental roles in children's schooling.
- Less than welcoming atmosphere for parents in schools.
- Minimal opportunities for parental involvement.
- Poor communication between parents and schools.
- Parent illiteracy, lack of parent education and skills.
- Time and job pressures.
- Language barriers.
- Cultural differences.
- Fear of authority-based institutions.

In addition, some teachers may even fear that their competence may be questioned by parents and so hesitate to involve them in the education of their child.

How can parents get involved?

The evidence is loud and clear: parental involvement enhances student learning as well as teacher efficacy. But how exactly does one go about involving parents in the education of their children?

The paper then goes on to describe several models of parental involvement. I am not going into those details here, as such models are best evolved for each one's unique context, and there can be no single formula that will work universally. In order to develop a workable model, for one's own context,

the best way forward is to examine the current challenges to drawing in more parental involvement. Doubtless, many of the factors listed in the previous section may find resonance in your context, too.

By first examining each one of them, and then brainstorming on ways of meeting these challenges (during staff meetings or parent-teacher meetings), a model that is suited to one's own context can then be evolved. For instance, if you resonate with the factor "minimal opportunities for parental involvement" and are pulled back by "parent illiteracy, lack of parent education/skills", then listen to this story: A school in Bangalore invited one of the school *ayahs* to share with Grade IV the story of *a day in her life*. That one interaction transformed the way the class thereafter looked at *ayahs* ... who, in fact, was the parent of one of the children admitted under the Right To Education Act! That this could well have translated into student attitudinal shifts, teacher efficacy or parent-teacher engagement – seems likely?

This, truly, is how we can bring research into the school!

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