

Language Minority Students, Parental Engagement and Partnerships

KATSURA SAITO

Graduate School of Education, Kyoto University

Engaging parents means a very important element to the academic success of language minority students (LMS). School districts and schools design to promote more effective and active parental engagement. It reflects the view that effective parental engagement spurs fostering LMS's identity and improvement in learning.

In the United States, parental engagement is legalized by legislation, and noteworthy activities on the matter are implemented by school districts. This paper provides key information to educators and local policymakers, who constantly face the challenge of how best to structure and implement education for LMS, those who are disadvantaged, and to empower parents in an effort to foster LMS identity and to improve academic performance. In the main section, approaches to engaging hard-to-reach parents are discussed.

I. BACKGROUND OF THIS STUDY

In the opening sentence of the report 'It Takes A Parent' (Appleseed, 2006), it mentions the importance of parental engagement for today's schools.

The role of schools has been expanded and national attention on student learning elevated. Today, public schools are faced with the tough assignment of assuring that every child reaches not only minimum standards, but beyond. That task should not be delegated to educators alone. In truth, if one wants to really transform education—It Takes A Parent.

By the U.S. Department of Education's definition (2004), parental engagement occurs when parents and educators participate in 'regular two-way and meaningful communication involving student academic learning and other school activities'. When using the term *parent*, this paper intends it to refer as well to a child's guardian or any other adult who plays a significant role in a minor's life. In this paper, the author uses the term 'engagement' instead of 'involvement' because it describes the degree to which parents are psychologically connected to what is going on in their children's schools. By engagement, this paper means something more than mere interest or commitment, though engaged parents are both interested in school and committed to doing something there.

Engagement in children's education starts at home, of course, with primary caregivers providing love, a healthy environment, developmentally appropriate learning experiences, and, as children start school, encouragement, a positive attitude about learning, and homework support. But within the formal education system, parental engagement is most effective when viewed as a partnership between parents and the school. President of Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education, Dolinger supports this idea (Appleseed, *op. cit.*).

In this time of federal and state mandates for improving student achievement through setting high standards, providing highly qualified teachers and holding schools accountable for results, we must not overlook one of the most important components for raising the performance of schools and students—parent engagement. In a recent poll, 86% of the general public believes that support from parents is the most important way to improve schools. As education stakeholders, we must create those best practices of parental involvement that create a successful system that not only enables parents to support the learning process of their own children but also allows them to be smart consumers of education—in advocacy, decision-making, and oversight roles. The more parents participate in schooling, in a sustained way, at every level, the better for student achievement.

This paper provides a brief overview of parent-school partnership in the U.S. It covers recent legislation, challenges to engaging language minorities, and the problems of how to close the gap and how to connect with disengaged, hard-to-reach parents. The purpose is to clarify the importance of parental engagement and to highlight the issues facing parents and students with limited English proficiency in building parent-school partnerships.

II. THE LITERATURE STUDY

NCES (1998) demonstrates one-quarter to one-third of all schools included parents to a moderate extent in most decision-making, with input on the development of parental engagement activities taken into consideration to a great extent by 31 percent of schools. The majority of public elementary schools (79 percent) reported having an advisory group or policy council that includes parents.

Literature studies show that children whose parents are engaged show greater social and emotional development (Allen and Daly, 2002), including more resilience to stress, greater life satisfaction, greater self-direction and self-control, greater social adjustment, greater mental health, more supportive relationships, greater social competence, more positive peer relations, more tolerance, more successful marriages and less delinquent behaviour (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003).

Parents help prepare their children to learn at all ages by keeping them healthy and safe and by supervising, disciplining and guiding them. They help children feel good about themselves and confident with others, which are related to a sound identity. They teach them a positive attitude about learning and school. Henderson and Mapp (2002) found that 'students with engaged parents, no matter what their income or background, were more likely to earn higher

grades and test scores and enroll in higher-level programmes; be promoted, pass their classes and earn credits; attend school regularly; have better social skills, show improved behaviour and adapt well to school; and graduate and go on to postsecondary education’.

Additionally, the study found, ‘Schools that succeed in engaging families from very diverse backgrounds share three key practices: 1. focusing on building trusting collaborative relationships among teachers, families and community members, 2. recognizing, respecting and addressing families’ needs and any class and cultural differences and 3. embracing a philosophy of partnership where power and responsibility are shared’.

Parent engagement can be classified by the degree of commitment. Epstein (1997) has organized it into 6 types. They are: 1. parenting: assist families with parenting and child-rearing skills, understanding child and adolescent development and setting home conditions that support children as students at each age and grade level. Assist schools in understanding families, 2. communicating: communicate with families about school programmes and student progress through effective school-to-home and home-to-school communications, 3. volunteering: improve recruitment, training, work and schedules to engage families as volunteers and audiences at school or in other locations to support students and school programmes, 4. learning at home: engage families with their children in learning activities at home, including homework and other curriculum-related activities and decisions, 5. decision making: include families as participants in school decisions, governance and advocacy through PTA/PTO, school councils, committees, action teams and other parent organizations and 6. collaborating with the community: coordinate resources and services for students, families and the school with businesses, agencies and other groups and provide services to the community.

The typology is important, because they lead to a better understanding of the many kinds of partnerships that contribute to students’ academic success. Often important partnerships such as learning in the family and family-school communication are not readily acknowledged. Knowing their importance encourages schools and parents to undertake them.

So far, we have shared knowledge that parental engagement affects students’ academic success. In general, the effectiveness of parental engagement appears to be convincing, but is actually somewhat arguable. Even though parental engagement is regarded in the literature as a key to bridging the achievement gap, my concern remains that parents’ limited English proficiency might leave a gap, or perhaps widen it. I am concerned about it, because parental engagement is now reinforced in a new Elementary and Secondary Education Act, called NCLB.

III. CURRENT LEGISLATION ON ENGAGING PARENTS

Although the system has been established, not every parent can get engaged. If parents do not understand English, this difficulty means a lot.

NCLB (*No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*) was signed into law in January 2002. This legislation is intended to help close the achievement gap between disadvantaged and minority students and their peers by improving public schools, and this federal legislation is based on four basic principles: stronger accountability for results, increased flexibility and local control, expanded options for parents and an emphasis on proven teaching methods. Key features include

the alignment of high state academic standards and statewide assessments, the use of qualified teachers, greater parental engagement and when schools do not perform up to par, the options of school choice, supplemental tutoring, or both, for eligible students.

- All parents are informed and have an opportunity to support increased student achievement.
- Inform all parents about opportunities for involvement at home and in school.
- Inform about parents' rights and roles in school improvement in appropriate languages and formats.
- Provide materials and training to prepare parents to help their children increase academic achievement.

In other sections, there are regulations for school districts to maintain a parental engagement policy as below:

- District distributes the parental engagement policy to parents.
- District distributes to parents a report card on the performance of every school and of the district as a whole.
- District along with parents conducts a yearly evaluation of its parental engagement policy.
- District promotes family and school partnership and builds capacity for parents and staff to work together to raise student achievement.

As above, there are regulations that engage parents. However, Lareau states it will not work easily: 'The barriers are enormous and it's not about parents not wanting to be helpful' (*Education Week*, 2006). Districts and schools search for ways to engage greater numbers of parents in more meaningful ways, but many find it challenging to increase the rates and types of parental engagement. This appears to be especially true at schools serving low-income and limited English proficient populations for whom a variety of factors are likely to inhibit parental engagement, including difficult family circumstances, for instance, parents working multiple jobs, homelessness, uncertain immigration status, parents' negative education experiences when they were students, language barriers and, for some immigrant parents, cultural norms supporting the idea that they should not question teachers.

What it more likely means is that many parents do not know how to get engaged, do not feel capable of contributing in a meaningful way, or simply do not feel welcome, because of their lack of language skills. What these parents need is more information, support, encouragement, or, specific training—something that schools and districts are not always well positioned to provide.

To close the gap between well-engaged parents and those who are not due to language barriers, schools and school districts should assess communication needs (e.g. language/ literacy level), work through established education associations to build trust and deliver information to teachers and other educators and address parents' diverse language needs by offering bilingual or multilingual materials, Web sites and trainings.

IV. HOW TO REACH DISENGAGED PARENTS

Once parents understand their opportunities in relation to their children's education and once they know how to formulate and ask the right questions and feel comfortable doing so, they are ready to better support their own children. They also are more likely to feel at ease volunteering in their child's classroom or helping out occasionally by working on a specific school-wide project (e.g., assisting with a fundraiser, participating in a cleanup day, etc.).

Certainly, hard-to-reach parents exist at every site. To engage those parents, programme arrangement and formulas of recruitment have to be considered. There are possible factors to encourage engagement. The factors include providing information and materials to community-based organizations that are in direct contact with hard-to-reach populations, such as homeless shelters, local Head Start programmes and faith-based organizations. In addition, liaisons should be trained to make home visits that are informed, targeted and culturally sensitive. School districts should help recruit liaisons who can easily integrate into the target community. Also, contracting with community-based organizations to disseminate information is recommended. Hosting summits and trainings that bring community-based organizations from across the state together for train-the-trainers sessions will increase the options. It is important to engage the community in order to connect with hard-to-reach parents, but this method and others that have been mentioned above are not very realistic. It is expensive and takes time to be noticed by parents. In my opinion, the easiest and most effective way to connect disengaged parents is by providing food. A research suggests offering food can be a motivating factor in drawing and retaining out-of-school-time programme participants of all ages (Collins, et al, 2008). Utilizing food as a lure may attract parents who are not interested in their children's education. What is more important, we do not need concise language skills in front of delicious meals, and food tends to dissolve walls. Once they have connected with teachers and other parents, it becomes much easier for both providers and recipients to keep or deepen relationships later on.

V. CONCLUSION

This paper has provided a snapshot of school-family and community partnerships. Now, the effort to engage LMS's parents is becoming very important.

In 2001, Hispanic students became the majority population in California's elementary schools. During the past decade, Hispanic enrollment district-wide has more than doubled. Many Hispanic parents come from cultures that shy away from parental engagement in schools. The first step toward encouraging their support is building approachability/familiarity. Applying the principles of inclusion and engagement to all parents and schools would cut across and eliminate artificial boundaries based on race and color and other traits and constructs.

Of course, parental engagement is not the single correct solution. There is no magic answer for the education struggles that LMS endures. However, parents cannot be relegated to the sidelines or seen as less important. High achieving schools and school districts recognize that parents represent a vital aspect of student success. In an era of school accountability, schools and school districts must determine innovative ways to relay critical information and improve the

level of school engagement for parents from diverse backgrounds.

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