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ABSTRACT

This paper, written jointly by a teacher and a parent, discusses the effects of changing parent expectations on parent cooperative preschools. It is suggested that pressure on the parent cooperative comes from parents' diminished respect for the professional status of educators, from new demands for a strict academic approach to preschool, and from the changing status of women. The parent cooperative philosophy of shared responsibility requires that the teacher have the professional skill and responsiveness to direct meaningful and successful parent participation and also maintain consistency of philosophy and procedure in the face of frequently changing parent boards. One essential element in a parent cooperative preschool is good teacher planning which can help parents become effective teachers. Another essential element is program evaluation which prevents a build-up of parental dissatisfaction and makes the communication of new ideas routine. The changing expectations of parents necessitates a clear division of responsibility between teaching staff, the parent board and the parents. (GO)

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by

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CHANGES IN PARENT/TEACHER EXPECTATIONS IN COOPERATIVE PRESCHOOLS

Thelma Harms and Judy Smith

This article was written by a teacher and a parent in a coastal university community. Our community is what we might call a "weathervane community" because it reacts strongly to the slightest stirring of the winds of change. The parents of young children here seem older and less naive, and often very much focused on the importance of nursery school experience in their children's total education. Frequently, our community is dramatically involved in issues which are part of larger social conflicts.

In the past few years, conflicts in parent cooperatives between parents and teachers have become more intense and more frequent. Schools formerly considered exemplary have erupted into conflict, and in the ensuing blow-up, the parent groups then split into factions and teachers were forced to resign. It was during such a nursery school conflict that the two authors of this article met: one was a parent involved in the group, the other was brought in as consultant to help the school work through its problems. The process of working through the immediate conflict took 3½ months of intensive work. This article will try to share some of the understanding gained by parents and teachers and by the consultant about the effect of changing parent expectations on parent cooperative schools.

Sources for change in parent and teacher expectations

When parent cooperatives were first organized in this country about 50 years ago, the inclusion of parents as part of the teaching team in the classroom was a revolutionary idea. Although parent involvement in schools is still the exception on a national basis, increasing numbers of parents have come to believe that they have the right to control the education given to their children. This changing attitude was dramatically illustrated in the New York City teachers strike of 1969, which occurred over the issue of community control of education. In this case, professionals and parents found themselves hopelessly locked in a power struggle, each group equally sure that it alone knew

what was best for children.

A more constructive example of the growing stature of parents in education is the current Early Childhood Education Act in the State of California, which gives additional funding to schools to stimulate improvement in kindergarten through third grade classrooms only if parents are actively involved both in a decision-making capacity and in the classroom. Parent participation in education is now no longer a privilege sought by the "enlightened" middle class parent or forced on the "resistant" lower class parent, but part of a parent's responsibility to his child and an extension of his protective role.

Changing attitudes towards authority and professionalism in general have affected even persons in hallowed professions such as medicine, religion, law and government, as well as education. All are now subject to demands for accountability by lay people. The authoritarian concept that put professional status above question has been replaced by another concept of authority, one that might be called an authoritative concept. Under the authoritative concept, a professional is respected only for the real knowledge he can demonstrate that makes him an expert. His superior knowledge and ability is seen as a resource which is expected to be useful to help solve the problems of lay people. It is now considered part of the professional's duty to give feedback to lay people, to be open to their questions, and to consult them when decisions are being made.

In this swing away from authoritarianism, many parents have mistakenly turned away from authority, and have adopted an attitude of distrust for all professional educators. This has shaken the confidence of many educators, and has made them retreat behind the weak excuse that they cannot take action until "they see what the parents want." This position is actually an evasion of professional responsibility, and usually brings on more distrust. The parent cooperative teacher needs to become a truly authoritative teacher, one who can put her skills and knowledge to use in the service of parents and children without abdicating her professional leadership role.

Another source of changing parental expectations is the pendulum swing back to a stricter upbringing of children and a stress on earlier school skill development. When Dr. Spock writes an article entitled "How not to raise a bratty child", and books advising parents to teach their 15 month old child to read are selling briskly, we know we're in the midst of a pendulum swing to the opposite pole from permissiveness. Unfortunately, all the positive values of the existing system may be swept away with the negative ones. The pressure of the Sesame Street-Headstart syndrome has caused many middle class parents to make unrealistic and unncessary demands on parent cooperatives for early academic instruction seem to be in contradiction to the prevalent parent cooperative philosophy, which grew out of a child development, free play approach. But when teachers look at the underlying motives of parents, namely the desire for a program with more intellectual stimulation,

many teachers find themselves in agreement with the intent, if not with the academic content of the parent's suggestions. The question then becomes how to satisfy the parents' intent by devising experiences which are appropriate developmentally.

Further insight into this source of conflict can be gained from an article by Lilian Katz (1970) on teaching role models. Dr. Katz describes three different preschool teaching models: the maternal, therapeutic and instructional. The maternal model puts emphasis on keeping children safe, happy and well behaved. Teachers in day care centers often follow this model. The therapeutic model emphasizes the expression and resolution of inner conflicts and the development of unique and creative individuals. Parent cooperative teachers often follow this model. The instructional model emphasizes the training of children in school skills. Teachers in Head Start and other remedial programs often follow this model. It is easy to see how conflicts arise if parents' expectations are shifting to the instructional model and parent cooperative teachers remain with the therapeutic model. Recent research in teaching strategies suggests that a new role model is forming, one that can be called the inclusive role model.[1] Teachers who use strategies from all three of the former models when they are appropriate and whose goals combine both intellectual and affective emphasis, will have fewer conflicts with parents because they can

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[1] Harms, T. "The Relationship Between Teaching Strategies and Educational Orientation of Preschool Teachers", Unpub: Ph.D. thesis, U.C., Berkeley, 1974.

offer a widely varied program with appeal to a greater range of parental concerns.

Another source of pressure on the parent cooperative has resulted from women's demands for equal rights. Cooperative teachers have traditionally been women who did not need to be self-supporting and who came up from the ranks as parents, often lacking full academic qualifications. This pattern is rapidly changing. More women today are self-supporting and have full teaching qualifications. Men are also becoming interested in this field. These changes have caused added pressure for full teaching status, higher salaries, and job security for nursery school teachers. Parents whose children are enrolled in private self-supporting cooperatives have thus found themselves paying higher fees and shouldering more responsibilities. Under such pressures, parents start to ask whether what they are getting for themselves and their children is worth their time and money, and they are likely to demand more professionalism on the part of the staff.

Another aspect of the changing status of women is the growing confidence that mothers have in their own value. There is a reaffirmation of the significance of the childrearing role in many intelligent, active women who choose to stay home. Many mothers in parent cooperatives have worked as long as 10 years in responsible professional positions, have taken time out to have children and will probably return to work when their children are in school all day. Some of the energy that they put into their former careers is now released in the groups designed to

provide additional experiences for their children. Their expectations for the preschool program are high and their intense involvement can sometimes become a threat to the professional leadership of the teacher. A private parent cooperative is no longer considered an informal play group arrangement, but a school. In order to make demands for professionalization of the parent cooperative a reality, parents must realize that more outside preparation and planning will be required from them as well as from the teachers. Since parents are an integral part of the teaching staff, program improvement will require more orientation, work parties to make materials, and more planning sessions.

How the parent cooperative can benefit from this challenge

The basic parent cooperative philosophy has always been one of shared responsibility. Ideally, parents and teachers need to create a new school every year, since there will be new families involved, and one of the prime reasons for joining a parent cooperative is that parents want to influence the education of their children. The variety of parental skills and attitudes presents a tremendous challenge to the cooperative teacher. The teacher must have the professional skill to find constructive and meaningful ways for the parents to function in the classroom. The school must, however, maintain a certain consistency of philosophy and procedure, while at the same time being responsive to all the new parents that come in every year. Teaching under these conditions requires persons who are unusually secure, resilient and competent.

Parent cooperative teachers need to be open to new ideas so that their own expectations become more divergent, more inclusive, more contemporary. But one must remember that parent cooperative teachers are more vulnerable than most other preschool teachers because they are visible every day to the parents. Parents, therefore, should guard against being overly critical or setting their expectations at a superhuman level. It is essential for a cooperative teacher to include all the parents' ideas in the best form possible. Dissent and conflict among parents is unavoidable, but it becomes the teacher's role as an authoritative leader to make a harmonious, rich program out of these varied elements. This kind of divergent curriculum is not an unattainable "pie in the sky" ideal. It is rather the result of hard-headed organization and planning, in which the director looks carefully at each of the learning centers she provides and asks herself, "What is this area contributing to the learning and development of the children?" The teacher's job is to include a full continuum of experiences for the children. But while the activities and experiences should be varied, there must be continuity, a sequential buildup of activities and consistent high quality. Continuity and consistency help create a calm atmosphere in the school and tend to give parents a sense of purpose and assurance.

Planning ahead for program content is essential if continuity of ideas is to be achieved. If parents are to be effective teachers they need some basic orientation workshops before they start to teach.

Workshops on ways of guiding behavior, on general routines, and on curriculum ideas in art, science and language enhancement are essential. Additional workshops on other curriculum areas and on the progress of individual children will, of course, be needed as the year progresses. In the initial orientation, a comprehensive parent manual is helpful. Throughout the school year, both parents and teachers should be encouraged to observe in other schools so that they can bring back ideas from different programs.

At the beginning of the year the teacher will need to take major responsibility for the weekly planning of activities, and for the arrangement of the school; but as the parents' become more experienced they can become more involved in the long-range planning. In parent cooperatives that run smoothly, it seems that the teacher has learned efficient ways of organizing the environment and activities. In one school, for instance, the teacher found that by numbering the cabinets she was able to answer parents' questions about materials much better. It was easier to say, "The paint is in cabinet 3." than to say, "The paint is in the cabinet to the right of the sink under the bookshelf - no, not that bookshelf, the one on the other side." In another school, the teacher has collected all the materials needed for specific activities in separate boxes. Included in each box is a card for the parent, with ideas for presenting the activity: questions to ask, helpful facts and suggestions for follow-up books to read to the children. The number of

activities that can be organized in advance is unlimited: the sink-float box, a magnets box, tasting box, a measuring activity box, weighing box, and so on. Parents in schools such as these tend to have successful teaching experiences and become competent more quickly.

Another essential element in parent-teacher cooperation is evaluation, which prevents parent dissatisfaction from building up and makes a routine of communicating new ideas.

In order to be minimally threatening, evaluations need to be done with the consent and cooperation of the staff. Evaluation forms should be written to elicit constructive responses, not designed to emphasize only the negative qualities of the school.

The evaluation form should be short, preferably no more than one or two pages, and should include a space for the parent to give his or her reaction to (1) the ways his own child benefitted from the school (did the school neglect anything?), (2) appraisal of the learning experience provided, (3) appraisal of the staff, (4) the ways the parent and family benefitted, (5) other services, activities, experiences the school should be providing. In addition, parents should be asked to comment on the way the parent board runs the school, and to suggest topics for parent education meetings.

Periodic observation by an outside professional can provide reassurance to the parents that the staff and school are being evaluated in a larger perspective. (There is a danger that parents may not have the breadth of experience to judge a teacher fairly in all areas of

professional competence.) Guidance in evaluation, and a panel of professional evaluators are much needed services that parent cooperative regional councils can provide for their members.

Formal evaluations are, of course, no substitute for open channels of communication, but rather an essential part of effective communication. In parent cooperatives, intense differences of opinion are very likely to occur. In such a case, clear grievance procedures can save a lot of interpersonal abrasion. At the time that parent cooperative committees are working out grievance procedures, hiring policy or other guidelines, the tasks seen interminable, but in the actual situation, clear guidelines help the parent board function with expertise and continuity.

One of the chronic difficulties in a parent cooperative is the changing parent board. It takes a certain amount of time for parents to learn what the function of the board is and how to function as board members. By that time the child is ready for kindergarten, and the parent "graduates" also. One school holds elections for their new board in February so that training by the outgoing board is possible (through joint meetings) before the old board leaves the school. Another school has the past board president serve as advisor to the new board for one year, even if her child has left the school.

Regional councils can provide a much needed service to the schools in their area by presenting leadership training in the spring when new officers are usually elected. Members of parent boards when trained by

resource people, can become effective earlier in their term of office. For example, a regional cooperative council presented a leadership workshop with a session for new presidents covering tips on parlimentary procedure, projecting goals, setting priorities and organizing a yearly calendar. The workshop also included sessions on evaluating the nursery school, and developing communication skills. In addition, a panel discussion was had at which members of a nursery explained the reorganization of their school after a year of conflict. This leadership workshop was such a success that another is being planned to include sessions for treasurers and public relations chairpersons on fund raising ideas, membership procedures and personnel procedures.

If the parent cooperative is to meet the challenges of changing parental expectations and the diverse composition of the membership, there must be a clear division of responsibility between the teaching staff, the parent board, and the parents. This is not easy to achieve, since authority patterns in the private parent cooperative are entangled. Parent/employers are expected to assume fiscal responsibility and managerial control, while at the same time serving as teacher aides in the classroom and students in the parent education program. Teacher/employees are expected to assume professional leadership in the educational programs for children and parents, and to provide a stable and consistent program, while trying to see that each parent is pleased with the immediate

effect of the program on his child. Careful thinking needs to be done concerning the deliniation of responsibilities in the parent cooperative. It is often helpful if parents visit other schools and observe the effects of varying parent and teacher roles.

Educational philosophy needs to be a joint parent-teacher creation. If a school has a clear philosophy, parents will join the school because they basically agree with that philosophy, or stay away if they are in conflict with it. In the division of responsibilities, the teacher needs to retain educational leadership, because, as the professional person, she has to respond to the diverse needs and wishes of the parents. But while ultimate responsibility for the quality of the educational program is the teachers, she cannot do this alone. Parents are responsible for managing the center's finances, and organizing the participation schedule, and handling purchasing, personnel matters and all the other administrative tasks required by an institution. A cooperative is not a cooperative without co-planning: teachers need to be brought into the administrative planning and parents need to be included in solving educational problems.

Experienced outside consultants can be brought in when mutual problem solving within the group becomes unproductive, or when an area of expertise is missing from the staff and the parent group. One regional council has expanded its consultant service to include educational consultants on its counseling panel of psychiatrists, psychologists and

therapists.

The effectiveness of a school is determined by the quality of the interaction of teacher, parent and child daily in the classroom. With the increased recognition of the importance of parent involvement, in all schools there is now a unique opportunity to extend the parent teacher cooperative model beyond cooperative preschool.

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Postscript

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