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ABSTRACT

On the one hand, parents are often seen as a source of hope for many reading difficulties. On the other hand, parents are viewed by many teachers and school orficials as a source of frustration and difficulty in ameliorating children's reading difficulties and fostering growth in literacy. Parents' active commitment and participation is lacking in most attempts by schools to involve parents in their reading education program. Programs to help parents help their children in reading will not reach their full potential until parents are empowered. At the school level, parent advisory committees can be established to study the school reading program and create an agenda for parent reading programs. Parents can observe reading instruction as it takes place in the school. At the individual classroom and parent-teacher level much can be done to empower parents. Teachers can ask parents what they would be willing to do at home to improve their child's reading. Parent volunteers in the classroom offer opportunities for empowerment. Teachers and administrators may initially find it difficult to share power and responsibility with parents. Strategies for overcoming this reluctance include holding seminars on the issue, and sharing experiences with teachers and parents who have successfully participated in such a program. Parent empowerment must be an honest and rigorous attempt to make parents equal partners with schools in the literacy development of their children. (MM)

READING AND THE EMPOWERMENT OF PARENTS

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In the graduate level courses I teach in reading education one assignment I frequently give my students, usually in-service teachers, is to develop and lead the class in a discussion of a case study on some critical issue in reading education. The case study is to be based upon the students' personal experiences as well as their research of pertinent literature in the field. I have given this assignment several times over the past two years. To my surprise, one issue has consistently been chosen as the topic of choice by a large percentage of students. That issue is parents in the reading program. In most of these case studies and in their subsequent discussion, parents are viewed as having a negative impact on reading instruction in the schools. The teachers in my classes, in general, view parents as presenting problems and causing difficulties for teachers in providing effective reading instruction.

The nature of the "parents-as-the-problem" notion is multifaceted. Teachers have described pushy and overly aggressive parents; parents who are difficult to contact; parents who resist teachers' recommendations; parents who neglect their children, intellectually as well as physically; parents who attempt to censor the reading material in a classroom; and other difficulties. Although these seasoned teachers understand the importance of working with parents in creating satisfying educational experiences, many also see parents as problems in reading.

Such a perception runs contrary to several articles written on the subject in recent years. These articles suggest that parents, rather than having a negative impact, can, in fact, be the answer to many reading difficulties or otherwise have a significantly positive effect on their children's reading. For example, Dolores Durkin

(1977) found that parents play a crucial role for children who learn to read before coming to school. Vincent Greaney (1980) reports on the positive relationship that exists between reading achievement and leisure reading, an activity over which parents can have great influence. Similarly, in their review of relevant research, Goldfield and Snow (1984) conclude that literacy experiences in the home may enhance school reading achievement. Moreover, parent-child reading programs can bring about significant improvements in children's reading (Topping, 1987). In Becoming a Nation of Readers, the Commission on Reading (1985) emphasizes the importance of parent participation in their children's reading development. And, at a more informal yet equally persuasive level, Jim Trelease (1985) speaks to the great affective and academic benefits of parents simply reading to their children. These writers, and others make the point that rather then being a problem, parents are a solution to many of their children's reading problems.

Why is it, then, that the parental role in reading education seems to enjoy such ambivalent status? On the one hand parents are seen by some authorities in reading as a source of hope for many reading difficulties. On the other hand, parents are viewed by many teachers and school officials as a source of frustration and difficulty in ameliorating children's reading difficulties and fostering growth in literacy. Somehow the translation of "what ought to be" into "what is" seems to have gone awry. An abyss exists between home and school in dealing with reading, and that abyss is seldom bridged.

characteristics of Some School-Home Initiatives

Perhaps a consideration of some of the attempts by schools to build a bridge to involve parents in the reading education program of the school may provide some insight. First, it is almost a certainty that any school-home reading program has its roots in the school. That is, the school is almost invariably the initiator of programs to involve parents in their children's reading. From the school level, where parents may be asked to contract to read with their children for ten minutes per day, to the classroom, where individual teachers may request parent volunteers to come into the classroom one day a week to tutor individual children in reading, all attempts to involve parents in their children's reading come from the school.

Second, the initiatives that are developed by the school are usually didactic in nature. By this I mean that the schools are very directive in what they want the parents to do. Again this is evident at both the school and classroom levels. Parents are directed to read to their child, to turn off the television, to take their child to the library, to become a classroom tutor, to make classroom reading games, etc. In all these instances parents have little voice in how the goal of increasing parental involvement is to be carried out. This has already been decided by the school.

A third characteristic of many school-home reading initiatives is their lack of connectedness. That is, many of the programs designed to involve parents in reading are piecemeal. Continuity is lacking from one year to the next, from one grade level to the next, and even from one classroom to the next at the same grade level. Parents, especially if they have more than one school-aged child, are often bombarded with a variety of seemingly unrelated demands and

suggestions concerning their children's reading.

Many schools or special programs (e.g. Chapter 1) are mandated to involve parents in the reading education of their children. Although the intentions of such a requirement are noble, because the requirement is imposed from outside, there is often a lack of commitment and a lack of a sense of mission by those charged with the responsibility of implementing the mandate. It is not unusual, then, for a school to sponsor a "parents and reading" night or a parents reading workshop for the sole purpose of fulfilling the imposed requirement. Whether or not the parents program is effective, meets the needs of the parents and children, or even reaches the intended audience is irrelevant. What is important is that the requirement has been fulfilled for the current year.

In all of these characteristics the missing ingredient is the active commitment and participation of the parents. Parents are not asked to participate in the parental program for reading except as passive recipients of information and directives or as classroom helpers. Parents are seldom asked their perspectives on their children's reading situation, their opinions of their children's needs in reading, nor their ideas on how to improve the reading of their own children. In short, many parents and reading programs fail because the input of certain key players in such programs is often neither sought nor used. Parents are, in effect, kept at a distance from schools and from the very programs that might help their children.

A New Approach

Central to recent efforts for improving teacher performance and student learning is the notion of empowerment (Ambrosie & Haley, 1988;

Boyer, 1988; Giroux, 1987). If teachers and students are to bear responsibility for their performance in the classroom, they must be given a voice in determining their teaching and learning roles. Rather than becoming the automatons that result from a blind adherence to "teacher-proof" curriculum materials, teachers need be accepted as informed decision makers in matters of curriculum and instruction. Students, also, can no longer be viewed as passive recipients of knowledge dispensed by the teacher. Students need to be perceived as active and responsible participants in their own education, relying on their own knowledge and experience to contextualize the educational process.

In a similar vein, programs to help parents help their children in reading will not reach their full potential until parents are empowered. This means that parents need to be given a role in the planning and decision-making processes of parent-programs as well as the actual implementation of such programs. Parents are not blank slates. They know a lot. They know their children. They know the context of their homes. They have a sense for the schooling process and they understand the values, institutions, and operations that exist in their neighborhoods and communities. Parents can and should be informed participants and decision-makers in any parent-reading program, whether at the school or classroom level.

How might such empowerment work? At the school level parent advisory committees can be established to study the school reading program and create an agenda for parent reading programs. Parents can be invited to observe reading instruction as it takes place in the school, to learn more about how it is done and to make suggestions to make it more contextually appropriate for individuals and groups of

students. Committees made up of parents as well as teachers can plan extracurricular reading programs the correlate home reading activities with those that occur at the school.

At the individual classroom and parent-teacher level much can be done to empower parents. During parent-teacher conferences, for example, rather than making suggestions for parents to implement with their children, teachers might ask parents how the classroom instruction could be modified to make it more meaningful for their child. Teachers can also ask parents what they could and would be willing to do at home to improve their child's reading.

Parent volunteers in the classroom can offer opportunities for empowerment. Teacher and parents can talk as colleagues about the challenges and problems presented by the reading program in a classroom. Together they can decide what the parent can do and with whom in order to address the reading needs of the classroom. This may mean reading a favorite book to or with a child or group of children, doing a language experience story with a student, or making some reading materials for the classroom based upon the parents' ideas.

The essential part of parental empowerment involves giving parents a participant role in the decision-making process of the school or classroom. Empowerment means giving parents a voice so that they become an integral part of their children's reading education. Like teachers, when parents are made to feel valued and responsible members of their children's educational experience, new potentials and possibilities for growth emerge.

The empowerment of fathers in any parent-reading program is a particularly salient issue. Fathers are typically not viewed as

active participants in their children's reading. Given the stereotypical view that reading is an effeminate activity and the realization that reading problems impact more boys than girls in the United States, it is clearly imperative that fathers be invited to help their children in reading. Special and specific invitations need to be issued to fathers to participate fully in reading program development and the reading lives of their children.

Teacher (and Parent) Reluctance

Teachers and administrators may initially find it difficult to share power and responsibility with parents. Parents may feel this way too, at first. Asking for parent input into decisions is something most teachers and parents are not accustomed to. Yet, with increased parental participation in the school community it is inevitable that parent-reading programs will gain new vitality and higher levels of parent support and involvement than previously imagined. When one is given ownership of a problem one is more likely to work actively towards its resolution.

Overcoming this initial reluctance is clearly an important issue. There are several strategies that may be useful in mobilizing teacher and parent partnerships in the reading program. Seminars for and by the teaching staff may help teachers begin to deal with the issue of increased parental involvement in and responsibility for reading. Curriculum and reading specialists from the university who have studied this issue can proved a convincing rationale and stimulate ideas for greater empowerment of parents. Teachers who have already shared their reading programs with parents can tell other teachers how they did it. Parents who have expressed a desire to become more involved in teaching reading to their children can share their visions

of expanded involvement. Administrators and teachers can together set the expansion of the reading program to include the integration of parents as a goal for the development of the school reading curriculum. Finally, teachers can brainstorm among themselves for ideas, activities, approaches, and invitations that will seek, capture, and maintain greater parental participation in and commitment to the school reading program. A key focus in all these strategies should be the improvement of communication and understanding between parents and teachers. Growth will occur only when a foundation of mutual respect is fostered.

Teachers themselves should take a cautious yet deliberate course when making their own commitment to empowering parents. At first, teachers may wish to team with one or two parents before engaging all the parents in a classroom. "Rap" or brainstorming sessions with groups of parents (in which parents as well as the teacher are involved in brainstorming) a couple times during the first half of the school term may help to break the ice. Also, simply asking the right kinds of questions during parent conferences can begin the process of empowerment. It general, questions that begin "What do you think...: or "How do you feel about..." tend to be more empowering than questions that begin with "I think you ought to..." or "I feel that...".

Regardless of the nature of the first step, teachers should have a mentor or peer with whom they can speak in confidence. The mentor or peer is there to listen with a sympathetic ear and suggest alternatives to those teachers who risk sharing the responsibility of teaching reading with parents.

Conclusion

This paper purposely makes no specific suggestions toward developing a reading program that involves parents. It simply makes the point that a potentially fatal flaw in many school-based parents and reading programs lies in the fact that these programs are often for parents but not by parents. Parents do not have a choice in shaping such programs and thus do not necessarily feel an obligation to carry through with the programs no matter how excellent they may be.

Regardless of the details of the program and regardless of the level of child or school organization to which it is aimed, parents must be included in the conceptualization and planning of such programs as well as in the implementation. While some schools and school programs have parent advisory boards, care must be taken to insure that these bodies do not exist simply to affirm the positions and policies of the school administration. Parent empowerment must be an honest and rigorous attempt to make parents equal partners with schools in the literacy development of their children. Empowerment may not be the only key to success in parental involvement in reading. It is however, an essential one, and one has been missing too long from too many parent involvement initiatives.

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