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ABSTRACT

Inner-city schools face a myriad of problems, including escalating violence and hunger. This paper describes programs that were initiated in predominately black inner-city communities and which fostered parent involvement and collaboration between parents, teachers, school professionals, and the community. Participation, it was learned, can bring about safe and academically productive schools. Including minority poor parents in the schools requires clear mechanisms for involvement and necessitates programs to stimulate and capture their participation. Pupil services personnel play a critical role in collaborative efforts. Collaborative models were based on the premise that everyone needs information and support to function effectively. Therefore, everyone in the collaboration was exposed to, and took part in, training and development. Involvement was measured by constructing a parent-school activity index to gauge participation in day-to-day school activities. Eleven categories of activities were generated and included parental activities such as classroom assistance, executive committee and advisory board membership, tutoring, workshop participation, lunchroom assistance, attendance at parent-teacher meetings or conferences, and participation in a variety of fund raising activities. Likewise, in order to understand alienation of parents, elements of alienation such as "meaninglessness," "normlessness," and "powerlessness," were explored. Accountability was highlighted since previous work showed that it is a critical component of empowerment. Shared accountability effectively shifted power from the school to include parents. Results revealed that the targeted group, mothers, appeared more empowered, generating the hypothesis that alienation and participation were inversely related. (RJM)

Working with African American Mothers and Urban Schools: The Power of Participation

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Today, Jackie Linnan is an empowered professional and social agency director. Twenty-five years ago, Jackie, the mother of three young children, was welfare dependent, depressed, and isolated. She lived in a predominately black inner city neighborhood in a small Northeastern state. Her motivation to become independent and self-sufficient is directly related to her years of participation in the day-to-day activities in her children's school. Hers is one example of the self-realization that can emanate from the involvement of parents in schools.

Parent/School Collaboration

Schools in the nation's inner-cities face a myriad of problems, including escalating violence, hungry, undernourished and increasing numbers of children who are homeless. Not only do many of these children live in

dilapidated and substandard housing but the schools they attend are often in disrepair. "Even in schools with adequate facilities, supplies, and resources, chronic absenteeism, poor academic performance, severe behavioral problems, disillusioned teachers and discouraged parents are common" (Winters, 1993, p.7). No one entity can solve these problems alone. Solutions to such problems require a collective effort, namely the collaboration of families, schools and communities (Chavkin, 1993; Epstein, 1991). "Collaboration suggests that neither group can function effectively alone; that each group needs the cooperation of the other to carry out its mission. The sum of the collaboration is greater than the total of what each group could accomplish alone" (Winters and Easton, 1983). Collaboration, parent involvement, and participation used interchangeably in this discussion, are all grounded in the expectation and reality of shared commitment (Winters, 1994).

The articulated goals encompassing safe and academically productive public schools, rest on collaboration that includes teachers, parents, school professionals, and community (U.S. Department of Education, 1994). Parent involvement targets the parents

(or primary caretaker) of children in the schools, and is grounded in the belief in the positive outcomes of collaboration. From the example of Jackie Linnan, it is evident that enhancement of competence, the development of skills, the actualization of potential and the impetus of motivation, are byproducts of parent involvement (Winters and Maluccio, 1988).

As parent involvement is contemplated, Comer (1988) has argued that it is not sufficient to merely "invite" minority poor parents to the school and expect them to be responsive and accommodating. Clear mechanisms for involvement and programs to stimulate and capture their participation, must be in place in order to involve parents who heretofore may have felt alienated from, unwelcomed in, and threatened by the school. Pupil services personnel play a critical role in collaboration. The precepts of various disciplines with the underlying shared focus on developing social competence, prepares pupil services personnel with the repertoire of skills to facilitate leadership development and foster collaboration. Given the complexities of parent/school collaboration, ongoing training for school personnel is paramount as it is for parents. The content of training

will vary in accord with the needs of the particular group.

My experience as a pupil services professional was first as a school social worker in the early days of Head Start in Connecticut followed by assignments in elementary, middle and high schools. As the chief social worker of the Baldwin-School Program, a forerunner of the School Development Program under the leadership of Dr. James P. Comer of the Yale Child Study Center, I witnessed what parents and schools can accomplish working together. One of the major objectives of the program was to bring parents into the school in meaningful ways and to make school environments more conducive for learning. Involvement of teachers and parents in decision making and management are critical aspects of the program. A collaborative model is based on the premise that all in our society need information and support to function effectively. To be effective participants, each player in the collaboration must be exposed to and take part in training and development. Socio-economic status and social psychological factors influence one's ability to function independently. In addition, individual potential becomes mitigated by the racism, elitism, and

sexism that perpetuate powerlessness. The experiences occurring in schools in which collaboration is ongoing can cut across these schisms and function as growth producing environments. The sensitive issues inherent in interaction require opportunities for both sides to air frustrations, reaffirm successes and weigh alternatives. Cooperative planning, a critical aspect of collaboration, provides an arena in which shared commitment and mutual respect can develop.

A number of schools have good intentions and genuinely want parent involvement. Yet it still remains a challenge for schools to work with and involve parents in the day-to-day activities of the school. School personnel will invite parents and encourage them, and yet may still become threatened when parents dare to question. School personnel often back away and become defensive when challenged. Although ultimately it is the school that maintains the power, schools guard their terrain and at times are reluctant to share their boundaries (Moles, 1993). Yet a number of schools across the Nation have successfully extended and engaged parents (Davies, 1990; Comer, 1988; Moles, 1993: Schorr, 1988).

A number of studies demonstrate how parent

involvement benefits children's academic and social functioning (Clark, 1993; Epstein, J.L. 1991). Studies have demonstrated that parent involvement can be an additional resource for schools (Johnson, 1990). Parker, Piotrkowski, and Peay (1987) found that Head Start mothers who participated in sponsored educational activities experienced an increased sense of personal well-being. The qualitative and quantitative studies discussed in this paper, first carried out in Connecticut in 1974 and later replicated in 1987 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, demonstrate the benefits of parent involvement for parents themselves. The schools are located in predominately black inner-city communities. Over the years, as mothers sustained their activity, they appear more empowered, generating the hypothesis that alienation and participation were inversely related. The focus targets the difference in outcomes between high and low participant mothers.

Constructing a Parent-School Activity Index

A Parent-School Activity Index was devised in order to measure participation in day-to-day school activities. In the initial study, both parents and school personnel identified all activities and contacts that parents had

with the school and school personnel since the beginning of the program, six years earlier. Eleven categories of activities were generated. Categories included parental activities such as classroom assistance, executive committee and advisory board membership, tutoring, workshop participation, lunchroom assistance, attendance at parent-teacher meetings or conferences, and participation in a variety of fund raising activities. A panel of raters including one principal, two classroom teachers, two parents, one of whom was employed as school community aide, and a school social worker, independently evaluated and assigned a numerical value to the designated activities. Criteria included time commitment, personal responsibility, and impact of the activity on the day-to-day functioning of the school, on a one-time basis. The inter-rater reliability coefficient was .88. A total score of 38 was divided to reflect low, moderate, and high participatory scores (Winters, 1993).

In keeping with a major commitment to involve parents in all aspects of the program, parents were active participants on the research team. Parents assisted in the formulation of questions, participated in the pretest and completed lengthy ongoing indepth

training regarding procedures and methodology to prepare them to be interviewers. As members of the research team, they did not rubber stamp the proposed research methodology. For example, in obtaining demographic data, they refused to solicit information regarding range of income. This item was eliminated from the survey questionnaire, and census tract data was substituted, still verifying that in accord with federal criteria a majority of the families were economically deprived.

Exploring Alienation

To explore dimensions of alienation, three constructs from the social science literature meaninglessness, normlessness and powerlessness were explored quantitatively (Srole, 1956; Seeman, 1983; Willie, 1968). Self-estrangement and social isolation, additional dimensions of alienation, were examined qualitatively. The extent to which an individual understands events in his/her social sphere was represented by meaninglessness. When the social sphere was unclear, confusing, and chaotic, individuals were confused as to what to believe, and in protection of the self tended to avoid interaction. To assess meaninglessness, subjects were asked whether they agreed

or disagreed with the statement, "things are so confusing in the world today, I do not understand what is going on". Mothers were questioned about their expectations and the extent to which they can anticipate and evaluate outcomes. When examining the interaction of participation in school activities and educational level, while the high participant mother was less likely to feel unable to understand events in her immediate world, education was found to be the prime factor in rejection of the idea that she was unable to absorb and process information about the social world. In one mother's voice, "..it is the 'little things' the an individual can do, that "make a difference". Her focus was not restricted to the confines of demanding family responsibilities. As a trained parent volunteer in the lunchroom, she had learned to move quickly to calm a youngster who had dumped another child's food tray. Before the situation could escalate, she skillfully engaged all children involved in the incident and was able to avert a major outbreak in the lunchroom. This parent volunteer, Annabell Stokes, was assured that there are small things that one can do, that make a difference and foster a sense of accomplishment.

"Inner cities are becoming the breeding grounds of normlessness, the state in which any behavior is considered acceptable if it meets needs and fulfills goals. [In a society that emphasizes material acquisitions and prosperity but the reality restricts access and opportunity for success, the concept of normlessness prevails]. For many urban dwellers, the message that has been conveyed is "possession by any means necessary. Illegal, marginal, or questionable behaviors become acceptable, as long as the goal is achieved and needs are gratified" (Winters, 1993, p.92).

The expectation that illegitimate means have to be used in order to realize culturally prescribed goals surfaces as a prime concern.

Low income mothers whose participation in their children's school is characterized as high, in contrast to their low participant counterpart, significantly rejected the idea, "that it is okay to do anything in this world to get ahead". It is not surprising that those few high participant mothers who were employed were twice as likely to reject the normlessness statement (Winters, 1993). "The positive spirit and strength in these women with minimal comforts and pleasures in their lives

remains intact. Yet, in our complex society with its mixed messages, the distinction between the acceptable and unacceptable is not always clear. Psychological strain results as individuals struggle in choosing between behaviors approved by the wider society and those that will fulfill a need" (Winters, 1993, p.93).

Powerlessness, the third dimension of alienation examined here, refers to alienation in a socio-psychological sense. The concept includes external isolation from the larger community and the internal isolation that is characterized by low self-esteem. Of all the components of alienation, the most devastating is this feeling of a lack of power. Powerlessness represents the degree to which a person feels powerless to achieve the role they have determined to be rightfully theirs in a specific situation. By virtue of participation in school based activities, a mother experiences her efforts as being valued. Gradually the self becomes strengthened with the realization of the positive outcomes of ones endeavors. In American society, our personal identities are defined in the context of what we do, namely our work. Hence, a mother's sense of self, is developed, reinforced, and

reaffirmed as she continues involvement in school activities. Goals are reevaluated and escalated as confidence is shaped, new challenges identified, and empowerment evolves. In 1987, high frequency participant mothers were twice as likely as their low frequency participant peers to reject the powerlessness statement. Their on-going commitment to involvement in school activities reflects their personal empowerment.

Accountability

A critical component of empowerment is accountability. Being accountable encompasses the expectation of responsibility for outcomes. One embodies commitment to outcomes as a critical aspect of ones sense of being. As parents' involvement continues over time, and they become increasingly accountable, they are more committed to producing positive results and become obligated to shared goals. As a result, the collaboration involving school personnel, families, and communities is enhanced. It is an ongoing process that develops overtime. "As an aspect of [collaboration], shared accountability shifts the power" from the school to include parents and thus expands and "improves the basis

for negotiation and understanding" (Winters, 1993, p.107).

"Jackie's story is one of the many positive accounts that seem to pale in the wake of human devastation wrought by today's inner-city environment. Through the exchange and interaction common to participation and ongoing socialization, she acquired knowledge, developed skills, and learned new attitudes. In the process, her ability and potential were reaffirmed. Education and participation interacted as significant determinants [in altering] Jackie's life chances " (Winters, 1993, p.105).

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