DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 407 204 RC 021 034

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TITLE Teachers' Attitudes towards Parental Involvement: Looking within a Rural Secondary School.
PUB DATE Mar 97
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Chicago, IL, March 24-28, 1997).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS High Schools; *Parent Participation; Parent School Relationship; Parent Student Relationship; *Rural Schools; *Secondary School Teachers; *Teacher Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS Teacher Surveys

ABSTRACT

A descriptive study gave rural high school teachers an opportunity to voice their opinions on parental involvement. A survey questionnaire using a Likert-scale format was completed by 51 of 85 teachers in a large rural midwestern high school. All respondents were European American, as were virtually all students. Over 70 percent of respondents had more than 5 years of teaching experience and had earned a master's degree or more. Only 39 percent of respondents strongly agreed that parental involvement would increase student success, and only 5 percent indicated that they had the time to involve parents. No teacher strongly agreed that involving parents was a responsibility of the teacher or was necessary at their school. Although 61 percent believed that parental involvement was important for a good high school, 95 percent were unwilling to participate in inservice training on ways to increase parental involvement. Only 4 percent strongly agreed that "the school views parents as important partners." While teachers favored having parents as active agents in their school, they were unsure how to promote such situations and unwilling to spend time learning how. Teachers believed that parental involvement was important in conferences with teachers and students but less important in other school-related affairs, that the responsibility for parent involvement lay with the parent, and that the appropriate sphere for parent participation was within the home. Includes recommendations for practice and further research. Contains 15 references. (SV)

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ED 407 204

Teachers' Attitudes Towards Parental Involvement: Looking Within a Rural Secondary School

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Abstract: This paper looks at a rural high school to examine the attitudes that teachers have towards parents and parental involvement. A descriptive study was conducted in order to give teachers an opportunity to voice their opinions on an issue that has gained support through federal, state, and local legislation. Results of the study will not only impact how the school community addresses the issue of parental involvement, but it also raises questions concerning teacher education and implementation of parental programs in other schools.

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Paper presented at the American Educational Researcher Association Conference (AERA) on Talking Together in Educational Research and Practice in Chicago, Illinois, March 24-28, 1997.

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The descriptive survey conducted in this study with rural high school teachers finds that teachers' report that parental involvement in schools should be limited to home responsibilities. This attitude is contradictory to that of researchers in the field of education who suggest that school-home partnerships to increase student success should be more complex, collaborative, and integrated with teachers' responsibilities in the school setting. Though teachers in this study recognize that parent participation is needed, they are reluctant to be involved in learning ways to create school-home partnerships.

Background

Throughout our nation's educational history, many researchers have held that the parent's role in their children's education needs to be limited to creating a home atmosphere for the social, emotional, and moral development of their child (Breckinridge, 1921; Center on Families, Communities, Schools & Learning, 1995; Ward, 1965). In the 1960's, however, federal legislation regarding parental involvement started to broaden with the passage of Head Start, Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Schools Act. Today this legislative trend continues through the most recent initiative Goals 2000. Now parents are given the option to "choose" the school or school district for their child in some states, due in part to the Bush Administration and present congressional emphasis on school

choice for parents and students. The Bush and Clinton Administrations have also encouraged other agencies (i.e., within the government) to look towards the implementation of parental involvement within programs (Ballen & Moles, 1994). Other countries are also setting up programs in order to increase parental involvement. New Zealand, Korea, Canada, and Sweden, for example, are making efforts to promote a more positive working relationship between schools and the home (see Ramirez, 1996).

In the United States, the issue of parental involvement in schools has become a topic that educators, parents, and legislators has been discussing widely over the past two decades. However, much of the parental involvement in schools is focused within elementary education (Wheeler, 1992), and a common belief among school personnel and parents is that as children grow older, parental participation is less desired, and therefore diminishes (Center on Families 1994; Epstein, 1995). This is not to say that parents of secondary students do not desire to participate in their children's school related activities, but rather that opportunities to become involved are more difficult to find (Rioux & Berla, 1993). Due to this diminishing parental involvement, more research needs to be conducted within the secondary schools to find how parents are perceived by teachers. This history also makes it important to learn about opportunities

that parents have to play a part within their children's education.

Research consistently suggests that with the increase of parental involvement comes an increase in student achievement (Epstein, 1995; Flaxman & Inger 1992; Hickman & Miller, 1995; Lee, 1994). With this in mind, many schools throughout the nation have programs, or are working on developing programs, to increase schooling on or off the school site (Center on families, communities, schools, & children's learning, 1995; Epstein, 1995; Rioux & Berla, 1993). However, if school personnel want to involve parents, they must be aware of two possible barriers to that involvement: 1) apathy of teachers and their lack of responsiveness to parents (which has been found to contribute to barriers to parent participation) and, 2)lack of teacher education programs that address parental involvement (Kahn, 1996).

Before outlining the development and outcomes of this particular study, the word "parent" needs to be defined. For the purpose of this study, "parent" refers to the definition taken by Wheeler (1992). Not only does the term stand for the students' biological, foster or adoptive parents, but it also refers to other family members including siblings, adult friends, senior citizens, community members, employers, or school staff. It also includes "any older individual who takes a special interest and

helps the teenagers to develop and understand life values and to build self-confidence." (Wheeler, 1992).

A major challenge in investigating parental involvement phenomena in education is the fact that many obstacles may hinder parental participation, including: narrow conceptualizations of parental involvement by schools, negative attitudes towards parents by school personnel, a lack of teacher preparation, occupational demands that impose constraints on parents' participation, cultural characteristics that affect parent involvement(Yap & Enoki, 1995), and parental insecurities concerning schools. In order to introduce parental involvement programs, schools would need to include the primary involved: parents, students, teachers, and teacher educators all have a stake in how the involvement should take place.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to discover the attitudes of teachers towards parents, and to use the study as an opportunity for teachers to discuss what might be accomplished if a partnership with parents is established.

Methodology

This study utilized a questionnaire to examine the attitudes and opinions of teachers toward parent involvement in the education of their children.

Setting

The school that was studied is situated in a small midwestern town within five miles of a major university. The population of the school is approximately 1,300 students. In terms of ethnic diversity, the school resembles that of the town, with a majority (95%) of the school population being Euro-American. The school is currently being headed by a new female principal, and is going to begin block scheduling for the first time in the fall.

Subjects

Of the 85 educators that are employed within the school, 51 (60%) completed their questionnaire and returning it to the appropriate location. The educators who did complete the surveys have contact with students from grades 9-12.

The educators consisted of a homogeneous group (100% Euro-American) of whom 36 (71%) of the respondents had more than five years of teaching at the secondary level with 40 of the educators (79%)having earned a master's degree or more. The population that participated in the survey were 25 females (49%) and 15 males (29%).

Instrumentation and Procedure

Instrumentation

The survey that was used was the *"High School and Family Partnership Summary"* (HSFPS)developed by Epstein, Conners and Salinas from John's Hopkins University(Center on Families,

Communities, School and Children's Learning, 1993). Issues on which teachers were asked to comment included the following response options with a four-point Likert scale ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree:'

- professional judgment concerning parental involvement
- professional judgment on specific ways of involving parents
- professional judgment on the importance of activities that they as teachers can employ
- estimation of professional contact made with parents
- professional judgments on specific measures parents should employ both at school and in the home
- estimation of parental participation at school
- estimation of others support of parental involvement in school
- professional attitude on the schools attitude towards community issues (e.g., drug use, gangs)
- professional judgment on students and teaching, and
- professional experience and background

For each of the ten categories illustrated above, 15-25 questions were included per section. The concluding section changed formats by including space which allowed the teachers to write comments to questions regarding what they felt had worked in their past experiences, what could work in the future, and what would be needed in order to strengthen parental involvement in their school.

Procedure

To gather data on teachers' attitudes toward parental involvement, a descriptive survey was distributed to all faculty members. Survey data were collected throughout the month of May 1996.

Before handing the surveys out to the teachers, the researcher desired to speak at a faculty meeting in order to assure the educators that the survey would provide valuable answers that would in turn allow the school and the community to discuss the issue of parental involvement within their school. The surveys were then copied and distributed to the faculty mailboxes by the on-site teacher who was assisting in the study. A time period of two weeks to complete the survey and return it was given to the faculty. Fifty-one (60%) of the questionnaires were returned to the supervising on-site teacher by the subjects.

Data Analysis

Responses by teachers were calculated by response category frequencies (percentage responding to each of the four categories on the Likert scale) for each question on the seven-page questionnaire. In examining results, all of the responses on the survey were not included in the analysis of the data. In order to concentrate on a more limited, specific agenda, about parental participation, specific questions were chosen that were relevant to the desired topic. The questions chosen would give an indication as to what practices the teachers are currently using, as well as what the teachers would like to see with regards to parent partnerships. Questions chosen were suggested by the creator of the instrument, Joyce Epstein. The calculation of responses to these questions would later be used for discussion

purposes by the faculty at the school site to stimulate conversation regarding parental involvement.

Results

After calculating the data, only 20 teachers (39%) strongly agreed that parental involvement would increase student success. They held this view research reports to the opposite. However, only three teachers (5%) indicated that they had the time to involve parents. No teachers strongly agreed that involving parents was either a responsibility of the teacher's or that it was necessary to involve parents at their high school.

Though 31 teachers (61%) strongly believed that parental involvement was important for a good high school, the majority (95%) stated that they were unwilling to participate in in-service training that would assist them in developing ways to increase the incidence of parental involvement in their school. To sum up the findings of the teachers' attitudes with regards to what their professional judgment, only four (7%) of the educators strongly agreed that the "school views parents as important partners."

The second domain, "assessing the specific ways of involving families," a percentage of the teachers agreed that information regarding "parenting skills" as well as "how to talk to their children about class-work and skills needed in school" was needed by the parents. However, 26 teachers (51%) stated that parent-teacher conferences with all families would need to be developed,

with only one teacher stating that the parent-teacher conferences were already strong.

When asked about what "activities" they as teachers could employ during a parent-teacher conference, 23 (45%) strongly agreed that inclusion of the students in the parent-teacher conferences would be beneficial.

"Parental responsibilities" was an area of the questionnaire that received the most attention, for all the questions were answered (in other sections, teachers left answers blank) as well as the most recommendations by the teachers given to parents. The items: "speaking to teen about the importance of school" (71% agreed it was "very important"); "assist teen in balancing school work, chores and outside activities" (69% felt it was "very important"); and "help teen plan for future work or schooling" (67% very important), received the highest rate of "strongly agreed" from teachers. Concern with these topics is of interest because in another part of the questionnaire most of the teachers (80%) agreed that parents did supervise their teenagers' behavior and were involved in some activities that were school or family related.

The next domain focused on who "supported parental involvement in the school and how much." Of the teachers that responded, most felt that there was not strong support (67%) for parental involvement on a school wide level, but 38 (74%) responded that they were more active in pursuing parental

involvement than their colleagues. Many of the teachers (45%) indicated that the highest support for parental involvement came from the principal, and the counselors (41% teachers response). Only two (4%) of the respondents indicated that the parents and community gave strong support to parental involvement, and only five (10%)teachers agreed that other teachers in the school and the school board members strongly supported parental involvement.

Teachers were also asked how they "viewed the community in which they teach," and the social ills that may be a part of school and community. As with many communities throughout the nation, the teachers felt that the three major problems that faced their school community are drug use (68% of the respondents), teen parenthood (43% of the respondents), and gangs (24% of the respondents). Three of the teachers responded that unemployment as well as homelessness were major problems within the community in which they lived.

Discussion

Review

Teachers at Bellarmine High School are in favor of having parents as active agents in their school, but indicate that they are unsure as to how to produce such situations, as well as unwilling to spend more time learning about how to include parents. One reason for these findings is suggested by Khan (1996) whose research indicates that many teacher education courses do not include parental involvement within their

curriculum. However, most of my respondents were seasoned professionals that were far removed from teacher education programs.

The teachers at Bellarmine indicated that certain aspects of parental interaction are important (e.g., parent-student-teacher conferences), but believed that parental involvement was less important in areas that involved school related affairs (e.g., inclusion of parents in curricular matters).

By reviewing the written portion of the questionnaire in which teachers were able to give their own comments, a majority of the teachers (95%) stated that "time and money" are major factors that may hinder them from producing active parental involvement within their school. Though many of the teachers indicated that they felt this, it was not clear as to whether they were speaking from lack of time to initiate a school-wide program, or lack of time and money to involve parents within their own classroom(this will be discussed in the 'recommendations for further research' section).

Further review of the data indicates that there were no active programs to bring parents into the school that were already strong within the school.

The teachers at this school believe that the responsibility to involve parents comes from the parents themselves, and not the teachers. This would prove difficult if the parents did not know how, or were unable to become active agents in the school due to

the inability to read the newsletter (20% of the adults in the county are functionally illiterate; Ramirez, 1996), or are unable to attend meetings. The latter may be difficult for single parents, working parents who works grave yard shifts, or parents who have anxiety even when walking on the school campus.

School-Based v. Home-Based Types of Involvement

Bellarmine teachers indicated that most of the appropriate efforts in which parents can participate would need to be within the home of the parent and child. The majority of the teachers indicated that the school is a separate entity, and that organization of parental involvement programs would be difficult, given the limited amount of time that the teachers have in their schedules. Kahn (1996) suggests, that teachers are often suspicious of parents that are involved, and that teachers do not want to give up power within their classroom.

Implications For Teaching

At Bellarmine, there is presently no active PTO/PTA, but the school is in the process of starting such an organization. One such group was formed that was called "Cardinals for Better Education" that was intended to bring parents together to raise money for extra-curricular organization, sports, and items needed by teachers for their classrooms. This organization was later disbanded. Due to the absence of such parent groups, teachers may not recognize the benefits that parents can bring into the school and classroom. However, parental involvement does not

mean that parents only raise money for the school, and keep an removed presence. Teachers did state that it was not important to include parents on committees that dealt with curriculum and policy matters within the school.

Parent involvement is a term that may indicate that there is an opportunity for parents to become involved by staying on the fringes of the school. If schools such as Bellarmine established "parental-partnerships" then a more active view of parents may be recognized by teachers and inclusion into their classroom and school.

General Recommendations For Practice

Before recommending what the teachers would need to develop to initiate parental participation, data on students' and parents' attitudes will need to be gathered and studied in order to view the phenomena from all the players (such data is in the works at this present time). In the meantime, Bellarmine can begin to look into the prospects of parental participation by:

1. Looking at current research on how other schools have incorporated parents into their schools, and the results that have been produced. Discuss whether or not parental participation is beneficial.
2. Read over the findings from this researcher, and discuss the areas that are of most importance for them.
3. Attending in-service that would show ways that the teachers can incorporate parental participation, since Bellarmine is going to a block schedule in the fall, which would free up time for the teachers, an issue that the teachers themselves were concerned when debating whether or not they would be able to begin active parental participation.
4. Recognize that parents are partners in education, not forces against it and developing ways that would assist parents understand the culture of the school more.

5. Developing communication practices for parents that may be functionally illiterate (Ramirez, 1996) or may not have access to a phone.
6. Discussing ways of conduct at parent-teacher conferences, and include students into the conversation, then re-examine the regular format of parent-teacher conferences at school, including address the issue of transportation to school events if parents are unable to drive.
7. Discussing why parents are not involved (e.g., SES, feelings of inadequacy, attitudes that parents do not care).

Recommendations for Further Research

Several important issues of research stem from this initial study. The teachers seem to be unaware of the benefits of parental partnerships, and expressed some anxiety over including parents into the school. Some of the research areas that would need to be addressed are:

1. Conducting interviews with teachers in order to find out what they mean by stating that "time and money" are factors that are preventing them from involving parents
2. Computation of data from the students and parents, then conducting interviews that would clarify issues that have been addressed from some of the responses from the students that have been read.

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