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ABSTRACT

This paper describes how one professional development elementary school in Detroit (Michigan) encouraged high levels of parent involvement. In 1993, school faculty joined with six universities to form a collaborative partnership. The group believed that all partners had an equal voice and that parents should participate in all meetings and groups. Though the school already supported parental involvement, the group determined that parents needed more skills and opportunities for leadership roles to increase their confidence. They formed a leadership team of parents (with input from university staff) to identify school problems and address problem solving. During weekly meetings, parents learned group process skills and roles and practiced their skills in meaningful arenas. The parents planned and conducted a parent workshop addressing school needs. In planning, they were encouraged to assign typical parent tasks to faculty members so roles would blur. Because the first workshop was successful, the parents continued to meet and plan further workshops. The project successfully achieved the goals of addressing school needs and increasing parents' group process skills. (Contains 27 references). (SM)

Meeting the Challenge for High Level Parental Involvement in an Urban Professional Development School

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at
Association of Teacher Educators Summer Conference

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by

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Running Head: High level parental involvement in PDS

Introduction

All relationships contain elements of politics and power. Educational relationships are not exempt from this generalization. In just relationships there is a concern for balancing power. As educational collaborations develop, the importance of leveling playing fields becomes a visible and important issue. This issue was identified and addressed at the Katherine B. White Professional Development School. Although working toward equity between parents, community members, university faculty, school administration, and teachers was an issue, this paper focuses how high level parent involvement was used to promote equity for parents.

Setting

Katherine B. White Professional Development School is a Detroit Public School which serves over 1200 children and their families. The diverse student population represents 11 language groups. A majority of the students are African America with a large minority of Arab students from North Yemen. The poverty level is over 75% and 99% of the students live in non-traditional families. There are 47 Prekindergarten - Grade 5 classrooms.

In 1993 the school faculty joined with six universities in the Greater Detroit area to form a collaborative partnership under the Michigan Partnership for New Education umbrella. With the Holmes Principles (Holmes Group, 1990) serving as guidelines, the team set six goals. One of the goals for mutual study and growth focused on parental involvement. When teachers, administrators, university faculty, and parents committed to the notion that all partners have an equal voice, urban parents needed skills to promote meaningful, high level parent participation. The school principal and

the university faculty member collaborated to help empower parents.

Theoretical and Research Considerations

Before beginning a parental involvement project in an urban setting, the possibilities for carrying out the project were considered. "Both James Comer and Moncriff Cochran implemented their programs with low-income minority populations. Their research demonstrates that parents with little education, on welfare, or with low-paying jobs are effective in contributing to their children's success in school." (as cited in Becher, 1993, p. 361). Bronfennbrenner (1974) reported that all families have strengths. Sharon Williams (1992) described strengths of black families and gave strategies, grounded in a sociocultural framework, for working with the families. The work of the preceding authors lends support to the idea that parents in the school were able to participate successfully in an involvement program.

Ability is one half of the participation equation. The second half of the equation is desire. Chavkin and David Williams (1985) found that parents wished to be more involved in their children's educations. Seventy five per cent (75%) wished to be more involved in decision making and 95% desired to be more involved as audience. In Zigler & Muenchow's descriptions of parent involvement in HeadStart, evidence of interest again appears.

Gutmann (1987) and Lynch (1992) both argued that not only are parents able and willing to work with educators, but that they have a right to work with teachers to educate their children. Having established the right, the ability and the desire of parents to work with educators, the need for collaboration was explored. The following advantages of parental involvement were located in the literature: (1.) increased academic achievement with parent involvement (Comer, 1984; Edmonds,

1979; and Walberg, 1980); (2.) lower retention rate (Bronfennbrenner, 1974); (3.) improved chances for a better life as adults (Berrueta-Clement, et al, 1984); (4.) greater psychological well being for parents (Zigler and Muenchow, 1992); (5.) improved parent ability to assist children in school tasks (Becher, 1985); and parent involvement is especially important in urban poor school communities (Winters, 1993). Additional advantages can be found in Table 1 on page 11.

Not all writers were positive about parental involvement. Williams (1992) noted the lack of teacher preparation to working with parents. Jones (1991) described the aversion some teachers have to parent involvement. Lightfoot (1978) noted that teachers negatively stereotype Black parents. Draper, as cited in Zigler and Muenchow, noted the need to help parents develop the necessary skills to participate in schools (p. 112). She also noted that some adults were more interested in political issues than children. ". . ., not all the HeadStart "parents" on the various advising committees and boards really had children in the program. . . ., some were activists just using the program as a platform." (p. 109). Winters (1993) identified unique problems in working with poor African American mothers in urban settings. Those difficulties, immersed in alienation, are powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness,social isolation, and self - estrangement. Garfunkel (1983) described the power imbalance in home-school collaboration. He questioned if parents could find a way to work as equals in a setting that educators claimed as their own. Equity was a crucial issue in the K. B. White program. Equity would emerge as a key element in defining parental involvement in the project.

In this project parental involvement was framed in three notions. The first element in the definition of parental involvement was the belief that parents are equal partners on an education team. Greenwood and Kaplan (1976) and more recently

Pettapiece and Meers (1992) noted the importance of equity for parents. Bronfennbrenner's (1984) notion that the child and the family come as an ecological package in child development is also included in the conceptualization of parental involvement in the K. B. White work. Doherty and Peskay's (1992) description of a family system added the final shaping to the definition of involvement. They wrote, "The family systems approach ... for schools is fundamentally social and collaborative. Home-school collaboration is an attitude not an activity, and occurs when partners (parents and educators) share common goals and responsibilities,are seen as equals, and contribute to the collaborative process." (Christenson, Rounds, & Franklin, 1992, p. 22).

In addition to clarifying the meaning of parental involvement, roles for parent involvement were considered. Zigler and Muenchow (1992) listed roles that emerged in early HeadStart work as: making decisions about programs, working in classrooms with and without pay, participating in learning activities, and receiving home visits (p. 106). According to Bessent and Webb (1976), "Parents have several roles to play - in home and in relation to social agencies such as the school." They continue that in school involvement is desirable through Citizens Advisory Councils (p. 110). Gordon's (1976) Parent Involvement Model consisted of the following five components: parent as audience, parent as teacher at home, parent as volunteer, parent as paid employee, and parent as decision maker (p. 6-9) Wissbrun and Eckart (1992) described a similar model. They suggested "Four levels emerge: (1) Spectator, (2) Support, (3) Engagement, and (4) Decision Making" to create a hierarchy. (p. 121) According to Christenson, et al, there are "four areas of opportunity to change the rhetoric about home - school collaboration to reality: training, development of comprehensive parent involvement programs at a school level,

interventions for groups of or individual children and their families, and research" (p. 46). At K. B. White the focus of involvement was at Wissbrun and Eckart's highest levels of engagement and decision making. The action taken to promote high level involvement was guided by Christenson's, et al's four areas of opportunity.

Description of Action

The principal of the school had acted to support parental involvement in the school prior to the formation of the collaborative partnership. She had an open door policy for parents. She listened to their concerns. She shared reading material with parents and established a parent room in the school. A weekly school newsletter was in place. Workshops were given to parents. When a university faculty member indicated her interest in working with parents in the school and shared her concern about equity for parents in the partnership, the principal and university faculty member formed an alliance to support high level parent participation in the professional development school.

One thing that became clear early on was that if parents were going to participate in meetings, study groups and governance committee, a set of skills would be useful. Teachers already had experience using group process roles in their meetings. In addition to the common professional dominance of work in educational settings, this set of group process skills thrust the educators into leadership roles. Thus, an imbalance was in effect in meetings and all partners were, in fact, not equal. In order to lessen the unequal standing of partners a set of group process skills were taught to parents. In addition to having skills, it was decided that parents needed opportunities to assume leadership roles to increase their confidence. Finally, it was thought that the leadership roles needed to occur in a real and meaningful setting.

It was decided that a leadership team of parents would be formed. The overt task of the group was to identify problems and needs that existed in the school and to work to address the needs and solve problems that would be identified. The university faculty member would serve as convener and facilitator of the first meeting. The seven preschool through grade two teachers, who formed the beginning teacher team, were asked to identify at least one parent that might be willing to work to solve problems. Seven parents were identified and all seven volunteered to meet biweekly to work to improve the school.

In addition to the overt tasks, covert tasks also were established. Those tasks, identified above as teaching parents group process roles, giving them opportunities to practice the skills in meaningful arenas, and increasing their confidence about participating in school events, were the goals of the project. Brainstorming was the first skill that parents were taught. They also were taught to do a needs assessment. They used the data generated by brainstorming and from the needs assessment to form a plan of action. The parents decided that a parent workshop was needed. The first workshop thoughts by the parents were ideas that revolved around an educator presenting to parents in a lecture format. This is what they knew. The university faculty member convinced the parents that they were able to conduct the workshop themselves. She reassured them that she would serve as their support person and do what they needed her to do. Although hesitant at first, the parents agreed to become the workshop presenters. This gave the university faculty member a teachable moment. In the planning of the workshop, it became evident that there were different roles that needed to be filled if all the tasks were going to be completed. Thus, the opportunity to introduce roles for group process emerged. The group discussed what a facilitator, a recorder, a time keeper, and a process observer did to help a meeting

be successful. At a parent request, meetings began to occurred weekly. There was important work to do and biweekly meetings slowed progress. As planning for the first workshop continued, the university faculty member suggested that parents may want to practice the roles learned in the planning meetings. Parents agreed and volunteered to assume roles. They also decided that the recorder's notes should be saved to serve as a set of minutes.

As the parents assumed the leadership roles, the professor became their typist. She was given the role additional roles of making a flyer for the school newsletter on her computer and providing snacks for the workshop. Parents were assigning tasks to the faculty member that they had traditionally been asked to do...make flyers and bring food. Thus, the blurring of roles had begun. Enjoying their emerging skills, they decided to base their workshop on the model that they were using in their planning sessions. They assumed various roles and planned small group brainstorming and reporting to the whole as a form of synthesis of the meeting.

As the workshop neared the anxiety level rose. This surfaced the need to rehearse for the presentation. The week before the workshop a role playing of the proposed workshop occurred. The future facilitator cried as she attempted to maximize participation in the drama. She said that she couldn't facilitate and wouldn't do it. The other parents rallied around her and with hugs and words they convinced her that she could do well and that they were behind her. This is the day that the group became a team rather than a collection of parents.

The university educator asked permission to hand out an evaluation form at the end of their meeting. She explained that it would help her do the research she needed to do for her job at the university and that the group could all talk about it at the next meeting. They agreed to grant her a spot on the agenda. Thus, six weeks after

their first meeting, the parents were ready to conduct their first workshop, which was a rousing success as indicated from the ratings on the evaluation forms and by their own excitement.

At the next weekly meeting the workshop was discussed and decisions about what to do next were made. The university faculty member revealed the extremely high ratings and positive adjectives used by the 24 participants to evaluate their workshop experience. The principal, who had attended the workshop, came to the follow up meeting. She complimented the parents on their skillful use of group process roles and cooperative group format. Using the recorder's notes from the small group sessions, the parents decided that a second workshop was needed to address issues raised in workshop one. In response to questions from the university faculty member, who was now the parent coach, it became clear to the parents that a series of workshops were needed. They had discovered that staff or parent development was not a one shot deal. This helped parents understand that change is a process. By using the evaluation forms and the meeting records, parents were continuing to use data to plan. Workshops and parent rallies continue to be planned and conducted.

Outcomes

When reflecting on the project, it was asked if the overt tasks were accomplished. The overt task of addressing school needs and problems was addressed in the first series of workshops. One example of identifying and solving a problem was when parents stated that the opening of doors after the school entrance period was disruptive to some classrooms and was a potentially dangerous habit. Parents created a door safety procedures and implemented it. A need for groups

norms was noted and norms were established for parents and other partners. Parent lead workshops have had attendance rates between 15 and 77.

On a deeper level, documentation was examined to determine if the goals of increasing group process skills and confidence to participate were met. Three stories serve to demonstrate the positive outcomes of the project. The first story shows that parents we able to use group process skills and that they had confidence to assert their thinking with an educator. At the planning session for the second workshop, the university faculty member's chairperson attended the meeting. He came in his suit and made several suggestions for the meeting. The parents told him that he was to be the process observer and informed him that he was to keep quiet until the end of the meeting, when he would be allowed to share with the team his observations of how the meeting went. The parents had assume ownership of these sessions and were not about to let a new person come in and take over their work.

Story two is about a workshop that occurred in December of 1994. Following an informal discussion between the parent coach and the parents about a phonics program commercial that promised academic success for all children (and adults), it was decided that parents in the school might enjoy a workshop on how to use toys in educational ways. After soliciting toys for demonstration purposes from local businesses , parents gave their "Using any toy to teach your child" workshop. Again, the principal found time to sit in on this presentation. This was the first workshop she was able to attend this year. She was amazed at the depth of understanding that parents had of how to facilitate children's learning. She was so impressed that she told her superintendent about the workshop. The workshop will be given area wide next year. The parents are confident and excited about moving their expertise out of the school and into a larger arena. They are confident about leaving the school nest

and sure about their leadership ability.

The third set of short stories demonstrates how parents assumed active leadership roles in the whole team meetings. Parents are active members of study groups, joining teachers, administrators, university faculty and student teachers in reading, discussing and reflecting on research. Parents have made suggestions in curriculum meetings. Parents have been part of presentation teams at conferences and professional meetings. A parent was elected by the members of the Governance Committee, an elected body that handles the business of the school, to serve as facilitator for first semester of the past school year. When elections were held in January for second semester facilitator, another parent was elected as facilitator. Parents regularly volunteer to assume other leadership roles in all meetings.

In addition to outcomes that documented meeting the goals of the project, outcomes consistent with research findings were also recorded. They follow in Table 1. The outcomes listed in Table 1 are over one and one-half years. The leadership group added members. Thus, the number of parents over the period of the project has increased from seven to 14.

Insert Table 1 here.

As in most processes, obstacles to positive outcomes arose in this program. In the first session parents spent their time voicing their feelings about being treated like children in the school and the resulting frustrations. Parents on several occasions wanted to exclude new comers. Power struggles within the parent group occurred. There were misunderstanding between parents, parents and teachers, and parents and university personnel. Once parents found their voice, they practice yelling

with it. A huge amount of time was invested by the parent coach on week-ends and evenings; often interfering with other responsibilities and sleep! (The parents liked to phone her after midnight in their moments of frustration.) Childcare and transportation were frequent hurdles to clear. Parents became very tired at the end of the second year, but they want to continue and expand.

Future Directions

Although funding for the continuation of the professional development school work is uncertain at this time, the parents and their coach plan to continue their work. The Professional Development team was able to restructure the school week to allow for a meeting of all partners on Thursday afternoons. This will permit study groups, Governance Committee meetings, whole team meetings, and parent planning and evaluation meetings to continue.

In addition to continuing the first year and one-half activities, a parent advocacy group has formed. Parents will be using their voices in a state level arena. The first experience with this effort took place near the end of the 1995 school year. Another end of the year task was to video tape interviews with children and parents, who were involved in the work of the school. Final editing remains a task to be completed in the fall. The comments will be analyzed and compared them to information gathered in personal interviews with students whose parents were not involved in the work. When test results from standardized test are returned, a comparison between students with parent involvement membership and students without involved parents will be conducted. Team members are in the beginning stages of looking for funding to continue and expand the work. Finally, parents are continuing their educations and

dreaming of becoming university students and their coach is searching for the funds to make their dreams reality.

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Table 1.

Other Outcomes Consistent with Research Finding

Project Outcome(s)	Interpretation(s)	Source(s) with Similar Findings
•Eight parents become employed (5 outside of school)	-Improved economic status -higher aspirations	-Kagan (1984) -Kagan and Schraft (1982)
•Supported teachers' hands on strategies and homework policy in curriculum meeting	-positive attitude -demonstrate higher understanding of school program	-Kagan (1984), Becher (1984), Epstein (1986) -Epstein (1986)
•Attended and testified at Senate Education Committee Hearing in state	-becoming more active in community -politically active	-Becher (1984) -Kagan (1984)
•Parent who had been removed from school by police now participated positively in study groups, committee meetings, institutes, leadership academy, and lead workshops. Supports team members from school, community & universities.	-less parent-staff conflict -positive attitude change	-Comer (1980) -Kagan (1984), Becher (1984), Epstein (1986)
•Parent returns to school to get GED	-higher aspirations -GED completion	-Kagan and Schraft (1982) -Winters (1993)
•10 parents volunteer at least 20 hour/month, 6 parents give 30+hours/week	-supports staff, school, and programs	-Epstein (1986)

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