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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses school-home dialogue: its benefits; its theoretical underpinnings (Plato, Dewey, Hegel); perspectives on parent involvement, including societal changes that seem to produce barriers to communication between homes and schools (changes in family structure and role, time/schedule problems, distance, and educational bureaucracy); and the emerging role of technology. The paper describes experimentation with telephones as a way to bridge the information gap between teachers and parents, resulting in "The Transparent School Model" which uses a school-based computer system to provide voice mail linkages between teachers and parents. The paper claims the model goes a long way toward promoting the ideal of community achieved through dialogue between homes and schools, and addresses the barriers to communication described earlier. Contains 18 references. (EV)

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Dialogue and communication between school and home

One of the unique factors that makes us human is our rich ability to communicate with each other. Human communication is vital in relationships between any two individuals, and is becoming even more vital as very large populations of people must understand others. We are at the dawn of a revolutionary information age. Peaceful progress will depend on how we share information and collaborate for the good of humankind. The relationships between people and the connections between the institutions of our society ought to reflect what is best about human interaction. We believe that the education of our young, at school and at home, is a place where we can live out the ideals of positive relationships and learn how to use these same good practices in other parts of our social lives.

Three themes guide the development of this paper. They are:

1. Democracy depends on an excellent education for all citizens.
2. An excellent educational system is enhanced by a partnership between teachers and parents.
3. A rich and frequent dialogue between teachers and parents can serve as a model of democratic processes in the larger society.

We believe that there is nothing more fundamental in a democratic society than excellent education for all citizens. Only educated citizens can govern themselves and the schools are the primary means for the society to make progress. Central to the process that allows schools to play this critical role is the concept of *community* - participants in an enterprise holding goals in common and acting jointly toward those goals. The way to achieve community is *dialogue* - in this case dialogue between the teachers and parents who

contribute most directly to the nature and quality of the experience of the children.

When parents and teachers have community, and form a partnership to assure the success of a child's education, this relationship is a metaphor for the ideals of an effective democratic society. The parent/teacher partnership is a benign example of the classical tension between the individual (parents) and the state (teachers, in this case). If these two entities are separate, neither of them can succeed. But when teachers and parents both have an accurate understanding of the school program and hold information in common, there is a much better chance for cooperation instead of conflict. With rich and frequent communication, parents and teachers can grow in mutual understanding and both can gain more expertise in how to optimize the education of the child. This can produce a two-generation benefit for the society. Better educated children will grow to be more effective citizen/ adults in the next generation. The adults (parents and teachers) in the current generation are practicing the very dialogue that contributes to a more effective democratic society.

The kind of school/home dialogue that we will discuss in this paper can have two fundamental effects. First, children will benefit from the coordinated support of the most important adults in their lives - their teachers and their parents. Second, these adults will benefit directly from school/home dialogue, they will learn from each other and their ability to create a supportive environment for the children will grow. James Coleman (1988) called these joint outcomes "social capital" and considered our efforts to encourage the dialogue as the "investment." Social capital is the product of better parent involvement, and includes the gains in knowledge, skills and abilities that help the citizens and the society to make progress. John Goodlad followed this line of reasoning when he stated:

A society should always be investing in schools protected from the erosion of their public purpose - that is, the educating of persons committed to a society that nurtures its members. (Goodlad, 1997).

It is exactly the integration of a high quality education to meet the needs of the individual citizens while serving the society as a whole that can remind us where we ought to be going. We will show in this paper that there are effective applications of telecommunications that can contribute to interaction between schools and homes and make it easier for parents and teachers to achieve community.

Theoretical underpinnings

The idea that parents and teachers should work together is based on simple logic and recent research on parental involvement (e.g., Abramson, 1994; Epstein, 1987; Henderson & Berla, 1994). Parent involvement may be the most powerful variable in predicting student success in school. When Walberg (1984) reviewed twenty-nine studies on school/parent programs, he found that family participation in education was twice as predictive of academic performance as socioeconomic status. Some of the parent involvement programs had effects that were ten times greater than other factors, and had benefits on both the school students and younger children in the home. In addition to the very strong research base favoring parent involvement, the underlying premise of this paper (dialogue) has a theoretical basis with a long and solid history. We will mention some of the ancient concepts that shaped this theory and then concentrate on the more recent and explicit theorists.

The discussion must begin with the historic origins of democracy from Plato and Socrates. Plato observed that a slave is a person who accepts from another the purposes of his behavior. In Plato's view, a high quality education would bring every person the point of not accepting the imposition of ideas from others. It would motivate the citizen to engage in dialogue with others so that all would grow from the interaction. The Socratic questioning process became a model for using dialogue to help each participant clarify their own views and understand the views of the other (Elkind & Sweet, 1997). In the idealized democracy of these ancient thinkers, education was the sole way of assuring equality for individuals and progress for the society.

These source ideas resonate with the three themes that guide this paper - democracy, quality education, and parent involvement. The most relevant chapter in the history of these viewpoints comes from the American philosopher John Dewey, who lived his life attempting to connect democracy and education in the minds of the general public. Dewey felt that parents and teachers (or citizens and the state) must achieve *community*, and community was achieved in rich and frequent communication.

Dewey thought and wrote about education issues around the turn of the current century but his thoughts are just as relevant for us as we approach the beginning of the next. His views on the importance of communication came from the German philosopher Hegel. Widely known for describing the “Hegelian dialectic,” he gave us a functional understanding of what is best in dialogue. When two people engage in rich and open communication, one is likely to hold a viewpoint (thesis) not held by the other. The other’s view was considered the “antithesis” and (without dialogue) this was the basis of all arguments and conflict in a society. Hegel assumed that these two people with different viewpoints were not evil and were motivated to understand each other - this was the reason that they would continue discussion rather than resort to isolation or force. In the condition of open dialogue, Hegel believed that each individual could retain much of their original belief while adding an understanding of the other point of view. Instead of making a compromise, he said that the dialogue would produce a new, integrated point of view that he called “synthesis.” In the more modern vernacular, these two persons achieved a “win-win” solution where intellect provided a better resolution than emotion or physical strength.

Both of our original discussants agreed with the new synthesis because they were involved in its formation, and therefore achieved a level of *community*. Each had clarified their own beliefs during the dialogue while listening to the views of the other. The Hegelian dialectic process also explained how the larger society would make progress in the future, because every synthesis became a new thesis that would be examined in another round of dialogue. In the contemporary context of school/home partnerships, Ravn (1997)

called this process “joint acting,” where the dialectic sequence can produce new levels of cooperation.

When John Dewey embraced Hegel’s views, he made the specific applications to the growing educational system in the century’s great experiment in democracy - a universal public school system for a growing democratic nation. He tried to show that the ideals of the designers of the United States could be translated into reality, and set out to transfer Thomas Jefferson’s “common school” model to the more complex society of the 1900’s. A vital aspect of the common school, for Jefferson, was a society holding knowledge in common. If all people had access to the same information, it was much more likely that they could act in concert toward a more positive future.

Carrying us to the third theme of this paper, Dewey would tell us that parents and teachers must engage in dialogue to achieve community. He interpreted Hegel’s theory for more practical consumption and recommended that:

1. parents and teachers identify their common goals; and
2. each engages in action toward these common goals.

The assumption here was the same as Hegel’s - that rich and open dialogue would allow each to hear and understand the views of the other. As this happened, each person would be transformed as they developed their new *commonly-held* views. The process was enhanced if the participants had considerable information in common; this would reduce misunderstanding and expedite communication. For example, if a teacher used a certain strategy for helping a young child with initial reading and the parent had learned a different method, they would first agree that they both wanted the child to learn to read (the common goal) and that elements of both methods might be even more effective (the joint action plan). Using dialogue, conflict is avoided and both learn from each other how to provide an optimal educational experience at school and at home. To complete the cycle,

a better reading experience for the child will contribute to the larger society as the child becomes an active adult citizen.

John Dewey would say that only when you have a voice in decisions are you likely to be an enthusiastic participant as the decisions are implemented. He went even farther to show how his ideas contributed to a democratic society. Dewey thought that the only sure way of making social progress (which Coleman called *social capital*) was to help the parents and teachers share in the ends while engaging in the means. This notion would also be used inside the classroom between teachers and the students - democratic decision based on dialogue would also be used to help children experience the process and enjoy the outcomes. And to complete the cycle of the three initial themes of this paper, the dialogue process in the classroom and between school and home becomes a kind of practice for democracy in other aspects of the larger society.

Commonly-held knowledge, an open climate for dialogue, and a desire for outcomes that benefited both the individual and the society - these are the conditions that endured the test of time and can guide us to a better tomorrow. When neighborhoods or cities achieve genuine community, there are clear social benefits beyond the education outcomes. In the largest social disruption study ever conducted, neighborhoods with a sense of community had lower rates of violence and crime. The study, funded by private foundations and federal agencies in Chicago since 1990, identified communication and cohesion among the citizens with a common vision about the lives of children that made the difference.

Parent involvement perspectives

There is a strong consensus around the world that parents and teachers should be engaged in rich and frequent communication. National polls in the United States often find that more than 90% of the citizens agree that there should be more and better parent

involvement. A poll of registered voters in 1997, conducted by the National PTA, found that 94% believed that progress in education depends on involving parents in the process (School Reform & Parents, 1997). The reasons for this widely recognized need are complex, but reflect other characteristics of post-modern society. We will comment on four societal changes that have a major influence on communication between schools and homes. These are:

- changes in family structure and role
- time/schedule problems
- distance
- educational bureaucracy.

Family structure and role - Families have changed much faster than the way schools could adjust to the changes. For example, schools think of the student's family as the classical, traditional model - two biological parents married to each other where the male parent works and the female parent does not. Samples of families in American schools reveal as few as 7% of the children in some schools come from such traditional families; 93% therefore come from families with quite different structures (Brice Heath & McLaughlin, 1987). As many as 60% of the children in some classrooms will only live with one of their biological parents during their school career. A startling number of children come from single-parent homes where the biological father has never had a role in the child's life. The family characteristic of poverty also produces an isolated underclass of families who are effectively disconnected from the important institutions of their own society.

Time and schedule problems - This category of problems contains the most common reasons that parents and teachers give when asked why they do not interact very often. Teachers' instructional demands fill their working day and there is no provision of time to communicate with parents. Parents either are genuinely busy or perceive themselves to be too busy for frequent parent involvement activities. Working parents are often at work

during the school day and rarely have time to visit school or attend meetings.

Distance - As schools have become larger and must cover larger geographic areas, the idea of the neighborhood school has begun to vanish. The local school has been replaced by the regional or consolidated school, and the "ownership" by parents and the community has been lost. The distance barrier, either social or geographic, is producing a generation of parents who might never visit the school their child attends.

Educational bureaucracy - Education has become so large and so professionalized that there is a danger that the original democratic ideal may have vanished. In the United States every local school system is supposed to be governed by a lay board of education. But in reality there are layers and layers of administrators who make most of the decisions (unencumbered by input from the citizens and parents). Phil Schlechty (1997) set the challenge for changing direction when he said:

If real change is to occur in our schools, . . . leaders must be willing and able to spend enough time together and engage in enough dialogue and analysis that they come to share a common understanding . . . (p. 46).

New collaborative roles for professional educational leaders are emerging, and those who can effectively interact with all stakeholders will be the influential guides toward the future.

This list of reasons (and many others) seems to produce barriers to effective parent involvement at a time when improved and expanded parent involvement is such a high priority. The results paint a dismal picture of interaction between schools and homes. In our most recent research (Bauch, 1997) we found that a typical teacher in the United States has contact with about two parents per day throughout the school year. That means that only about 10% of the families have interaction with their child's teacher on any given day - 90% have none! The parents recognize that they are out of touch. Our survey found

that 78% of parents say they need more information from the school and teacher. Fully 45% of the parents in this 102-school study reported that they have no contact with their child's school per week. Other studies have estimated that the median number of parent/teacher conversations may be as low as four *per year* (Marttila, 1995).

These conditions indicate that the communication between schools and homes is minimal (Smith, 1995). Parents and teachers may not interact with each other for long periods of time. With little or no interaction, parents and teachers cannot hold the same pertinent information in common. They cannot meet the conditions of dialogue set out at the beginning of this paper, and are therefore not likely to contribute to educational excellence or growth of the society. The research on parent involvement shows two levels of outcomes from improved parent involvement. First, basic and frequent communication between teachers and parents produces greater student achievement benefits than no parent involvement. Second, when the involvement becomes more *active*, we can expect even higher student success (Cotton & Wikelund, 1989). Lyons, Robbins & Smith (1983) generated some key points from their study of parent involvement programs. They concluded that it is important to try to reach *all* parents and that the process must be two-way. So how do we solve or prevent this serious informational disconnect between home and school and establish more effective communications models?

The emerging role of technology

Beginning in 1987, we began experimenting with telephone-based communications technology to bridge the information gap between teachers and parents. The telephone was chosen because it is ubiquitous and easy for everyone to use. In 1994, 94% of households in the United States had at least one telephone (Schement, 1994), so the phone is close to being a universal communications instrument. (Recent estimates are as high as 97% of homes with telephones). Our early experiments resulted in *The Transparent School Model*; a way to increase communication between teachers and parents by up to 800%! The model

uses a school-based computer system to provide voice mail linkages between teachers and parents. At the end of each school day, teachers record a message that describes what was taught, how the students learned the material, and gives parents suggestions on how to help the child at home that night. The parents can call and hear the message at their convenience from any phone. One example of what the parent would hear is found in this teacher's message:

Hi folks, this is Ms. Weaver with news about my class for March 16. Today we started to learn about fractions. We had fun cutting up apples into halves, thirds and quarters. For homework tonight, I have assigned problems one through five on page 62. Please check them over before tomorrow morning. Also, the next time you are measuring cooking ingredients, ask your child for help. See if they can measure a full cup of flour using the $\frac{1}{4}$ cup measuring spoon. Fractions seem mysterious at first and we will be working together for at least the next month and I am sure you will see your child grow in understanding as the days go by. Please call tomorrow for more important information about some very interesting science experiments we have planned.

This simple idea responds to the major barriers to good parent involvement mentioned earlier; family structure, time, distance and bureaucracy. In response to the growing complexity of family structures and roles, the model assumes that there are very similar needs for information and communication with the school *that can be provided to all families* regardless of structural differences. The model also solves the problems of time limitations (it only takes the teacher a few minutes to record the message), schedule conflicts (parents can call anytime), distance, and bureaucratic barriers. To make the communication more interactive, parents can leave messages for teachers after listening to the daily message. The technology also allows the school to record messages for groups of parents and the computer systems automatically place calls and deliver the messages.

When schools use the Transparent School Model faithfully, there are very predictable results. At least half of the parents call every day to find out what is going on in school. Student attendance, homework completion, grades and achievement test scores all improve because of this expanded communication link (Bauch, 1997). The system goes a long way to meeting the original ideals of this paper for a new sense of community between homes and schools. Parents have easy access to information every day, and can build the essential common knowledge base. Since their interactions are much more frequent and focused on the child's educational experience, some of the conditions of dialogue are also met. After parents listen to teacher messages, they can return their thoughts to the teacher in their response, and the teacher can consider this feedback as new decisions are made. These outcomes fit well with the conditions of home/school collaboration provided by Christenson, Rounds & Gorney (1992), where they expect parents and educators to share goals in common, see each other as equals, and both actively contribute to the process. After listening to daily teacher messages, parents are prepared for more personal interaction with teachers and are empowered to take positive action in support of their child's education.

Easy exchange of information can also lead teachers and parents toward more common goals. Teachers and parents holding information and goals in common are much more likely to cooperate, and there is a high potential for achieving the very kind of partnership-based society that everyone from Plato to Dewey sought. The problem is lack of communication; the solution is dialogue and one promising strategy can be found in the use of new technology. It remains for all of us to open the dialogue, to listen to others and to build a better democratic society.

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