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ABSTRACT

This study examined the views of kindergarten, first-, and second-grade teachers regarding families' competence to contribute knowledge to their child's educational process. In the first part of the study, 33 teachers from a variety of schools participated in small-group nominal group technique discussions. Their beliefs then contributed to the development of Q statements, which were later sorted by 43 kindergarten, first- and second-grade teachers. Seven teachers, representing the varied beliefs expressed through the Q sort, were interviewed to clarify the three factors emerging from the Q analysis. Three perspectives were identified: (1) Valuers, who place value on family influence to varying degrees; (2) Categorizers, who tend to dichotomize families as competent or not and family input as worthy or not, and who felt that families could not provide decision making about their child at school; and (3) Tunnel Visioners, who see limited uses and benefits of family classroom influences and feel that families are competent only regarding information on their own child's education at school. Further analysis of these perspectives showed all the Categorizers and Tunnel Visioners were also Low Valuers. High Valuers were more likely to have wide-ranging family competency beliefs than Low Valuers, Categorizers, or Tunnel Visioners. High Valuers used information obtained from families to understand their interests, activities, and circumstances, whereas Categorizers, Tunnel Visioners, and Low Valuers used such information to evaluate or judge families. Only some High Valuers took an active role in encouraging many areas of family influence. (Contains 37 references.) (KB)

PRIMARY TEACHERS' BELIEFS REGARDING FAMILY COMPETENCE FOR PROVIDING INPUT TO HELP MEET CHILDREN'S EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

A paper presented at the American Educational Research Association Annual Conference in New Orleans, Louisiana on April 27, 2000

by

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Primary Teachers' Beliefs Regarding Family Competence for Providing Input to Help Meet Children's Educational Needs

Background/Purpose of the Study

Collaborative, equal partnerships between families and schools have been emphasized in early childhood reform efforts (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Burton, 1992b; National Association of State Boards of Education, 1988, 1991; Powell, 1994; Swan & Morgan, 1993; Swick, 1991; Walter, 1995). Research has most often viewed the partnership from the perspective of what families and children can learn or ways they can benefit from closer involvement with the school (Beane, 1990; Davies, 1996; Eccles & Harold, 1996; Epstein, 1995; Henderson, 1987; Henderson & Berla, 1994; Hughes, Burgess, & Moxon, 1991; O'Brien, 1993; Swap, 1993). The complementary viewpoint that schools can also learn and benefit from partnerships with families has been explored less often.

Current research has specified families as partners, yet early childhood teachers have often expected "participative parent involvement" from families (Burton, 1992a; Chavkin, 1993; Davies, 1993; Parr, McNaughton, Timperley, & Robinson, 1991). This involvement has included such behaviors as attending conferences, fund raising for the school, and helping with homework. The role of families has typically been seen as supporting the values and agendas of the school (Burton, 1992a; Lareau, 1989; Powell & Stremmel, 1987). Teachers often have had implicit standards for parent involvement such as parents should be positive, deferential, supportive, and respond to teacher requests for help (Lareau, 1989, 1994). Although most early childhood teachers have agreed that parents should be involved in their child's schooling, teachers' beliefs regarding a bidirectional form of partnership, which includes school-to-home and home-to-school influences in the day-to-day routine of the classroom, have not been addressed.

To understand family-school partnerships from the teachers' perspective it is necessary to understand the beliefs with which they define their work with families (Nespor, 1987). Research has demonstrated that individuals' beliefs strongly affect their behavior (Pajares, 1992). Because teachers have interpreted current early childhood reform efforts toward family-school partnerships through the lens of their beliefs, current reform initiatives may not have always transferred to practice (Burton, 1992b; O'Brien, 1993). An understanding of teachers' beliefs regarding family collaboration in classroom decisions could contribute knowledge regarding how family expertise can be used as part of family-school partnerships.

The primary grades were viewed as particularly relevant for this study given that the relationship between the family and the school has been found to make a difference in how a child adjusts to school and how much the child benefits from school (Ramey & Ramey, 1994). Thus, given the importance of the early school years, the purpose of this study was to examine public school kindergarten-primary teachers' beliefs about families' competence to influence their classroom curriculum, instruction and interaction style.

Theoretical Perspectives

Bronfenbrenner (1979) developed a model for describing the child in the context of the larger environment. This model has been depicted as a set of concentric circles representing progressively more complex interrelated systems, each circle having bidirectional influence on the next. The first two circles or levels are relevant to this study. The first level is the microsystem, the settings a child inhabits, the people who are there, and the things they do together. Bronfenbrenner referred to the interrelations between multiple settings in which a child is involved as the mesosystem (i.e., the child who functions at home and at school). He has suggested that

since a young child is a member of a family as well as participating in a school setting, that the interconnections between these settings (mesosystem) affect the child's development.

Specifically, Bronfenbrenner (1979) proposed that development would be enhanced for children participating in home and school environments when (a) there were frequent two-way communications between family and school personnel; (b) valid information, advice, and experiences relevant to one setting were made available, on a continuing basis, to the other; (c) the mode of communication between settings was personal, for example, face-to-face rather than written; and (d) there were compatible role demands and goal consensus between settings. Bronfenbrenner's view of the family-school mesosystem supported sharing information from both the family to the school as well as the school to the family to enhance a child's development.

Epstein (1987) integrated and extended Bronfenbrenner's model to develop a model of overlapping spheres of influence of families and schools. This model has been shown pictorially as spheres that can be pushed together or pulled apart by practices and interpersonal forces in either the home or the school environments with the student at the center of the model. Three main forces affect the extent of overlap of the spheres (time, experiences in families, and experiences in schools). Time focuses on the age of the children involved, with greater overlap observed during the preschool and early elementary grades than at later ages even though families, schools, and communities share an interest in children all across the school years. The "maximum overlap" occurs when schools and families operate as true partners, but never have "total overlap" as both family and school maintain some functions independent of the other.

Epstein (1987) found most families and schools have separate spheres in infancy, increasing overlap during the preschool years and up to first grade, and decreasing overlap from

Grades 2 or 3 on. Teachers play a critical role in the overlap of the spheres. Teachers who limit or reduce communications and collaborations reinforce boundaries between family and school, whereas teachers who increase communications between family and school build connections. Teachers who include the family in their child's education were rated higher by parents than other teachers on interpersonal and teaching skills (Epstein, 1987). Epstein found that parents, children and teachers benefitted when there was greater overlap in the spheres. Epstein's work suggests the need for families and schools to work as partners and to increase the overlap of the spheres. She also indicated that the preschool and primary years were the times most likely to find maximum overlap.

Design and Methodology

Q methodology was selected as the method for this study because it provides the systematic means to examine and reach understandings about individual's opinions (McKeown & Thomas, 1988). Teachers' beliefs might remain present but undetected, even to themselves, unless provided with some method, such as a Q sort, for making their beliefs explicit (Brown, 1986). This study began with the assumption that primary teachers were segmented in terms of their beliefs concerning family competence for input in the classroom. Q methodology was used to enable the researcher to compare the beliefs, discover what those varying segments were, and to locate consensus, if it existed, that might otherwise to unnoticed (Gargan & Brown, 1993).

Q methodology, in this study, employed both quantitative and qualitative research strategies in a mixed method design (Brown, 1996). Qualitative methods of the nominal group technique (NGT) were employed at the beginning with interviews used at the end of the study. The Q methodology quantitative methods included the participants' actual ranking of belief

statements from strongly agree to strongly disagree and the statistical correlations and factor analysis which led to the discovery of certain factors or "types" of opinions.

Using Q methodology (Brown, 1980, 1986, 1993; Stephenson, 1978), the beliefs and experiences of primary teachers regarding the competence of families to share knowledge concerning their child's educational process were explored. First, 33 teachers from a variety of schools in northeastern and central Ohio participated in small group nominal group technique (NGT) discussions (Delbecq & Van de Ven, 1991; Gargan & Brown, 1993; Kinsey & Kelly, 1989). Their beliefs, as well as teachers' beliefs cited in the literature, were used to develop a concourse for a Q sort. Second, the Q statements were sorted by 43 primary teachers. These sorts were analyzed using the QMethod program (Schmolck & Atkinson, 1997) and three factors emerged. Finally, seven of the teachers, representing the varied beliefs expressed through the Q sort, were interviewed. These interviews were conducted to further clarify the three factors.

Findings: Teachers' Beliefs About Family Competence

This study began with the research question, "Do kindergarten, first and second grade teachers view families as competent contributors of knowledge regarding their child's educational process?" There were three different perspectives found among primary teachers regarding this question. The first, and most common, perspective identified was that of Valuers. Within this perspective there were High, Moderate and Low Valuers. One difference among these Valuers was the extent to which they expressed positive regard for family influence and used the family influence they received. High Valuers expressed greater positive regard for, and multiple examples of, the use of family influence. Low Valuers expressed less positive regard for family influence and used less of it. This assessment was evident through a participant's high or low Factor A loadings.

The second difference among Valuers was the type of family influence they valued. This difference could not be evidenced as clearly through actual Factor A scores, but became apparent through the interviews. Factor A indicated that teachers valued families as an influence in the classroom, but not which types of influence were valued.

The second perspective identified was Categorizers. Teachers who scored significantly in Factor B categorized family input as worthy or not worthy and families as competent or not competent. Categorizers felt families were not competent to provide decision making about their child at school or decision making about the class.

The third perspective identified was Tunnel Visioners. Tunnel Visioners saw limited uses and benefits of family influences in the classroom. They did not feel information about the child at home or the child's family was relevant to their work. Tunnel Visioners felt families were competent only regarding information on their individual child's education at school. Teachers believed that families were not competent to provide any form of input on what took place with the class as a whole.

All Categorizers and Tunnel Visioners were also Low Valuers. They listened to family suggestions, but had doubts that the suggestions were worthwhile. Blended factors appeared more likely in teachers who were Low Valuers.

The participants in this study indicated that the home-to-school aspect of partnership was valued in certain areas more so than in others. All the teachers interviewed placed at least a minimal value on family influence in their classroom. High Valuers, although not guaranteed to believe in most or all of the types of influence listed in Table 1, appeared more likely to have these wide-ranging family competency beliefs than Low Valuers, Categorizers, or Tunnel Visioners.

Table 1

Possible Ways Families Can Provide Influence In Their Child's Class

1. Sharing jobs, hobbies, and so forth with class.
2. Sharing about families' home culture, religion, lifestyle, or current events.
3. Providing information on their child's interests, concerns, strengths/weaknesses, personality.
4. Giving feedback on how classroom practices affect their child.
5. Giving suggestions for their child's education and instruction.
6. Joint planning with me on rules/discipline/social interactions for their child.
7. Making decisions with me about teaching practices/curriculum for their child.
8. Giving ideas for the class as a whole.
9. Making decisions with me about the class, such as curriculum/teaching practices.
10. Providing feedback on teacher performance.

Factors, other than the overwhelming first factor, seemed to clarify the reasons for their low valuing of home-to-school influence. In this study, the two main beliefs which conflicted with the valuing of home-to-school flow of influence seemed to be represented by Factors B, categorizing families, and Factor C, limiting family influence.

Another significant difference between Categorizers, Tunnel Visioners, and Low Valuers as compared to High Valuers was that the first three often used information obtained from families to evaluate or judge families. High Valuers more often used the information to understand the interests, activities, and circumstances of families, or simply to appreciate the meaning family members attach to their situations.

Findings: Teacher Roles and Results of Family Influences

The second research question pursued was, "What experiences have primary teachers had with family influence in the classroom?" Data related to this research question were utilized to address the following issues which emerged during data analysis. The first emergent issue concerned the relationship between teachers' beliefs and their stated practices. The teachers in this study displayed actions that coincided with their strongly held beliefs, but not with their conditional beliefs. The teachers who strongly believed in a particular competence of families did something about their belief and pursued receiving this influence from families. The teachers who really did not believe in certain types of family competence, or the importance of that influence, did not encourage it.

A second emergent issue involved the relationship between a teacher's utilization of typical parent involvement and beliefs about family competence. Teachers who valued family influence and believed in wide-ranging beliefs of family influence may, or may not, have family members as volunteers in their classrooms. Conversely, teachers who placed low value on family

influence and who believed in limited types of family influence may, or may not, have family volunteers. Thus, the presence of volunteers in the classroom did not, in and of itself, facilitate an understanding of these teachers' beliefs about family competence. Therefore, the assumption that teachers who use parents regularly in their classrooms are also teachers who believe in family competence to influence their classroom appears inaccurate.

A third issue which emerged concerned which beliefs or practices seemed to facilitate partnerships with families. High value for families' competence to influence the classroom as well as wide-ranging beliefs on family competence seemed to facilitate partnerships with families. Also, actively involving families in providing home-to-school information and in decision making about their child seemed to facilitate the home-to-school aspect of partnership.

The fourth issue involved the feedback teachers desired from families. Teachers did not want vague, critical feedback, but rather specific, constructive feedback from families. Nevertheless, teachers felt they did not receive this type of feedback. Only High Valuers with wide-ranging beliefs about family influence, however, actively pursued family feedback.

A fifth issue concerned school infrastructures that support or impede family-school-partnerships. It appears that certain school structures and policies have an impact on the likelihood of family-school partnerships. Structures such as the rarity of adult collaboration, the "us" (school) versus "them" (families) attitude, and the lack of support provided to teachers can impede family-school partnerships. Common school policies such as conventional parent conferences, children having the same teacher for only one year, and unwelcoming school visitation policies also can impede partnerships. School policies do not prevent partnerships, but can make it more difficult for High Valuers to establish partnerships and virtually ensure lack of partnerships with Low Valuers, Categorizers or Tunnel Visioners.

Discussion

Each step of the research process provided additional understanding of the research questions. Information from the NGT suggested that teachers did not view family competence to influence the classroom as extremes of either being competent or not competent; instead, they viewed families as having competencies in some areas, but not in others. Families might, for example, be competent to provide information about their child, but not competent to share in decision making about their child. Diversity was found among primary teachers concerning the types of influence families were competent to provide.

Through Q methodology, the beliefs of individuals were discerned and patterns among individual teachers were identified. Q methodology found patterns (factors) in primary teachers' communication of their points of view that were not available as part of the NGT. Based on teachers' sorting of the Q statements, Q analysis identified three different teacher perspectives on the topic of family competence to provide influence in the classroom. Q identified one perspective, Factor A, as being fairly widespread among the participants. However, there were other factors which could be blended with this first factor, to clarify issues of family competence. Based on the Q methodology phase, the first research question, regarding teacher beliefs about family competence, could be addressed.

The interviews, in combination with Q methodology, provided a unique perspective in understanding the relationship between beliefs about family competence and stated teacher practices. The interviews contributed the teachers' interpretations of the Q statements which deepened and clarified each factors' beliefs and thus provided greater understanding of the first research question.

The interviews also yielded teachers' beliefs about their role regarding family influence and the results of family influence. Relationships between practices and beliefs could not be found until the interviews. As was discovered through the NGT, family competence was not viewed as bipolar extremes of competent or not competent, but as families having competencies in some areas, but not in others. Q methodology helped reveal that teachers with certain perspectives (factors) view families, in general, as more competent to influence the classroom than other teachers. The factors, which were discovered and named, could be compared to the interview data on a variety of topics. For example, the interview analysis supported the Q analysis finding that family competence to provide influence in the classroom can be viewed as a continuum. In this continuum, many teachers, of varied perspectives, accept family competence at the "information on child" level of influence, but fewer teachers accept family competence at the "decision making for class" level. However, only some teachers who scored high in Factor A valued and took an active role in encouraging many areas of influence. This comparison was possible only because of the identified teacher perspectives yielded through Q methodology. This final phase of the research process, interviews, addressed the second research question. Each phase of research provided additional information and clarification from the previous phase.

Implications

A few implications of this study are included. One implication is that teachers' beliefs influence their practices. Teachers are less likely to pursue family influence actively in their classroom unless they strongly believe families are competent to provide that influence. Therefore, if administrators desire family-school partnerships in their schools, they need to consider the beliefs of current, as well as prospective, teachers regarding family influence in the

classroom. If early childhood education faculty desire that their graduates will work toward family-school partnerships, then they also need to consider the beliefs of preservice teachers.

Teachers who said conscious efforts were made to involve families in certain areas saw results. Teachers need to be specific with families on the types of influence they desire and be persistent in their attempts. When teachers value family competence to provide influence and actively persist in involving families in broad types of family influence, such as decision making, then family-teacher partnerships become a real possibility. Teachers, however, need administration to support family-school partnership, and provide the resources to work toward it.

School systems could consider including teachers' skills toward establishing family-school partnerships in professional evaluations. Criteria to use in evaluation of the home-to-school aspect of partnership might include valuing and appreciating families, and the extent to which teachers utilize a greater variety of types of family influence.

Families need to be guided in providing helpful feedback to teachers. Families need specific formats and entry points provided for the purpose of feedback.

This study challenged the idea that family-school partnerships mean that families need to be in the school. It further suggested that a key to family-school partnerships might be fostered through an emphasis on regular, open, two-way communication rather than on parent volunteers in the school.

Policy makers would be wise to adjust family involvement requirements to include home-to-school flows of influence, as well as school-to home and to clarify the variety of home-to-school types of influence which schools can promote.

Conclusions

This study originated from a lack of research on the home-to-school flow of influence. Although early childhood and other educational reform efforts have specified that families should be engaged as partners in a child's education, little research was conducted on actual teachers' beliefs about family competence to provide input into the classroom. This research provided a beginning exploration of one side of the partnership--the teachers' beliefs about family influences.

Most primary teachers valued, to some extent, family input regarding the educational process. The most common perspective (factor) ranged from high to low in the extent to which teachers expressed positive regard for family influence, used the family influence they received, and valued various types of family influence. The other two factors, represented only by individuals who expressed low regard for influence, classified families as competent or incompetent or saw limited possibilities for family influence.

According to self-report, the teachers in this study displayed actions that coincided with their strongly held beliefs, but not with their conditional beliefs. Further, the presence of volunteers in the classroom did not indicate teachers' beliefs about family competence.

The contemporary conceptualization of the home-to-school flow of influence needs to be broadened. The current emphasis on family-school partnerships suggests the necessity for additional research on the home-to-school flow of influence to expand the knowledge of this frequently neglected "other half" of the family-school partnership.

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