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Parental Involvement in Education Among Low-Income Families: A Case Study

Jane Graves Smith

Abstract

In order to explore parental involvement among low-income families, a case study was conducted at a public elementary school in the Pacific Northwest. In 2002, a new school replaced an outdated structure. During the planning stage for the new school, community members and agency professionals, along with educators, developed and implemented programs to both support families and engage them in their children's education. Utilizing qualitative research methods, interviews, observations, and document reviews were conducted with the intention of investigating the impact of efforts undertaken to involve parents at the new school. The study found that the development and implementation of intentional parental involvement strategies positively influenced the level of parental involvement. In addition, participants perceived numerous benefits to students and families resulting from strategies implemented and the related involvement. Parental involvement strategies also influenced educator's perceptions of acceptable parental involvement behaviors, with interviewees recognizing a broad array of behaviors as involvement in education.

Key Words: parental involvement, low-income, school-community relations, achievement gap

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine the phenomenon of parental involvement in a low-income school created with parental involvement in mind.

In order to explore parental involvement among low-income families, a case study was conducted in March of 2004 at what became known as Clark Elementary (pseudonym), a public elementary school in the Pacific Northwest. After two academic years at the new site, an investigation of the impact of those efforts could be initiated.

Problem Statement

In their search for methods to improve academic performance, educational researchers and practitioners have advanced policies designed to promote parental involvement in children's education (Abrams & Gibbs, 2002). Teachers and school administrators encourage parents to support their children's academic pursuits at home, as well as in the classroom. Researchers continue to find evidence that higher levels of involvement by parents are related to academic success for students (Epstein, 2001).

According to Lareau (1987), parental involvement is seen as an integration of home and school. This practice encourages parents to participate in the life of the school, as well as attend to the learning of their children at home (Epstein, Sanders, Simon, Salinas, Jansorn, & Van Voorhis, 2002). Many educators believe that creating a community of families, students, teachers, and school administrators provides additional support for children's learning. Further evidence suggests that academic success may be predicted by the quality of these connections (Booth & Dunn, 1996).

The promotion of parental involvement to increase academic success raises issues of equity, since rates of parental involvement are significantly higher among middle- and upper-class parents than in low-income families (de Carvalho, 2001). Researchers agree that rates of parental involvement are lower in low-income communities than in higher income schools (Abrams & Gibbs, 2002; Epstein, 1995; Lareau, 2000; O'Connor, 2001). Therefore, low-income children, with less involved parents, often experience fewer of the academic benefits than children coming from higher income homes. It follows, then, that children of higher income families are receiving more of the academic and attitudinal benefits of parental involvement than low-income children. Children of low socioeconomic status (SES) are at risk for lower academic achievement (McLloyd, 1990). For these children, rather than acting as a benefit, the lack of involvement by their parents only leaves them farther behind their higher income counterparts.

School personnel continue to request parental involvement without taking into account the SES of the family (Lareau, 2000). Policies have been created at the local district level, as well as state and federal levels, which ignore the

particular needs of underrepresented groups (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991). Instead of raising academic performance for low-income students, too often parental involvement policies only serve to widen the achievement gap (de Carvalho, 2001) and create barriers between schools and families (Delgado-Gaitan).

The most widely accepted definition of parental involvement focuses on behaviors that can more easily be accomplished by middle- and upper-income parents (Mapp, 2003). The current parental involvement policies, built on the accepted definition, disregard the needs of low-income children and their families which further burdens children who are already falling behind academically (de Carvalho, 2001; Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Mapp).

A small number of researchers have investigated the challenges encountered when low-income parents attempt to become involved and have also provided a number of recommendations for enhancing involvement for these families (Comer, Ben-Avie, Haynes, & Joyner, 1999; Lareau, 2000; O'Connor, 2001). These researchers have called for further research regarding involving parents in their children's education among underrepresented groups. In addition, in an annual synthesis of parental involvement literature, Jordan, Orozco, and Averett (2001) reported that educators are attempting to create partnerships with families without adequate "research-based knowledge" (p. 1) to support their efforts. A case study has been conducted in an attempt to answer calls for further knowledge and understanding of parental involvement among low-income families.

Methodology

In September of 2002, students and staff moved from an aging, out-of-date structure into a new building developed by a group of committed individuals, the Clark Advisory Committee, from many parts of the community. At its inception, those envisioning a new Clark Elementary School considered the involvement of parents as much more than help in the classroom and supervisors of homework. The physical, emotional, social, and intellectual needs of the families were also considered, and efforts were created intended to meet those needs.

Parents were intentionally considered in two distinct ways. First, the individuals involved in the design of the new building considered the needs of the mostly low-income neighborhood residents. The Clark Advisory Committee created and implemented strategies in an effort to meet those perceived needs. Second, with a belief in the benefits of parental involvement in education, the Clark Advisory Committee also created and implemented strategies designed to enhance the involvement of parents at Clark. The consideration of parents is

apparent from the initial conceptualizations of program development through the implementation of those programs until today, years later, when the early outcomes of those efforts are becoming visible.

Research Setting

Clark Elementary School was situated beside a city park in a small community surrounded by large industrial complexes. The majority of residents in the neighborhood were low-income, with the local housing authority providing a high percentage of residences at a subsidized rate. In October of 2003, 99% of the 182 students were eligible for free lunch, qualifying the school to receive Title I funds. During the 2003-2004 school year, 5% of the students were American Indian, 3% of the students were Asian, 7% were Black, 19% were Hispanic, and 67% were White. According to the Clark website, as of October 1, 2003, the languages spoken were 79% English, 11% Spanish, 6% Russian, 3% Ukrainian, 1% Vietnamese, and 2% other.

In 1998, the district had begun to consider building a new school to replace a crumbling, out-of-date structure. An advisory group, the Clark Advisory Committee, was formed with members from community organizations, government agencies, the local church, the neighborhood association, the Clark Parent Teacher Organization (PTO), educators from Clark, and school district personnel. This group provided input throughout the development process for the new school, held open meetings in order to invite further participation in the development process, and eventually participated in the ongoing administration of many of the programs it had designed.

The new building opened in the fall of 2002 and was dedicated on October 2, 2002. With the hard work and continuing commitment of the community, the district opened a cooperative facility serving families and the local community, while at the same time enhancing parental involvement in education.

Data Collection and Analysis

In order to explore the phenomenon of parental involvement in a low-income school, a case study was conducted in the spring of 2004. To accomplish this purpose, interviews, observations, and document reviews were conducted.

Semi-structured, open-ended interviews were conducted with educators, family workers, and parents from Clark Elementary School. Four administrators were interviewed, including the Principal and the district consultant who had overseen the development process for the new school. The other two administrators interviewed were the Family Liaison and the Family Services Coordinator. These two positions had been added during the development phase for the new school and were financially supported by a consortium of

community agencies. The Family Liaison provided a bridge between the school and the families of students, served as the coordinator for volunteers, and also connected with community agencies offering social services at the school (for example, a food bank and clothing closet). The role of the Family Services Coordinator was much like a school counselor; however, she was encouraged to refer any families in need of ongoing counseling to community agencies.

At the time this study was conducted, there were 10 teachers serving the small student body at Clark Elementary; of these, 6 teachers were interviewed. These teachers had worked at both the new and the old buildings and provided perspectives on any changes occurring during the transition. In addition to educators, six parents were interviewed. Snowball sampling was utilized for a number of parent participants. For example, after interviewing the ESL teacher, a request was made for an introduction to a Spanish-speaking parent. For other interviews, requests were made from among those encountered in my role as a school volunteer. The interviews ranged widely from 15-50 minutes and were conducted at a variety of locations from the classroom to a family's home. Pseudonyms were created for all participants, as well as for the school.

A variety of events at Clark were observed, including parent nights and before- and after-school programs. Also observed were a Read and Play program designed to encourage the involvement of parents of very young children and an awards assembly to which all families had been invited. At most of these events my role was that of participant-observer. During this time period, I volunteered regularly at the school as a "lunch buddy," tutor, and assistant for Read and Play and other family events.

Documents reviewed pertained mostly to the development process for the new school. All materials collected during the design process were examined and all references to the school in the local paper were reviewed. In addition, the school website and monthly newsletters were reviewed. Two broad research questions gave direction and provided continued focus during the study:

1. How did a low-income school create intentional parental involvement strategies?
2. What were the effects of those strategies?

Analysis began early in the data collection process. Transcripts, observations, and reviews were read and re-read with reflections documented in the research log. As themes emerged from the data, a list of conceptual categories formed and codes were developed for each conceptual category. Next, coded chunks of text were placed in a matrix for further analysis. As this process continued, key findings emerged in response to each research question.

Case Study Findings

The voices of the study participants came through clearly during the analysis process. Prevalent themes emerged into conceptual categories. In this section exploring the study findings, each theme will be illustrated through the voices of the parents, teachers, and administrators who gave time to participate.

A Foundation of Understanding

In-depth knowledge of the needs and strengths of school families was foundational to attempts aimed at enhancing parental involvement in education at Clark Elementary. At initial meetings, the Clark Advisory Committee heard from neighborhood residents, members of the neighborhood association, and the Clark PTO, giving those engaged in the development process an understanding of the life circumstances of Clark families and the environmental factors affecting them. The Clark Advisory Committee also invited representatives of community agencies engaged in service delivery to neighborhood residents to give input regarding the needs of the mostly low-income families in the neighborhood. During a design symposium and again when focus groups were conducted, Clark parents and other neighborhood residents described the needs of families as well as the strengths they brought to the school. Many residents of the neighborhood were unemployed or underemployed. In addition to challenges related to income level, many parents were non-native speakers with limited English skills. As residents spoke at meetings, educators and Clark Advisory Committee members began to understand the challenges faced by the parents of Clark students.

Without an in-depth knowledge of the needs and strengths of the school families as a foundation, educators may have created programs that would have been disregarded by those for whom they were intended. Conversely, when those engaged in the development process understood the needs and strengths of the neighborhood residents, programs were accepted and appreciated. As one parent commented, "I think the school has that solid community base, it really does, I know it's been the whole goal, and I think they've achieved it, at least from my perspective." From a foundation of understanding, the new school was created with services for the community and with strategies intended to enhance parental involvement.

Once the school opened, attention was given among the school staff to the ongoing development of an understanding of the life circumstances of the school families and the environmental factors affecting them. The Clark Principal described additional reasons for this understanding. When she first arrived at Clark, the staff spent time studying the work of Ruby Payne (2003).

According to Payne, hidden rules based on income level guide individual behavior. The rules learned by low-income students may create a gap between the students' families and their middle-class teachers. Once teachers were made aware of the differences in perception and behavior based on SES, they approached parents with greater appreciation. Payne's books and videos helped the teachers gain an awareness of the challenges faced by low-income families at Clark. The Principal commented, "We do talk a lot about what our families face, and we make those connections between what we saw [on the videos] and what we see happening every day here." She also based this understanding of the lives of Clark families on the informal connections built and maintained between parents and educators.

With open communication and many informal opportunities to build relationships, the understanding of families increased. Clark teacher Sam Brown, demonstrating this understanding, commented, "We have a lot of families that are so consumed by their daily life they don't have time to get involved as maybe other demographic parents would." In the interview with the first grade teacher, Ann Edwards, she described her own developing understanding of the lives of Clark families. She commented, "I was very shocked to find out that a lot of children didn't have very many books at home, not even Dr. Seuss."

This understanding of the life circumstances of the families has reduced the tendency for Clark teachers to blame families when their students faced academic challenges. Certainly, this understanding is limited by personal experience; however, teachers have apparently grown in their knowledge of the lives of their students' families. Then, rather than blame, the desire has grown to assist families as they educate children.

A Broad Definition

Based on the developing picture of the community, an understanding of parental involvement at Clark Elementary School emerged. Educators came to realize that Clark parents, facing challenges related to SES and language proficiency, might not be able to be involved in the same manner that parents at middle- and upper-class schools would be. Parental involvement would look different at Clark.

At Clark, a broad definition of parental involvement emerged which recognized a wide array of behaviors as involvement. Educators acknowledged all parental presence in the building as involvement, even the receipt of social services, such as picking up food or clothing in the Family Resource Center. Rather than assume that parents would comply with commonly accepted requests for involvement, Clark educators recognized even small attempts made by parents to support their children's education. One teacher stated, "I've seen

more parents here, just with the Family Resource Center, you know, more parents coming in and being involved, taking advantage of some of the services that are offered.” Having parents in the building, even though they were not volunteering in the classroom or putting up bulletin boards, was perceived as involvement in education.

In one interview, the Family Services Coordinator confirmed the presence of a broad definition of parental involvement at Clark. She stated,

I think that parents being here gets them, affords them an opportunity to feel a part of this community, and that’s only going to benefit their child. If you have a positive feeling about this school, it will rub off on the way that they story this place for their child. And so the more positive involvement that parents can have here, in my opinion, the better an opportunity for their child to feel similar feelings about this place.

So, for many of the staff at Clark, parents obtaining the offered services and just being present in the building were perceived as involved in education.

One mother who dropped her son at school each morning, Brenda Simpson, was involved in the school as much as possible. She took time to talk with her son’s teacher and the Family Liaison as she came and went each day. Brenda talked about her belief in the importance of education: “I’ve tried to stress to him that he needs to learn this, he needs to go to school, he needs to learn to read, he needs to learn to write. I’m hoping that he understands, that he understands how important it is.” She let her son know that school was important by getting up early to get him to school even though most nights she left work after midnight. If measured against a commonly accepted definition of parental involvement, she might be seen as uninvolved. However, at Clark, educators welcomed the level of involvement she was capable of offering.

Even though parents were invited into the building, there was an understanding among Clark educators that not all parents would be able to attend events or meet with teachers at the school. One teacher described parental involvement in education as reading street signs together or talking about measurements while cooking or grocery shopping. For another teacher, parental involvement was defined as, “the learning that took place when the family got together and worked through something together.” The broad definition of parental involvement which emerged at Clark extended to include learning activities families naturally engaged in at home.

Creating Intentional Parental Involvement Strategies

The creation of intentional parental involvement strategies based on an understanding of neighborhood needs had a positive impact at Clark. These

intentional parental involvement strategies considered the parents of Clark students in two distinct ways. First, with the design of a full-service school, the Clark Advisory Committee intended to meet many of the physical needs of the low-income families in the neighborhood. Second, the Clark Advisory Committee developed strategies to enhance parental involvement in education.

Strategies to Provide Services

At initial meetings of the Clark Advisory Committee, as the needs of neighborhood families were considered, the concept of a full-service school emerged. With input from the advisory committee and local residents, an understanding developed regarding environmental factors and the needs of neighborhood families. The school building was then designed to meet many of the distinct needs of its low-income families. The new building became much more than a school. It was designed and opened as a center for the community.

The center of activity for families became the Family Resource Center. In the old building there was no space designated for parents to connect informally with educators or with other parents. Kathie Jones, the Family Liaison, mentioned that she had seen parents networking with each other, exchanging information in the Family Resource Center. Parents were able to stay informed about school events by talking with each other and with school personnel. The development and administration of the Family Resource Center at Clark has been central to the improvement in school culture.

Clark families could easily access resources provided by government agencies and community organizations. The Family Liaison, from her office in the Family Resource Center, could access information on all county resources through a computer network. A table was set up to disburse free clothing to families of Clark students and the Family Liaison maintained a food bank in her office. According to Kathie Jones, a local service organization “came on board and helped get the food bank started when I saw a need, because the closest food banks were at least one or two bus rides away.”

The Family Resource Center was equipped with activities for neighborhood families. When asked about ways in which parents were considered during the development of the new building, one teacher mentioned the new computer access in the Family Resource Center: “They [The Clark Advisory Committee] formed the resource center where the community could come in and learn how to use computers. Because of the low income in this area, a lot of parents can’t, don’t have access to computers in their homes.” A parent pointed to additional activities, “They have games available in there that parents can come in and play and different learning activities that can be checked out like books in different languages, we have Russian and Spanish.” In addition, literacy classes

were offered which improved proficiency in English for the Hispanic and Eastern European families in the neighborhood.

The participation of government officials, business leaders, agency representatives, and members of the local church was vital to the Clark project. Not only did they provide input on the needs and strengths of the neighborhood, but they also participated in efforts to meet those needs. The inclusion of both of these roles was key to the project at Clark. The Family Services Coordinator described the theme of partnership at Clark: "We just have amazing partnerships, we have phenomenal partnerships, and a lot of that has to do with just people in the beginning, their vision for Clark, you know, they just made it happen." Without the opportunity to provide input, organizations outside of the school may have been less likely to agree to requests for help. Conversely, when individuals had a sense of ownership in the process, the community representatives offered assistance without continued prodding.

Strategies to Enhance Parental Involvement

The Clark Advisory Committee created and implemented programs designed to enhance parental involvement in education. In addition, the development of intentional parental involvement strategies allowed for community input and participation, which resulted in a positive impact on involvement levels.

Strategies implemented which had a positive impact on parental involvement in education were based on a broad definition of parental involvement and on a foundation of understanding. Therefore, they had a positive impact. At Clark, parents were invited into the school for conferences, family nights, and to access resources offered in the Family Resource Center. Each of these strategies encouraged parental involvement. Reflecting on perceived changes in parental involvement, the Family Liaison stated,

I think that I am seeing more parents trying to be more involved or at least come into the building more, whether it's to have that lunch with their student or walk them to breakfast or touch base with the teacher. And a lot of them hang out here in the Family Resource Center.

The increased participation of parents and community members positively impacted Clark. A teacher, responding to a question about changes in parental involvement levels at Clark, commented, "I could say that for me personally it's been better this year, the parents helping kids with homework, it's been better this year." To the same question a parent responded, "All of the parents or families are somehow, some way involved."

Strategies to improve involvement were effective at Clark, yet some parents remained disconnected from the school and staff. Educators and parents interviewed spoke of parents they knew who were unable to be involved in

their children's education. Kate Best, the mother of a kindergartener, reported that she knew of families in crisis who were unable to be supportive of their children's education. According to the Family Liaison, Clark educators seemed to understand that a small group of parents were unable to engage with the school. Rather than blame parents for their seeming lack of involvement, Clark educators understood the challenges to involvement facing Clark families.

Benefits of Parental Involvement

Those interviewed expressed beliefs that parental involvement provided children with a number of benefits. Participants most often described the positive outcome of involvement as academic success. Parents, teachers, and family workers believed that children with engaged parents would be more successful at school, scoring higher on tests and earning higher grades. A teacher stated, "I think if the parents are involved the kids benefit because they really see the participation by the parents, and they work harder at school."

Teachers spoke of improved motivation as a positive outcome stemming from the message from parents that education was important. Teachers also felt that children would benefit when parents encouraged the completion of homework. Kathie Jones stated, "I see kids more on top of their homework because they realize their parents are in touch with their teachers." One teacher also talked about improved self-confidence in children with parents who were engaged in their education. The Family Liaison had noticed parents and children talking together about what job the student may pursue in the future and how to accomplish their goals. She believed that these conversations were a result of enhanced family and community involvement at Clark.

In interviews, parents also discussed advantages to involvement other than academic ones. Since her daughter had a learning disability, Kate Best believed that her involvement helped her to advocate for her daughter with educators and families at Clark. This belief encouraged Kate to volunteer weekly in her daughter's class and may also have encouraged the involvement of other parents. Describing some of her motivation for involvement, Sue King said, "I think if you work with them it kind of shows that you care." The desire to demonstrate care for their children may have motivated the involvement of additional Clark parents. Brenda Simpson spoke of her desire for her son to succeed in school. She hoped that desire became clear to him by her involvement. Each of these parents was motivated to provide support for their children's education based on their belief in the benefits of their personal involvement.

Two participants shared their beliefs that parents also profited from involvement. Kate Best described the sense of accomplishment she felt when assisting in the classroom: "I am able to be a person that comes into this school knowing

that you might make one little difference, just giving them a smile or hug.” When she described her work at the carnival, she spoke of the sense of community experienced:

It also helps to get involved in other aspects of the school, like the carnival; you can be a part of doing all kinds of things, you know, that make you feel welcome and a part of it because this school to me feels like a family, it really does, and you know these people and you can just be yourself and it’s good.

The Family Services coordinator echoed Kate’s belief that involvement helped parents to gain a sense of community: “I think that parents being here gets them, affords them an opportunity to feel a part of this community.” These two participants held beliefs that both the children and the parents could benefit from parental involvement. This belief may have positively influenced parental involvement at Clark following the move to the new building.

Recommendations

Certainly, Clark Elementary cannot be seen as representative of all low-income schools. In many ways, the community and the school development process were unique. However, knowledge gained through this study may provide a guide for educators to enhance parental involvement in education at low-income schools. This study can inform the concept of parental involvement in low-income schools on a broader scale.

1. Educators interested in developing strategies for enhanced parental involvement in low-income schools would be wise to seek the input of neighbors and interested agency representatives in order to gain an understanding of the lives of those that the school serves.
2. Educators, with a clear understanding of the lives of their school families, ought to encourage the emergence of a definition of parental involvement which would recognize a broad array of parental behaviors intended to support academic success. In low-income schools, there is a need to acknowledge and encourage even the smallest efforts made by parents to support their children’s education.
3. Educators serving low-income populations must consider offering services to the families of their students, thereby bringing parents into the school building. Full-service schools, well-situated in neighborhoods, can provide services intended to meet the needs of low-income school families. The services offered must be based on an understanding of the needs of the neighborhood and provided with the participation of government and community agencies.

4. Educators should consider inviting the input and participation of community agencies, businesses, and local churches or other faith-based groups in any efforts to meet the needs of school families. Offering the opportunity to provide input early in any transitional process will encourage feelings of ownership and allow for long term participation and financial support by community members.
5. Educators must realize that some parents will remain disconnected from the school. Whether because of past school failure, family life circumstances related to financial stress, or other crises, some parents will be unable to respond to invitations for involvement. Parents may also choose to leave the responsibility for educating their children to the teacher out of respect and trust. Educators need to accept that even though parents desire academic success for their children, they may not choose to be involved in education in commonly accepted ways. With this acceptance, teachers may be less likely to judge parents harshly for a perceived lack of involvement.

Conclusion

One of the most important findings in this study related to the consideration of the needs of Clark families, which formed the basis for strategy development and provided a broad definition of parental involvement. I cannot help but wonder how the outcomes may have been different without an understanding of the neighborhood. So often, even with the best of intentions, middle-class educators create and implement practices intended to serve low-income families without an assessment of community needs. Programs may be offered but go unattended without that assessment. Also, needs that are unnoticed may go unmet. In the analysis for this study, it has become apparent that the understanding of the particular needs of Clark families was vital to enhancing parental involvement. Educators working in low-income communities need a willingness to learn about their student populations and a high degree of commitment to school families.

From the district consultant to the head of the neighborhood association to the Clark Principal, every individual involved in this project demonstrated an exemplary commitment to Clark students and their families. The Clark Advisory Committee spent countless hours in meetings and allocated money from tight budgets. Once strategies were created, Clark educators were committed to putting them into action. Across the country, there are educators and community members devoted to working in low-income neighborhoods. With a dedication to the community and a commitment to educational partnerships, communities may undertake projects like Clark Elementary School and encounter similar success.

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