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Collaboration between teacher and parents : a determining factor in the success rate of students

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Abstract

Collaboration between parents and teachers is an important issue that has grown throughout the years. The purpose of this thesis is to make readers aware that collaboration between parents and teachers is a determining factor in the success rate of students. Many parents and teachers do not understand their role in the collaboration process and because of this misunderstanding, students are less successful.

By reading several books on the topic of parent/teacher collaboration and doing a case study, I was able to find in every source that success starts with collaboration and continues as the collaboration relationship is maintained. Individuals who collaborate have mutual goals and will learn to trust one another. They also can share resources and decision making. The student is the one who ultimately benefits from parent/teacher collaboration and that is the primary goal.

Characteristics of Collaboration

Collaboration is direct interaction between at least two people voluntarily taking place in shared decision making as they work toward a common goal. Collaboration occurs when it is used by people who are engaged in a specific process, task, or activity (Friend & Smith, 2003).

It is not possible to force people to collaborate because collaboration is voluntary. States may pass legislation, school districts may adopt policy, and site administrators may implement programs, but unless school professionals and parents choose to collaborate, they will not do so. Parent/Teacher collaboration can be challenging, but the benefits far outweigh the risks (McCaleb, 1997).

Collaboration requires equality among people who are participating. Parity occurs when each person's contribution to an interaction is equally valued and each person has equal power in decision making. If one perceives the other as having greater decision-making power or more valuable knowledge or information, collaboration cannot occur (McCaleb, 1997).

Collaboration is based on mutual goals. When parents and teachers collaborate, they must share at least one goal. They do not need to share all goals in order to collaborate, just one that is specific and important enough to maintain their shared commitment. They may differ in their opinions about a student's motivational level but share the goal of the student's achievement potential.

Individuals who collaborate can share resources. Each individual taking part in a collaborative relationship has resources to contribute that are valuable for reaching the shared goal. Time and availability to carry out each individual's responsibilities is a very

important contribution to the collaborative relationship. Each person carries knowledge that may be the other's resource. When teachers and parents share resources, they can collaboratively plan such things as home reward programs for students. The parent is more likely to have access to rewards that the student will respond to (video games, computer access, etc.). Together they can come up with the number of positive behaviors the student should display, how often the reward should be given, and the plan for systematically phasing out the rewards once the students has been successful (McCaleb, 1997).

Teachers and parents who collaborate will learn to trust one another.. Only after a period of time in which trust, and respect, are established can teachers and parents feel relatively secure in fully exploring collaborative relationships. Once begun, the relationship can be strengthened until trust becomes one of the most important benefits of collaboration. With successful experiences the trust will grow. Trust is most fragile when a collaborative relationship is new. If one of the partners violates a shared confidence, fails to contribute to the relationship, or communicates inaccurately, trust is likely to be broken (Friend & Smith, 2003).

Barriers to Collaboration

Oftentimes educators view parents as problems. Keeping parents outside the school doors can make some parents more hostile. Educators miss out on knowledge and support that could make schools work better for students. Parents and educators want to do what is best for children. If this is true, why is the relationship between home and school not stronger and more positive?

Parent-as-active-participant suggests that parents also have something of value to add to the conversation about good teaching. Parents should not just take the word of the "experts," they are encouraged to become advocates for not only their own children but also other children. According to Dodd and Konzal (2000), "Parents are encouraged to serve as members of school councils, to become more informed consumers by learning more about what happens in schools, and to contribute knowledge about their children and community to the information used to make decisions about local schools" (p.18). The goal of this change gives parents and teachers an equal voice.

It is easy to see how these two paths to reform, if not carefully managed, can create conflict between teachers and parents. Just as teachers are finally gaining a greater voice in what goes on in their classrooms, parents are demanding an equal voice. Who knows best? Teachers? Parents? Does it have to be one or the other (Dodd and Konzal, 2000)?

Another difference between parents and teachers that can generate conflict lies in the fact that parents cannot keep from judging what happens in school in terms of the effect on their own children. Because parents focus on individual children rather than all children (as teachers must do), they may oppose a new program or practice that would be beneficial to many other students (Dodd and Konzal, 2000).

The following principles can guide the process of parent/teacher collaboration:

- Both parents and teachers bring important knowledge to the discussion about "good" schools. Teachers are more and more increasing their knowledge about teaching and learning. Parents, on the other hand, who know their own children, their community, and their culture, realize that

some innovations just won't work in their schools. Unless efforts are made to bring them together, the competing teacher-as-professional and parent-as-active-participant views can block meaningful reform.

- The focus must shift from talking about ways to share power to finding ways for teachers and parents to share perspectives. Most people think of power as a limited product: Power given to someone means power must be taken away from someone else. But talk about redistributing power makes school change a win-lose situation. Then again, the sharing of multiple perspectives fosters the development of a community where parent-educator relationships can be equalized because both respect and value each other's views (Dodd and Konzal, 2000).

Research clearly indicates that student's achievement is maximized through parent involvement. Children's academic success depends on the degree to which teachers understand and accept the different cultures of the communities they serve. Several studies have found that collaboration with the parents from nonmainstream cultures help teachers gain the cultural competence they need to enhance student motivation and achievement (Lazar and Siostad, 1999).

According to Lazar and Siostad (1999), "Parents are important in the fabric of educational support and both state and federal agencies are now calling for greater collaboration between parents and teachers". The Goals 2000: Educate America Act specifically states, "Every school will promote partnerships that will increase parental involvement and participation in promoting the social, emotional, and academic growth of children"(p.208). Schools that stress the importance of a positive parent-teacher

collaborative relationship, are likely to see it being used. Teachers want to see their students be successful and grow academically. When they see student growth because of a positive collaborative relationship, they will make it priority to work with parents.

Adversarial relationships between teachers and parents began in the earliest days of our schooling culture. Educators have been blaming parents for years for their seemingly inability to support children's intellectual, social, and moral development.. We still continue to blame parents, especially those from low-income and minority backgrounds, for the academic failures of children. Many teachers tend to believe that parents in those communities neither value education highly nor provide their children with the intellectual and motivational prerequisites for learning in school.. This assumption is narrow and incorrect.. Why do these negative perceptions of parents and parent involvement continue? One reason is that our schools of education have not adequately educated teachers to understand parents and to work with them. Another reason is that district policies and traditions of schooling limit teachers' access to parents (Lazar and Slostad, 1999).

According to Lazar and Slostad (1999), "Teachers' fears and apprehensions about parent involvement stem from a fundamental error in teacher education. Teachers have not been provided with adequate educational support to properly start and maintain partnerships with parents. A review of the teacher educational literature reveals that very little attention is given to preparing teachers to work with parents and other adults. Given the lack of attention to this area in both undergraduate and graduate education, teachers cannot help but feel uneasy about parents and unprepared to invite parent collaboration" (p.211). Teacher educators need to consider changing the curriculum to include parental

involvement projects as part of field experiences. The importance of parent-teacher collaboration is not stressed enough in classes. For those already teaching, professional growth is desperately needed.

Teachers who understand the significant role in parent involvement are in better positions to invite parents to support their children's education. Many parents feel they should or can support their children's development, but they simply do not know how to do so.

Determining Factor in the Success Rate of Students

Parent-teacher relationships are very important in the education and development of a child. In a good parent-teacher relationship, the attitude of the teacher and the parent become positive. Being able to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of their child and ask the teacher questions gives the parent a relaxed and comfortable feeling. Several middle school teachers agree that if you keep the parents of your students well informed of their child's progress the more secure they feel and the more involvement you will see. Working together with the teacher gives the parent a sense of community. According to Lynn (1994), "Being involved in preparing their child with the proper communication and problem solving skills they see necessary, gives the parent a feeling of belonging and responsibility" (pp.4-5). When the child begins to sense a secure feeling given off by their parents, they too will then feel more at ease when interacting and participating in school.

Ways to Facilitate Good Collaboration

Teachers who regularly partner with parents believe partnerships actually reduce the general level of stress associated with teaching. Teachers who send out brief, weekly

newsletters to parents describing classroom and homework activities or grading procedures keep all parents and students "on the same page," cutting down on confusion and time spent explaining and defending practices and policies. Asking parents to provide input on their child's performance through phone calls, written comments, or during conferences actually helps teachers to solve classroom conflicts and look at teaching practices that best meet the needs of their students.

One way to begin changing the practices that limit parent-teacher collaboration, is to inquire about the ways in which schools and districts invite parent involvement. . What changes are needed to attract parent involvement on a school and district level? If parents are welcomed as potential partners, and if parents assume a significant role in working with the teacher, the students will have the best shot at succeeding in school (Lazar and Siostad, 1999)

Strategies for Collaboration

Parental involvement is an important issue that has grown throughout the years. There have been many changes in our society and families and with that has come the need for increased parental involvement. . Parents can become involved in many different ways. For example, parents can get involved in PTA/JPTO, school visits, written or oral communication, helping with homework, and banquets or award ceremonies.

There are three essential strategies for making parent-teacher collaborations work.

1. Parents Want Your Help- Parents want their children to be successful in school. They want them to behave appropriately in class, to do their

homework, and to benefit from the knowledge that a good education gives them (Lynn, 1994).

2. Changing Roles-Involved parents want to have more say about what happens in the classroom. They want more information about their children's curriculum and sometimes want more power to make decisions. Teachers usually welcome parents who take an interest in their children's education. They know the difference a caring and attentive parent can make in a child's life. One-to-one communication that occurs between teachers and parents is still the key to improving student performance. Improving communication will help collaboration between the classroom and home (Lynn, 1994).

3. Making Interaction Count-It's Quality, Not Quantity, That Makes the Difference- Quality of teacher-parent interaction contributes most to student achievement. The following are strategies recommended to improve interactions with parents:

a. Make It Positive-It is important to let parents know when their child is doing well not only when they are misbehaving. If teachers let parents know when their child is doing well, the parent is more prone to be responsive to the areas where their child needs work.

b. Make It Practical-Give parents resources to understand the curriculum. Be specific about where the students are having difficulty. Make suggestions about how the parent can help their child overcome the difficulties they are facing with schoolwork.

- c. **Make It Personal-Collaboration** between parents and teachers is raised when parents read something personal about their own child. Include personalized messages to parents whenever possible (Lynn, 1994).

As we are learning, true collaboration with parents is often a difficult goal to achieve. Parents and teachers have a common goal in mind but sometimes that can be hard to reach. According to Pogoloff (2004), "There are many ways to facilitate positive relationships between parents and teachers that can build a healthy collaborative partnership" (pp.116-119). Listed below are some of the ways this can be accomplished.

1. Develop a personal relationship with parents. Parents need to feel that they can trust the teacher.. Developing and maintaining trust is difficult in a relationship that is unequal. Teachers should base their strategies concerning the way they communicate and have relationships with parents on an individual basis. Every relationship is unique because of the combination of strengths and needs that each person brings to it. Some parents will need more support than others. Some may need emotional support while others will only need professional support and expertise (Pogoloff, 2004).
2. Parents should be given the opportunity to communicate about their child in writing, by phone, or with face-to-face interactions. Ask parents how they prefer to communicate and try to communicate using the parents' preferred system rather than always using what you prefer (Pogoloff, 2004).

3. Parents need positive feedback on their children. Start every conversation with parents with a positive statement. Provide parents with positive feedback and they will look forward to speaking with you rather than fearing each conversation. Parents will feel less uneasy or defensive if teachers communicate more positively (Pogoloff,, 2004).
4. Showing interest, respect, and a caring attitude about each student as a whole person will show parents that you really do care. Teachers should ask the student and family members about nonacademic topics like family vacations, special interest, extended family relationships and favorite places to spend time (Pogoloff, 2004).
5. When talking with parents, ask what they think their child's strengths and needs are. Ask for this information in different ways. Education and parent involvement are ongoing processes. Encouragement of parent input should also be ongoing (Pogoloff,, 2004).
6. Develop a system or plan to communicate something positive about the student on a regular basis. This can be done through telephone conversations, messages, or notes sent home. Try to do this on a weekly basis (Pogoloff,, 2004).
7. Interact with students and families in different environments. Observe and interact with students and families in many settings. Strengths, needs, and interests are often shown in environments outside of school..

Occasionally attending ball games, recitals, club meetings, or community activities will show that you care (Pogoloff, 2004).

8. Plan meetings with the students' and family's schedules as the first priority. Have meetings in a central location that is convenient for both parents and teachers. Attempt to have the environment comfortable by having adult size chairs and desks available (Pogoloff, 2004).
9. It is important to be sensitive to the emotions of parents. Topics or comments that may seem like no big deal to you may sound negative or harsh to a parent so be careful of what you say (Pogoloff, 2004).
10. When parents are talking, always be a good listener. Give parents the attention and respect that you would want in return. Thank parents for their participation. Tell them how important they are. Accept differences of opinion. Disagreements are inevitable in any relationship. Share information, expertise and resources (Pogoloff, 2004).
11. Always communicate honestly with parents. If you make a mistake, inform the parents as soon as possible. Parents are more likely to understand an honest mistake but are not likely to understand or forget if you have failed to inform them of an incident involving their child. Trust is an essential component in every relationship, especially parent-teacher relationships (Pogoloff, 2004).

12. Never give up! Parents may have been in negative relationships in the past. Past relationships may cause parents to require more time to trust new teachers (Pogoloff, , 2004).

Case Studies

Listed below are some of the programs that schools around the world have used to encourage parent involvement. Some programs were more successful than others. Each program had a different way of getting parents involved but their goal was the same.

Empowerment of Parents

A middle school in Milwaukee (serving Hispanic and economically disadvantaged students) developed a "parent center" where parents can meet, make phone calls and get information to help solve problems. The center is staffed by volunteers and parents. They also have a special program for some students who need extra help with schoolwork. It calls on parents to agree, in writing, to attend school meetings and events. The director admits that the program can't reach 100% or even 50% of parents, but that the program has changed the lives of many students and their families. Several parents have even used skills they learned at the school to earn better jobs (Lynn, 1994).

Three-Way Partnership

Two middle schools in Baltimore began a program that requires students to work with their parents in order to complete homework assignments. The program tries to create a three-way partnership between parents, teachers and students. Teachers get training in how to create assignments where students have to interview their parents, ask for their opinions on specific topics, play a game with them or work with them in some other way. The teachers also do follow-up exercises in class that allow students to share

what they have learned. Parents are sent a letter about the program during the summer and are asked to attend orientation meetings and receive additional information through newsletters and their children.

Many parents say they have taken a new interest in their children's homework, and students reported that they learned things about their parents they never would have known if they hadn't worked with them on homework assignments. Teachers report higher rates for return of homework and the assignments have opened lines of communication with many parents (Lynn, 2004).

Going to School Instead of Work

A high school in Denver sends letters home to parents telling them they will be "required" to participate in an orientation meeting before school begins and at least one parenting workshop during the school year. Students whose parents meet the terms receive extra academic credit toward graduation. They are also asked to come to school for a full day during the year. Working through the parents, school officials ask employers to grant each parent a paid day off to attend classes and meet with teachers. Almost all of the employers have agreed. The school reports that only 25% of parents have participated in the "required" activities each year, but the parents that do participate say that they are more comfortable about communicating with teachers (Lynn, 1994, p.5).

In my own case study, I interviewed a parent (see Appendix A) and a teacher (see Appendix B). I found from each person interviewed, that by communicating and showing support, a positive parent-teacher partnership could develop and continue to grow. The teacher said she always tries to make herself available at the convenience of the parent and the parent said teachers have always made themselves available to her.

When questioned about the communication, the parent stated she prefers in person meetings. Conversely, the teacher explained that she communicates by phone or in writing. In addition, the teacher did say that she would meet in person at the convenience of the parent, if necessary. Both the teacher and parent agreed that positive communication is important.. The teacher sends it out almost always on a daily basis through assignment notebooks or through WOW notes. The parent said she receives comments often normally stating how hard her child is working.

Both the parent and teacher feel that professional and emotional support should be offered from the teacher. When teachers can listen and offer their support or guidance, parents will continue to trust them. There were many similar-answers throughout the interview but when asked about parents and teachers becoming partners and collaborating, they both answered by saying that communication and showing a caring attitude were keys to a successful partnership.

Appendix A

Mrs. [REDACTED]-Parent

1. Do you feel that it is important to develop a personal relationship with your children's teachers? Why? What do you feel that your role is in developing this relationship?

Yes and no. I feel it's important to develop a *professional* relationship with them in order for us both to be on the same page in helping out my child. My role? I guess letting the teacher know when I see my child is struggling with something and offering my help as well to resolve the problem.

2. Do you think that teachers should offer emotional support as well as professional support and expertise?

I think it comes natural most of the time. However, I think it helps in any situation when the professional can put themselves in the parents' shoes and pass on that understanding. It shows you care.

3. Do you prefer to communicate by phone, notes, daily communication or face to face meetings? Why?

Any of the above. After a while a live body or voice helps clear up any misunderstandings that don't always get correctly communicated in writing. Daily communication? I guess it depends on what's going on with the student/child.

4. Have you had teachers ask you what you think your child's strengths and needs are? Have your thoughts and concerns been respected? Can you talk about an instance where this took place?

I don't think that I've been directly asked. However, I've offered it up. Tommy is extremely good at building things with his Legos. I was telling his 2nd grade teacher how organized his playing time was with his Legos and the war scenarios that he created with them and his green army guys. She then shared with me a project that they did in class where they had to put something together without any directions. Tommy was the first one done. We both agreed that he was more of a Kinesthetic Learner..

5. Have you received positive information regarding your children on a regular basis from their teachers? What does it consist of?

Yes, usually it always starts out with how hard they try.

6. Do you feel that teachers listen to you? How does it show they are listening or not listening? Have you experienced a situation where a teacher wasn't listening to you or your recommendations? How did you handle it?

Actually I've had extremely good relationships with Tommy's teachers. Anytime there's been a problem I address it with them and we work together to get it solved.

7. Has confidentiality ever been an issue?

Not with this school system. I had problems with another school district and felt I had no other recourse that to pull my child out.. He was labeled - plain and simple. (not Tommy)

8. Have teachers always been available or made themselves available when you needed something?

Yes.

9. Throughout your experiences, what has been the key factor in parent teacher collaboration?

Caring about the real learning happening in the child no matter what the method to help it to take place. Even if it's unconventional. .

10. How do you believe parents and teachers can become better partners?

I think as long as they communicate with each other and respect the others position.

Appendix B

Mrs. Wickers-Classroom Teacher

1. How do you develop a personal relationship with parents?

I normally send a letter to parents introducing myself and giving them my phone number and e-mail address. After generating classroom rules with my students and discussing the homework policy, I will send them home to the parents and request they discuss this with their child and both sign and return the bottom. I work hard to consistently communicate in a positive manner to parents regarding their child.

2. Do you feel it is equally important to offer emotional and professional support as well as expertise to your parents? In what ways do you do this?

If a parent asks for emotional or professional support I will listen carefully. If I feel I have expertise in that area I will discuss the issue. If I feel inept, I will either direct them to another staffmember and/or information regarding outside resources.

3. Do you prefer daily communication, phone calls, notes or face to face meetings with parents? Why?

It's nice to aim for daily communication (which can be as simple as a short message in an assignment book, or e-mailing), but in reality daily communication of substance is difficult to accomplish.

4. We have been told by experts that we should communicate something positive about a student on a regular basis. How do you do this?

I believe as educators we should begin the year with regular and consistent positive communication with both the parents and students. This can be as simple as a WOW! Slip went home at the end of the day or as time-consuming as evening phone calls. Positive communication done consistently from the beginning of the year will help you work with parents as a team when needed.

5. How do you share information, expertise and resources with parents?

I will usually send home "hand-outs", a quick note home with the student or by mail, or I will make a phone call.

6. How do you provide specific, detailed information to parents related to goals and objectives, expectations, strategies, teaching methods, or ongoing progress of students?

All parents receive a copy of the goals and later the progress toward those goals every quarter.. Parents are asked to attend curriculum night early in the school year, a fall Parent/Teacher conference in November, and their child's annual review. In addition, I believe a progress report should be sent home at least twice per school year..

7. Do you make yourself available at the convenience of a parent?

I will always try to make myself available at the convenience of the parent.. The exception is late evening or late afternoon on Friday. I will make phone call from home or on weekends.

8. How do you deal with parents who have a low sense of efficacy (especially when you know it is affecting the student)?

As a special educator, I have a large percentage of my parents that for a variety of reasons are not available or cannot help their child. I see my role as an educator to minimize homework and send assignments home the child can independently complete on their own. When giving long-term assignments/projects I will often help them complete it at school, often supplying the materials myself..

9. How do you handle a parent who is angry or overbearing?

An angry/overbearing parent can catch you off-guard. This is when I try to remember information I learned from Parents on Your Side by Lee Canter. I need to be sensitive to the parent's concerns. The concerns are important.. I need to immediately take the time to listen and discuss, or if needed to set up another time. This needs to be done carefully to ensure the parent does not think you are "putting them off." Occasionally I may need to contact an administrator to help. A teacher never should stand there and permit a parent to verbally abuse or threaten them.

10. How do you believe parents and teachers can truly become partners?

I believe almost all parents have their child's best interest at heart. Most parents care and want to support the schools. As educators we must believe this and help parents see that we as educators also want their child to succeed and not just to conform. If parents view us as supportive, caring, and positive then we have laid the foundation of working as a team to support their child/our student in whatever way is needed.

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