

Teacher Researcher Perspectives on Parent Involvement

Reviewed by Catherine Compton-Lilly

Catherine Compton-Lilly is a Grade 1 Teacher in the Rochester City School District. She is also a member of the Editorial Board of *Networks*.

What is happening at your school to foster parent involvement? Where I teach, parent involvement is a constant struggle. Programs that promise to bring parents into the school come and go quickly; they are never well-attended and the parents who do attend the first session often do not return for the second. Teachers, observing this lack of involvement, complain that parents don't care and do not support the school. The rhetoric around our school blames parents when things go wrong for children at school.

But as I meet with parents and talk with them I consistently find them to be extremely concerned about their children, and very willing to do whatever they can to help. As I get to know parents and discover the challenges they face, I can't help but be in awe at their resilience and amazing capacity to persevere. Thus an intriguing contradiction pervades my thoughts. Either these parents are consistently and collaboratively putting on a deceptive show when they visit me at school or there is more positive "stuff" going on in homes than many teachers assume. I believe the latter. The question remains: how can schools demonstrate respect for the parents of their students and at the same time develop practices that support students and their families?

Betty Shockley, Barbara Michalove, and JoBeth Allen, authors of *Engaging Families: Connecting Home and School Literacy Communities*, make a clear distinction: "Programs are implemented, partnerships are developed" (p. 91). This book is about the need for educators to engage in respectful dialogue with families; the need for teachers to reject assumptions about parents and to challenge the belief that there is one best way to be literate. It is about the rich possibilities that exist when teachers dare to learn from parents. Shockley, Michalove and Allen use "home reading journals" with their first grade students. These "home reading journals" feature the writing of children, teachers and parents, providing a forum for dialogue among all participants.

Shockley, Michalove and Allen are clearly not interested in demanding or promoting a particular form of journal response. Their goal is to allow each family to develop ways to respond to books that are both personally meaningful and relevant to issues and ideas raised within the families. Each night students choose a book and read it with a family member. Together they record their ideas about the book, insights on the child's literacy development, and sometimes questions related to school or their particular concerns. The "home reading journal" becomes a means of supporting both family relationships around literacy and building the parent/teacher relationship.

Interestingly, parents reveal a wide range of attitudes about literacy in the "home reading journals." While the teacher researchers did not always agree with parent tactics such as correcting invented spellings or having students rewrite journal entries for neatness, the authors are careful to respect the parents' efforts to help their children. At times demonstrating respect for parents and confidence in their ability to help their children with literacy tasks requires teachers to recognize both the intent and the perspective of the parent. For example, when Adrian's mother tore a page out of Adrian's journal and made Adrian rewrite it neatly, the teacher researcher validated the parent's response explaining that writing has to be neat so that others can read it. Adrian's mother later expressed her view that children should know how to "make complete sentences using correct grammar and punctuation." Obviously Adrian's mother values correctness in writing and is sharing this value with her child. The authors make the very important point that, "Literacy standards were not something abstract or simply imposed... they were a part of their (the family's) lives, and they (family members) were making sure that they (literacy standards) would be a part of Adrian's life too."

For the authors, the key is to recognize the positive intent in each family's journal responses and respond in a genuine and respectful manner. Responses from the teacher researcher ranged from confirming parent decisions and strategies to recognizing the wonderful things parents do with literacy in the home. Teacher researchers also provided information and explanation when parents requested help. As the authors write, "...we were not trying to impose our vision of literacy but to develop relationships with families where we could learn about what already existed in the families and connect that with the literacy classroom community." The journals are not a means to enlighten parents about the best way to help their children; the journals provide a place where teachers can dialogue with parents and learn about the ways parents support their child's literacy development.

In addition to "home reading journals", Shockley, Michalove and Allen implemented other methods to support the home/school relationship. At the beginning of the school year, teachers invited parents to share information about their child. As the child's first teacher, parents shared a wealth of information and insights. Occasionally, during the school year, parents were invited to record stories from their own lives that their child could share with his/her classmates, record and place in the classroom library. Finally, at the end of the year, parents and students reflected on the child's development as a reader and writer.

In her book *Building Communities of Learners: A Collaboration Among Teachers, Students, Families, and Community*, Sudia Paloma McCaleb presents another approach to developing rich parent, student, and teacher relationships. McCaleb collaborates with a first grade teacher to find ways to create school/parent relationships that are positive and empowering. Parent involvement has traditionally been defined as an opportunity to provide parents with skills and knowledge that they are assumed to lack. There is often an assumption that something is wrong with the literacy practices of urban parents. Rather than attempting to change parents, the teacher in this classroom strives to create a classroom in which all parents and students are welcomed and valued. At "Back to School Night," the classroom teacher shared an annotated book of photographs from her own life. By sharing her personal life with parents, the teacher relinquished the role of all-knowing and omnipotent teacher.

Over the course of the year, McCaleb spoke with each parent twice during the project to initiate a dialogue about issues related to literacy and the home/school connection. McCaleb asked questions about the educational experiences of parents, their views on their child's education, and the parents' perspective on how to improve the home/school connection. These dialogues provided McCaleb with information about parents' interests and concerns. McCaleb use this information to identify generative themes (i.e. childhood friendship, families building together) that would become the basis for student/parent written texts. This book is full of powerful and beautiful examples of student and parent work. Each story reflects the individuality of the writers. Illustration media range from drawing to photography and collage. Several stories are written in Spanish, the native language of some parents.

Theoretically grounded in the work of Paulo Freire and Henry Giroux, McCaleb explores how teachers can build relationships with parents through dialogue and shared goals. The creation of books, co authored by students and parents, provided the opportunity for parents, students and teacher to collaboratively explore generative themes from their students' lives. These stories demonstrate not only the creativity and talents of parents and students but also emphasize the potential strengths families bring. Unfortunately, these strengths are often overlooked in schools.

So what does this mean for my school, a place where parents are an obstacle to overcome? Perhaps McCaleb says it best: "If teachers welcome and validate parents by listening to their concerns and finding positive things to communicate to them about their children's ongoing progress, then... teachers' words will be received with an open heart and mind. On the other hand, if teachers believe that parents don't care or are too tired or apathetic to be interested in their child's education, then the parent will be likely to fulfill those negative expectations." Our first step as educators must be to seek ways to create meaningful and productive partnerships with parents. I highly recommend both these exceptional examples of classroom research. I am looking forward to engaging my students and their families in writing "home reading journals" and co-authoring family books.

Shockley, Betty; Michalove, Barbara and Allen, JoBeth. (1995) *Engaging Families: Connecting Home and School Literacy Communities*. Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Heinemann. 162 pages.

McCaleb, Sudia Paloma. (1997) *Building Communities of Learners: A Collaboration Among Teachers, Students, Families, and Community*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers. 210 pages.