RESEARCH AND COMMUNITY IN MINORITY DEMOGRAPHIC SCHOOLS

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OVERVIEW

How do parents and caregivers (PCs), especially those from marginalized families, become more active in their children's schooling? And who bears primary responsibility for this, families or schools? The challenge looms large in an Ontario where linguistic, cultural and racial diversity further complicate family and school relationships.

There is almost universal consensus these days that PCs play a crucial role in student success in schooling. For the elementary grades in particular, the extent to which PCs extend their children's classroom work through activities such as reading together at home and discussing homework assignments and demonstrating an interest in their children's development and learning is typically linked to increased academic success (Grant & Ray, 2010; Harris & Goodall, 2007; Ippolito & Schecter, in press; Lee & Bowen, 2006; People for Education, 2011; Sanders, 2006). And while some qualify the link between active PCs and successful students, suggesting that only certain forms of PC involvement affect student achievement (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003) or that some interventions are more effective than others (Cox, 2005), the weight of evidence suggests that active PCs improve chances of student academic success. Why, then, are PCs and schools so often unable to work toward this common goal?

PCs and schools often attribute the gap to weak or non-existent lines of communication between homes and schools. For example, all too commonly teachers are frustrated by *parents who just don't return my phone calls* and PCs, especially those from marginalized families, are at a loss to help children complete homework that *no one at home can understand*.

The academic literature reiterates the communication breakdown between homes and schools. For their part, Grant and Ray (2010) locate the breakdown in educators, schools and families; Harris and Goodall (2007) echo the concern around *hard to reach* schools, adding social and economic factors as further catalysts for communication breakdowns; Ippolito & Schecter (in press) look to issues of power and inequality, questioning the normative assumptions that frame the family-school conversation; Lee & Bowen (2006) highlight the link between family demographic characteristics, including race and ethnicity, and differentiated achievement outcomes; Sanders (2006) strategizes school-community collaborations with universities, businesses, social service agencies and faith-based organizations as remedies for the home and school partnership; and the People for Education (2011) group isolate a communication gap between what research says and what parents and schools do.

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WHAT IS THE RESEARCH ABOUT?

Since 2005/2006, we have facilitated a program of school-based, community-referenced research which responds to barriers between homes and schools, in particular the perceptions that families and schools have of each other, of themselves and of the histories that shape them. In a nutshell, our research shifts the focus from a) how to increase PC support to improve classroom performance and higher test scores in schools with marginalized populations to b) how to broaden adult stakeholder relationships within marginalized schools. The aim is to connect marginalized families and their children's schools through meaningful dialogue, offering a broad context within which to address student achievement.

The project is now situated in four elementary schools in the Greater Toronto Area. It began as a series of after-school, town-hall community forums with PCs, in-service and pre-service teachers, school administrators, local community agencies, and a university-based research team. The discussions address issues parents consider pressing in their families' experience of public schooling, specific issues such as standardized testing, homework, report cards, transitioning to middle or high school; and wider issues such as authority and learning, equity policies, minority languages in Anglophone schools, and inter-generational relationships (Ippolito, 2010a).

In the third year of the project, PCs wanted to pursue issues in greater depth, and thus were born PC research teams. The research teams provide small groups of PCs opportunities to explore their children's schools and share findings with their school communities (Ippolito, 2010b). The project has evolved this year to include classroom teachers as co-researchers.

Do families or schools bear primary responsibility for parents and caregivers becoming more active in their children's schooling?

CRITICAL ROLE OF WORK

For example, one school-based team was given a mandate by its school community to explore parents' views on and core challenges with discipline. The fifteen month investigation revealed that parents of this K – 5 school hold progressive ideas around discipline. They understand discipline as a process of communication and information-sharing with their children – which is not always an easy task while simultaneously trying to acculturate to Canadian society. And perhaps the key challenge in this process is posed by the interface of minority languages and English. Parents face a situation where, precisely when they need to communicate in building relationships with their children, language stratifies and complicates this relationship.

IMPORTANCE

Researchers and participants speak of the project as a chance to make connections to their children's schools and beyond, and teachers, too, have expressed both curiosity and interest in what these research-based discussions can reveal. Widening the discussion around the place of PCs in elementary education, from the specific role they can play in student success to the quality and depth of relationships shared amongst parents, children, and schools, offers an alternate route for bringing marginalized PCs into their children's education. This broadened context also avoids the chicken-and-egg question of whether families or schools bear primary responsibility for PCs becoming more active in their children's schooling.

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