Increasing Parent Participation in Middle School Learning Communities

Katherine Walters
Dave S. Knowlton
Renee E. Weiss
Southern Illinois State University

Historically, educators have recognized the importance of parents; after all, parents are a child's first educators (Berger, 1995). In spite of this recognition, schools often seem to be isolated places for teachers and students, while parents and other primary guardians remain on the periphery. In the early part of the Industrial Age, parents' peripheral participation may have been a sign of deference to the unique role of formal education in the lives of their children; in the Information Age, however, postmodern lifestyles and economic realities have created peripheral (or non-existent) involvement. . To some extent, formal educational structures have not well tolerated the peripheral involvement. .. In the last five years, the United States Department of Education identified the creation of "partnerships that will increase parental involvement and participation" as an essential goal.. Such partnerships could be useful "in promoting the social, emotional and academic growth of students" (Drake, 2000, p. 34).

Perhaps more to the point of this paper, the importance of parents is highlighted in light of the re-conceptualization of schools as "learning communities." Although some literature about learning communities includes a discussion of the importance of parent involvement (e.g., Bielaczyc & Collins, 1999; Horsch, Chen, & Nelson, 1999; Drake, 2000), recommended strategies to enhance parental involvement in the context of learning communities seem scarce. As advocates of involving parents in learning communities, we see the need to delineate strategies for involvement. . We begin this paper by offering a framework for considering the nature of parent involvement within learning communities. After this framework, we discuss

implications of the framework and provide practical strategies for involving parents and guardians in learning communities.

A Framework for Considering Parent Involvement Efforts

In this section, we develop a conceptual framework for considering parent involvement in learning communities. We begin by offering a brief overview of a learning community, with a particular emphasis on the role parents ideally might play within that community; then we address key considerations for understanding parents and families. Both an understanding of learning communities and a consideration of parents can help school personnel select strategies for promoting parent involvement.

What is a learning community?

Educational learning communities emphasize increased student achievement through a broad range of involvement. In fact, learning communities focus on providing opportunities for all stakeholders-teachers, students, parents, and other members of the community-to become co-learners and collaborators: "Learning communities offer a way to end the isolation of [students] and integrate their learning with that of the wider society" (Bielaczyc & Collins, 1999, p. 9).

The benefits of parents being involved in the learning process are clear. By truly being participants in the process of learning, parents can model problem-solving processes for students and participate in sharing information and solutions to problems (Barth, 200). Knowledge, then, becomes both collective and social (Bielaczyc & Collins, 1999). Barth (2000) emphasizes this important role for parents by noting that "only when school becomes a context for adult development will it become hospitable for student development" (p. 69).

From these sources, we infer that effective learning communities adopt a style of learning that is consistent with constructivist views of teaching and learning. Namely, students

and adult co-learners collaborate to solve real world problems. Based on their problem-solving activities, all members of the community develop a shared notion of "truth." That is, they construct an understanding of the content of the problems that they are solving.

Considering Parents and Families

To properly consider the role of parents in learning communities, we must acknowledge their unique expertise as the primary caregivers of their children (Maroney, 2001). This expertise should be considered in light of family diversity. Drake (2000) notes that diversity can be identified based on culture, ethnicity, and linguistic differences. Because it would take a book-length manuscript to address these issues and because these issues are commonly discussed in the foundations of education literature, we limit here our discussion of diversity. We offer an explanation of family structure and discuss the notion that parents' past experiences with formal education will influence the likelihood of their involvement in learning communities. Our point is that only through considering family structure and a parent's past experiences with education can we fully understand a parent's expertise as a student's primary educator. .

Family Structure

Traditional family structure is characterized by clearly recognized norms, stereotypical roles for family members, acceptance of authority, and consistency across time. Traditional families may be less common than families with rotating roles and fluidity of structure (Drake, 2000). In many families, biological parents are not necessarily the primary guardians. An increased number of grandparents serve in this pivotal role, and some students often are left in the care of other relatives, guardians, and foster parents (Manning & Lee, 2001). So, while we use the term "parents" in this paper, readers should interpret the term more loosely.

A secondary issue of family structure relates to the fluidity of that structure. Responsibilities shift and are shared as needs change. While such fluidity may lead to less structure, fluidity might result in closer personal and physical relationships. Because of the technologies of travel, for example, parents who have professional jobs often work at job sites that are in cities removed from their main residence. As a result, children in these families often develop stronger bonds with more family members than would be typical in a more traditional family. Homelessness and transience may also change the fluidity of structure within families. as well.. Because of homelessness and transience, parents might come and go within a home or children are shuffled among a variety of homes. Regardless of the reasons for the fluidity, parents in families with fluid structures may feel some suspicion or distrust of schools, which tend to operate more rigidly and view traditional family structure as superior. .

Past and Present Educational Experiences

Parents may have had a variety of experiences within formal educational structures. As a result of their experiences, their comfort levels in the ways that they interact with schools may vary greatly. For example, whether a parent comes from urban or rural educational environments may influence how comfortably they understand conventions of interacting with school staffs. Further, parents' own level of education may influence interaction styles and their engagement within an educational learning community (Floyd, 1998).

We do not mean to suggest that parents' experiences as former students are the only factors that have shaped their attitudes toward their willingness to be a part of an educational learning community. Attitudes that parents have developed in their own formal educational experiences seem to be reinforced by current patterns of communication between schools and home. Many parents have indicated that they felt that schools were not particularly responsive (Drake, 2000; Turner, 2000). Cultural differences in communication might offer a partial explanation for

why some parents do not view schools as responsive. Some cultural differences in communication styles involve the use of eye contact during conversation, the appropriateness of critically questioning teachers, notions of personal space and physical contact, comfort with silence, and awareness of time constraints (Manning & Lee, 2001; Muscott, 2002). As a result of these differences, some parents have learned distrust of "the Establishment" (Floyd, 1998); thus they are more reticent to participate.

Strategies for Increasing Involvement

As we have argued so far, learning communities require the involvement of parents in order to be effective and efficient. . Yet, for a variety of reasons, parents' patterns of participation are influenced and undermined. From the framework presented in the previous section, readers might infer that we are pointing to a hopeless situation of parents remaining on the periphery. We do not view the situation as hopeless; we suggest, though, that viable strategies for promoting parent participation must meet numerous criteria:

- Meaningful educational activities will be the basis of parent involvement
- A shared expertise between parents and teachers will be a cornerstone of involvement. .
- Flexibility in ways that parents are involved will be valued.

In this section, we offer guidelines for attempting to increase parent involvement. . Our guidelines are developed with reference to the above three criteria.

Conduct a Needs Assessment

Needs assessments are of two types. First, a strong parent involvement plan should consider the needs of the school. .

Administrators and teachers should be interviewed. Curriculum should be analyzed. Integrating parents into learning communication should benefit schools, so a school should understand its own needs and goals.

Second, a needs assessment should be conducted that collects data and ideas from the families that a school serves. Such a needs assessment can be conducted formally by using surveys, interviews, or focus groups. But, informal means of conducting needs assessments should not be overlooked. Teachers can, for example, initiate conversations with parents during conferences. Schools might also consider an idea box, where parents can anonymously offer their ideas. Superficially, a needs assessment should collect demographic data. School personnel need to consider cultural differences as they plan to involve parents in learning communities (Floyd, 1998). But these considerations are only possible if a school knows the demographics of families and students that it serves. Needs assessments also should involve collecting data regarding life-style issues. When asked why they are not involved in the school community, many parents cite lack of transportation, lack of childcare for younger siblings, and inconvenient meeting times (Floyd, 1998; Turner, 2000). Planning and brainstorming may offer creative new solutions for these problems, but for solutions to be effective, they must be planned and implemented based on an understanding of the unique needs of families within specific school districts.

Beyond demographics, a needs assessment should collect data about the felt needs of parents within a school district.. As argued in the framework section of this paper, parents should be respected, so their concerns are paramount.. Parents who are asked for input are more likely to feel respected and thus be positive about their students' school and teachers. This enhances their willingness to participate in learning communities. Simply stated, one felt need that should be assessed deals with the resources and activities that parents feel are necessary to help increase the achievement level of their students (Floyd, 1998; Krajewski & Sabir, 2000). To this end, schools might consider using a Delphi

technique, where parents are asked to rank resources based on their perceived value.

To some extent the framework described in the first part of this paper and the results of a needs assessment might be enough information to design strategies for promoting parent participation in learning communities. But, in the remaining parts of this section, we elaborate on key principles that might be relevant in designing strategies for involving parents in a learning community.

Use a Broad Range of Strategies for Initiating Contact with Parents

Once a needs assessment has been conducted, schools should have a better understanding of the types of involvement that would be educationally useful. . Schools also should have a better understanding of resources and activities that parents may desire. Information gathered from the needs assessment may also indicate areas in which the parents may serve as resources to the staff, students, and other parents. With this knowledge in hand, schools should use a broad range of strategies for initiating further contact with parents.

Sabir (Krajewski & Sabir, 2000) commented on her administrative approach to family involvement at a school in Memphis, Tennessee: "Involving parents is a top priority and if they won't come to us, we'll go to them" (p. 46). The school district in which Sabir served had a poverty level in excess of ninety percent and a minority population around ninety-nine percent. To initiate contact with parents, school personnel visited students' homes in groups of two or three. Not uncommon in this district are school book clubs that involve readings for both parents and students. Conferences between parents and teachers are encouraged, but are scheduled based on parents' availability. Our point is not that these strategies implemented by Sabir are appropriate in all situations; but our point is that if a broad range of ways for initiating contact can be used in a high poverty and high minority school district like Memphis City Schools, then surely

most districts can find appropriate ways of initiating contact with families in their districts.

Because of a variety of family structures, a variety o strategies must be used for communicating with families (Manning & Lee, 2001). Respect must be shown for the extended families and their shared interest in being responsible for the students (Maroney, 2001). If school budgets allow, school newsletters or personal letters from teachers to parents (or other appropriate family members) can begin the school year with open and non-threatening communication. School administrators might contact local newspapers to see if the school's newsletter could be distributed as a news article (Garner, Edwards, & Knowlton, 2000). If budgets do not allow, perhaps phone calls to homes can help establish dialogue between schools and families. Phone calls have the additional advantage of allowing two-way discussion, but th~y can be time consuming. In some districts, e-mail might serve as a useful means of making contact in a forum that lends itself to easy two-way communication. Obviously, though, e-mail would not be a useful communication tool in high poverty districts. One often-overlooked aspect of initiating communication is the development of a communication team. Translators or respected community members, for example, may be included to help facilitate meaningful communication (Manning & Lee, 2001). Perhaps, for example, that a particularly receptive parent can become a part of a "phone tree" or home visit team. Reticent parents might be more receptive to contact from other parents, particularly if those parents are of the same culture.

The point is that broad strategies for initiating early contact with parents are needed. Efforts at appropriate communication can also encourage more honest interactions and help the parents feel comfortable asking questions regarding school procedures and expectations. The opportunity for parents to ask questions provides a positive foundation for future communications (Drake, 2000), and as a result, parents might feel more empowered (Norwood, Atkinson, Tellez, & Saldana, 1997).

Invite Participation Proactively

Regardless of the mode of communication, the message must be planned carefully to communicate the intent of the current year's learning community. Both in initial contact with parents and in subsequent communications, proactive invitations to participate should be part of the message. And, just as schools must use broad strategies to make contact with parents, schools also must provide broad opportunities for parents to participate in the learning community. These broad opportunities might come during the school day, as a part of after school activities, or through distant involvement from the home.

Ideally, all parents could be involved during the actual school day. Having parents in the classroom participating in in-class activities would seem to be preferable in terms of enhancing students' learning and increasing parents' understanding of middle school curriculum and pedagogy. These parents could serve as small-group facilitators, project coordinators, or they simply could serve as co-learners, sitting side-by-side with middle school students while all are learning together. . (In saying this, we recognize that middle school students would shudder at the thought of *their* parents routinely working with them, but teachers could take advantage of creative groupings by pairing students with adults other than their own parents.)

Perhaps, a "during school learning community" curriculum could be shaped around parents' unique expertise. For example, one author of this paper invited a parent who was a police officer to come to class and facilitate a series of role plays to help students understand how to interact with the police in case of a traffic stop or encounter during out-of-school time. Parents could be asked about areas in which they feel competent and willing to offer instruction. Some are great at working out budgets, using public transportation, planning special events, all of which could provide useful information in a variety of curricular areas. We realize that this type of integration into the school day is most preferable, but not necessarily possible.

hours. As Knowlton and Garner (1997) note, involving parents in extracurricular activities can have value-related benefits. We agree with Knowlton and Garner, and we add that an extracurricular activity is a learning community in itself; therefore, parent involvement can further the learning that occurs within extracurricular activities. For example, parents might be able to provide students in service learning projects with insights about the role that service has played in their own lives. Further, perhaps parents who once were athletes can serve as assistant coaches for middle school sports teams.

Still, due to some of the factors discussed in the first part of this paper-like fluidity in family structure-we must realize that not all school involvement takes place within the school building itself. Many working parents cannot be physically present during the school day and direct participation may be viewed as intrusive by parents from some cultures, but many are very interested and involved in their students' schooling. So, when inviting participation, schools should help parents see how they can reinforce the values of a learning community from home. For example, if an in-class learning community is examining history, parents can share at home with their children their own memories of key historical events-such as the explosion of space shuttle Challenger or the assassination of Martin Luther King or President Kennedy. Parents also could be encouraged to volunteer to be interviewed by students other than their own, which would increase interaction among all members of the community and provide opportunities for students to interact with others from a variety of cultural backgrounds.

Schools should not overlook the possibility of framing parent-teacher conferences conducted outside of school hours as a type of learning community. Students may even be involved in conferences with parents and teachers to discuss expectations and establish learning "contracts," as well as demonstrate what they know and how they can use what they know (Brown & Thomas, 1999). While less than ideal, such a use of conferences does involve parents in a learning community.

Offer Training and Resources to Parents

The result of a needs assessment should indicate the type of training and resources that a school needs to offer to parents; these results should help schools extend beyond simple parent orientation evenings or once-a-year parent teacher conferences. But, perhaps some statements about parents' needs cut across contexts: Many parents simply do not know how to support their child's educational development (Lazar & Slostad, 1998). Dauber and Epstein (1993) note that many parents said they would spend more time working with their children if they had some specific directions on hall' to help. Parents also indicated that they felt that schools were not particularly responsive in providing information on how to work with their students at home and what specific curricular expectations exist for students at grade levels or in particular courses (Drake, 2000; Turner, 2000). To meet some of these needs, schools might create brochures or other resources that parents can bon"ow from a school library. These resources might offer general information on young adolescent development, but they also might offer specific strategies and suggestions for working on specific skills, explanations about the role of praise in a child's development, and strategies for helping students think more critically about their school work.

Perhaps more important than the content of resources is the mode of training that schools should employ. As we have noted, expertise of parents and respect for culture and family styles are essential. Drake (2000) notes that schools can recognize the expertise of parents as educators yet still offer meaningful training to parents. We agree but note the importance of not using authoritarian training models where "experts" ' lecture while parents passively sit and listen. Training sessions should be based on interactive learning strategies. Superficially, this may simply include discussion and question-answer sessions. More substantively, simulations and role-play can be used in parent training. Training also might include helping parents understand how to reflect on their own past experiences in education so that they can accentuate positive aspects of their child's education

without reliving negative experiences from their past (Floyd, 1998). It should not go unnoticed that by constructing training thai is based on discussion groups, not authoritarian models, schools are broadening notions of community by creating interaction among parents.

Constant Revision of Plan and Implementation

Most successful parent involvement.. strategies and programs develop over time. Especially when viewed from a learning community perspective, change is inevitable because learning communities develop through time. School personnel should note that change is an ally in school improvement efforts (Fullan, 1993; Sarason, 1996). Success is rarely immediate and seeing results in terms of achievement directly through test scores may prove elusive. Learning communities are works in progress, changing as students achieve socially, emotionally, and academically.

As school personnel become aware of the family dynamics for their students, communication can be facilitated with fewer concerns over confidentiality or responsibility. For example, when the staff is aware that some students may live in two (or more!) homes due to joint custody anangements, work schedules, or other variables, multiple copies of important information can be given to the students. Having an understanding of shared responsibilities allows the staff to acknowledge the impact all caregivers have on the students. To better understand custody arrangements, work schedules, family culture, and other variables, we suggest that schools keep a database of information about each student and their living situation. Such a database would provide immediate access to vital information about the students' parents.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have provided a framework for thinking about integrating parents into learning communities. Further, we offered practical aspects of a plan for involving parents in learning

commul1ltIes. Middle school learning communities must reflect the larger community, and this reflection is impossible without parent involvement.

Effective schools view parents as partners who will assume significant and responsible roles in helping their students achieve (Lazar & Siostad, 1999). Initially, on the part of schools, creating this type of partnership will be time-intensive. As positive feelings increase because of school personnel's efforts, though, parents are more likely to make use of effective strategies suggested by school personnel and are more willing to invest time and energy in useful ways that will positively impact students (Floyd, 1998). This leads to the development of a cycle of increased understanding, acceptance and achievement for all members in our communities.

One point to make is that involving parents is not a classroom teacher responsibility. It's the responsibility of the entire school. So, the staff must be culturally competent, which entails demonstrating respect for differing values and behaviors of particular groups, working to further understanding of cultural behaviors and developing an awareness of the varying communication styles of diverse cultural groups (Muscott, 2002; Manning & Lee, 2001; Floyd, 1998). We hope this article is useful in helping school personnel and teacher educators consider some of the ideas that underlie such competence, respect, and awareness.

References

Barth, R. S. (2000). Building a community of learners. *Principal,* 79 (4),68-69.

Berger, E. H. (1995). *Parents as partners in education* (4th Ed.). Columbus: Merrill.

Bielaczyc, K., & Collins, A. (1999). Learning communities in classrooms: Advancingknowledge for a lifetime. *NASSP Bulletin,* 83 (604), 4-10.

Brown, E. T., & Thomas, J. A. (1999). Expecting the best, producing success. *Peabody Journal of Education,* 79 (3-4),224-235.

Dauber, S., & Epstein, J. (1993). Parents' attitudes and practices of involvement in inner-cityelementary and middle schools. In N. Chavkin (Ed.), *Fmnilies and schools in apluralistic society* (pp.53-71). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Drake, D. D. (2000). Parents and families as partners in the education process: Collaboration for the success of students in public schools. *ERS Spectrum,* Spring 2002, 34-39.

Floyd, L. (1998). Joining hands: A parental involvement program.. *Urban Education,* 33 (1), 123-135.

Fullan, M. (1993). *Change forces: Probing the depths of educational refonn.* Bristol, PA: Falmer Press.

Garner, A., Edwards, J. A., & Knowlton, D. S. (2000). Rural communities and schools join together to teach values and character education. *Michigan Middle School Journal,* 24(2), 12-18.

Horsch, P., Chen, 1., & Nelson, D. (1999). Rules and rituals: Tools for creating a respectful, caring learning community. *Phi Delta Kappan,* 81 (3),223-227.

Knowlton, D. S., & Garner, A. (1997). Is your hidden curriculum hidden: Unveiling the hidden curriculum through extracurricular activities. *The Louisiana Middle School Association Journal [On-line J,* 8(1). Available: http://www.tec.nsula.edu/LMSA/index.htm [December 31, 1997]

Krajewski, R. J., & Sabir, L. (2000). Every child a success: Reaching for a vision. *Principal,* 79 (4), 44, 6-47.

Lazar, A., & Slostad, F. (1999). How to overcome obstacles to parent-teacher partnerships. *Clearing House,* 72 (4), 206-210.

Manning, M. L., & Lee, G. (2001). Working with parents-Cultural and linguisticconsiderations. *Kappa Delta Pi Record,* 37 (4), 160-163.

Maroney, S. A. (2001). Respect for parents. *Instructor, 110 (5),* 12-13.

Muscott, H. S. (2002). Exceptional partnerships: Listening to the voices of families. *Preventing School Failure,* 46 (2),66-69.

Norwood, P. M., Atkinson, S. E., Tellez, K., & Saldana, D. C. (1997). Contextualizing parent education programs in urban schools: The impact on minority parents and students. *Urban Education,* 2 (3),411-432.

Sarason, S. B.(1996). *Revisiting "the culture of school and the problem of change."* New York: Teachers College Press.

Turner, J. (2000). Parent involvement: . What can we learn from research? *Montessori Life,* 12 (2), 37-39.