

RESEARCH-TO-PRACTICE SUMMARY

Teacher Initiated Communication Strategies to Engage Urban Parents

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This article summarizes a research study investigating teacher initiated communication efforts as it related to engaging urban parents in the elementary school classroom from a sociocultural perspective. Results revealed that shared knowledge, empowerment, responsive planning, developing cultural knowledge and establishing trust were essential in responsive communication. The results also suggested that the use of multiple teacher initiated communications strategies were most effective to engage parents responsively.

Key words: Urban Teacher-Parent Communication; Parental Involvement; Teacher Initiated Communication; Culturally Responsive Communication

Support for family involvement is a targeted area of educational improvement as the No Child Left Behind Act “requires schools to develop ways to get parents more involved in their child's education and in improving the school” (No Child Left Behind Act, Sec. 1118; in Mattingly, Prislin, McKenzie, Rodriguez & Kayzar 2002). Mattingly et al. (2002) acknowledges that activities to increase parent involvement have indeed become consistent components of federal, state, and local education policies. Because of these mandates, teachers have worked to invite more parental involvement into their classrooms. In addition, teachers also know and research supports that parents who are more involved have students who are more academically successful, which is the ultimate result for all students (Jeynes, 2005). The concern becomes deepens as teachers and families must define what effective parent-teacher communication and engagement look like.

To examine parent teacher communication and engagement from an urban context, sociocultural capital comes into play. For the purpose of this study, sociocultural capital referred to the transmission of and adherence to shared norms and expectations. Shared norms and expectations to the researchers refers to connecting the bridge between home and school, with no one environment having more power or knowledge than the other. The norms and expectations can transfer from one environment to the other without a power struggle. Once autonomy has been shared and understood between teacher and parents, success for the student can begin and true communication between teacher and parent can occur.

SUMMARY OF THE STUDY PURPOSE AND RESEARCH METHODS

The primary goal of this study was to investigate the communicative strategies of an ‘effective’ teacher as it related to urban parental involvement. We first created the contextual framework for discussing the role of sociocultural capital as a factor that teachers must address when communicating with urban parents. The end result of this study was to examine which teacher initiated communication activities were most influential in getting parents involved in the classroom, and what they looked like. Therefore, the teacher initiated communication activities were analyzed, and assisted in the creation of the TICS scale. There is a plethora of research about the effects of the lack of parental involvement with urban families, so this piece seeks to contribute to the dearth of research about how to effectively communicate with urban parents.

The use of autoethnography was chosen to examine personal communicative patterns from a teacher’s perspective as a framework for developing narratives from parents. The data were collected for a period of six months from the teacher’s journal on parent communications, observational notes of parental interaction, and informal conversations with parents. Data from all sources was used to develop rich narratives and triangulate for accuracy. Grounded theory (Charmaz, 2000) was used to structure a step by step process for coding and analyzing the data for patterns and themes. Narrative analysis coupled with thematic analysis was employed to analyze and develop effective and accurate narratives. Grounded theory also afforded accurate contextual descriptions and created space to compare the narratives with the perspectives of the participants. In addition, a narrative protocol was developed to minimize bias and create consistency in each narrative’s purpose, validity and reliability.

MAJOR FINDINGS

As a result of the data analysis, narratives of parental interactions were developed. The brief synopses of the narratives capture the essence of the parent-teacher interactions. Table 1 reflects the narrative themes, a description of the narrative, implications for teachers, and how the theme connects to the Teacher Initiated Communication Scale, which will be detailed further below. Additionally, each theme will be further explained.

TABLE 1.
Data Narratives with Descriptions and Findings, Indicators

<i>Data Narratives</i>	<i>Brief Description</i>	<i>Results/Findings</i>	<i>TICS</i>
Quality Parent Involvement 'How Can I Help You'	A parent ask to assist in the classroom and consequently relieves the teacher of stress as well as finding her space in the classroom dynamics	Creating spaces for parental empowerment Parental awareness of a genuine need fosters parental interest Plan assignments and activities (jobs) for parents	3 & 4
Parent and Teacher Relationship 'Between a Rock and a Hard Place'	In a parent/teacher conference a father reveals his struggles with reading and schools in general. He vows with the teacher to support at home and school efforts to ensure his daughter will read on level before school ends.	Suspended judgment and genuine acceptance promotes trust Shared goals among parents and teacher plus common interest in the success of child builds relationships Student success is depended on parent and teacher communication and partnership	3 & 4
Building Trust Beyond the Classroom 'You' jus' like family'	A home visit strengthens home/school relationships and yields positive behavior outcomes as well as enduring academic success for a student going through a family crisis (divorce).	Triangulated partnerships among the student, parent and teacher promotes the acquisition of cultural knowledge Understanding root cause(s) of disruptive behavior can alter teacher (re)actions Home visits are one of the most effective forms of communication	3 & 4
Practical Communication 'Holla Back!'	Weekly letters sent to parents as one form of how the teacher communicated regularly.	Provide both positive and pertinent information. Use language that is neither harsh, jargon loaded, or too fluffy. Proof read all letters. Know your parents! Prepare responsive communicative strategies.	1 & 2

NARRATIVE THEMES

Quality Parent Involvement

Quality parent involvement describes how parent involvement emerged out of classroom needs into a more meaningful event. Teachers can create a space in the classroom for parents/caregivers to explore their personal interests and the many ways of helping. Allowing parents' background and work prior experiences can be utilized in the classroom to help students and the teacher. Another trace of quality parent involvement was the teacher being honest and open enough to share that they don't know everything, and the answer can be discovered together. This was a great example of how authority of knowledge can be shared between teacher and parent.

Parent and Teacher Relationship

Within the classroom dynamics, teachers should develop a rapport with parents, albeit academic or personal, but it must be based on "true" knowledge, not preconceived notions or stereotypes. Once a relationship is developed, it is easier to move beyond deficit-oriented personal beliefs and progress towards affirming-oriented high student expectations and success. When upholding an affirming perspective, it is easier to reduce the temptation to impose values on parents, and more so attempt to generate connections between home and school via authentic established relationships.

Building Trust Beyond the Classroom

For parents who getting to know them during a parent teacher meeting is labor intensive, an alternative is to interact with parents outside of the classroom environment. That allows for a mutual trust and respectful partnership. Understanding and engaging in the community which surrounds the school can reflect a genuine interest in learning about cultural differences and similarities. Furthermore, that outside school information can be used within the classroom. Another method of building trust beyond the classroom is making home visits. Berger (1995) suggested that in preparation for home visits teachers must remember to, "be good listeners, set specific goals for each visit, be flexible, realize the limitations of our role as teachers, remember that small improvements lead to big ones, be yourself, respect cultural and ethnic values, don't impose personal values, don't expect perfection from parents, and begin working with the parent and child on a specific activity immediately" (pp. 316-317). Mutual trust encompasses knowing about students and their families removed from stereotypes and preconceived notions via making home visits.

Consistent Communication

Consistent methods of communication establish expectations for continuous parental involvement. The avenues to communicate can vary depending on the teacher and the families.

After a home visit insight can be provided on how parents like to communicate. Understanding when parent's work can generate an idea of when a parent can take a phone call or if they need to be contacted via letter or email. Keeping parents abreast of what is occurring academically in the classroom informs parents of ways to be involved in and out of the classroom. A critical component to consistent communication is to "know the audience," and tailor the communication "to the audience and its information needs." (Dietz, 1997, p. 41).

TEACHER INITIATED COMMUNICATION SCALE

The four previous narratives reflected parent teacher communication birthed the teacher initiated communication scale (TICS). Undergirding the TICS was a current of culturally responsive strategies. Careful analysis of the narratives revealed four basic themes of communication: text only; calls only; text and calls; and face to face. The initial results of teacher initiated communication strategies showed parent involvement was most effective when multiple forms of communication were used. Impact indicators were developed to label the teacher initiated activities based on time to develop and resources needed with (1) needing the least time and resources and (4) needing most time and resources. Resources referred to social capital, community investment and trust development of families served. Table 2 displays the Teacher Initiated Communication Scale (TICS).

TABLE 2.
Teacher Initiated Communication Scale

Level	Type	Example	Impact
1	Communication via Text contact.	Teacher sent newsletters, notes, journals, daily planners, texting* and emails	Low – Med Information
2	Communication via Phone contact	Teacher initiated communication through voice mails and phone conversations	Medium Information/news
3	Communication via Text and Phone contact	Teacher initiated communication through cards, gifts, conversations, and effects that are important to the parent community.	Med – High Personal Invitation
4	Communication via Face to Face contact	Teacher initiated communication through on campus meetings {formal teacher/parent conferences, school events, school activities, field trips, informal meetings} and off campus meetings {home visits, local library, stores, place of worship, recreation centers, parks etc.}.	High Information, news, progress, personal invitations

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

In an effort to forge effective partnerships this study revealed teachers must communicate their desires to empower, responsively plan, gain cultural knowledge and build trust with parents. First, teachers should engage urban parents in classroom activities by encouraging them to be

room parents, help with organizing field trips, planning social activities, and deciding award criteria (Benson & Martin, 2003). These activities can empower parents and validate their interest in school involvement. Secondly, teachers must carefully plan responsively communicative strategies and parent involvement opportunities to avoid confusion, anxiety, or disaster (Haynes, Ben-Avie, Squires, Howley, Negron, & Corbin, 1996). Parents should be able to come into the learning community and know how to assist. Thirdly, in an effort to communicate effectively teachers must become aware of the culture of the families served. Finally, building trust is a foundation for productive partnerships and communication with parents. Trust building is a byproduct of amassing cultural knowledge and might also help parents feel accepted and at ease in the classroom.

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