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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Teacher Initiated Communication: Engaging Parents Responsively in an Urban School Context

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This study investigated teacher initiated communication efforts as it related to engaging urban parents in the elementary school classroom. Qualitative data from an auto ethnographic research project yielded four narratives. Grounded theory and narrative analysis was employed to develop and validate the narratives and examine themes and types of communication used. The analysis led to the establishment of Teacher Initiated Communication Scale (TICS). The results revealed that 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.

Keywords: Urban Teacher-Parent Communication; Parental Involvement; Teacher Initiated Communication; Responsive Communication

On January 8, 2002, the emerging consensus that parent involvement has a fundamental impact on student success was declared by the signing of *The No Child Left Behind Act.* Support for family involvement is a targeted area of educational improvement as the NCLB 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 and Kayzar 2002). Mattingly, et. al. (2002) acknowledges that activity to increase parent involvement has indeed become consistent components of federal, state, and local education policies. Since family involvement and empowerment is one of the targeted areas of NCLB, many would-be supporters and dissenters are debating the value and relevance of parental involvement and its potential impact on schooling in the United States. Sheldon (2005) contends that "the value placed on family involvement at the federal, state, district, and school levels reflect scores of studies showing positive connections between family involvement and positive student outcomes (p. 172)." In fact, beyond support of the Department of Education, the National Institutes of Health, the National Science Foundation, and the National Academy of Sciences have all rallied behind research on parent involvement and empowerment (Mattingly, et al., 2002). The support from the aforementioned agencies as well as Charter Schools (Finn, et al., 2000) and urban school districts is based on research studies (e.g., Eccles & Harold, 1996;

Epstein & Dauber, 1995; Griffith, 1998; and Grolnick et al., 1997, as cited in Mattingly, et al. 2002; and Jeynes, 2005) that have reported that increased parental involvement will yield increased student achievement. In fact, researchers have long posited that involving families in their children's education is an important goal for school success (Ingram, Wolfe, & Lieberman, 2007; Jeynes, 2003; Sheldon, 2005).

While researchers agree that parental involvement is beneficial, the larger issue is how teachers effectively communicate with urban parents to engage them in meaningful activities. Lee and Bowen (2006) argue that the impact of the culture and population of families must be addressed in defining what effective parent-teacher communication and engagement activities look like.

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. Second, we lay out the methodology for narrative development, data collection and data analysis. Third, within the analysis we focused on teacher initiated communication activities. We also explored the narratives and the analytical meanings through a culturally responsive parental involvement paradigm. Next, we discussed the results and the development of the Teacher Initiated Communication Scale. Finally, we explore implications, limitations and the need for further research.

SOCIOCULTURAL CAPITAL IN URBAN PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

While many urban and often minority parents feel marginalized by teachers, administrators, and school culture or have had bad school experiences as students and adults, their involvement in school is a major factor in their child's success (Pomerantz, Moorman, and Litwack, 2007). Unfortunately, many urban parents may lack the time, education, confidence, and energy to be presently involved in schools because of their work schedules and former school experiences (Eberly, Joshi, & Konzal, 2007; Weiss, et al., 2003). For the purpose of this study sociocultural capital referred to the transmission of and adherence of shared norms and expectations. Lee and Bowen (2006) describe the lack of time and educational knowledge to navigate school reality as structural barriers built by middle class- eurocentric ideology. In addition, they described the lack of confidence and motivation to become actively engaged as psychological barriers that keep parents from schools (Lee and Bowen, 2006). Communicating with parents in a consistent, respectful and culturally appropriate manner (Eberly et al., 2007) through the use of accurate knowledge about students and parents' culture can provide the space for all parties involved to develop a relationship in which teachers are learning about beliefs and values from parents, and vice versa. As stated in Eberly et al. (2007), when parents and teachers communicate effectively, there is a better chance that parents will develop the sociocultural capital needed to navigate the schooling process and obtain confidence. Therefore, principals and teachers in urban schools have a responsibility to reflect on their beliefs, expectations, and values to generate multiple forms of communication in an effort to create a place where every parent feels welcomed, encouraged, and educated on how to participate.

Although parental involvement is neither a panacea nor a luxury in the educational enterprise, research shows that participating parents are a fundamental and essential component in creating healthy learning communities and student success (Fantuzzo, Davis, & Ginsburg,

1995; Fehrmann, Keith, & Reimers, 1987; Henderson, 1987; in Mattingly et al. 2002). Thus, it is logical to suggest that where there is little to no parental involvement there is marginal to low student achievement. Hence, it is imperative that teachers explore diverse ways to communicate and engage parents in school activities in an effort to boost sociocultural capital and student achievement.

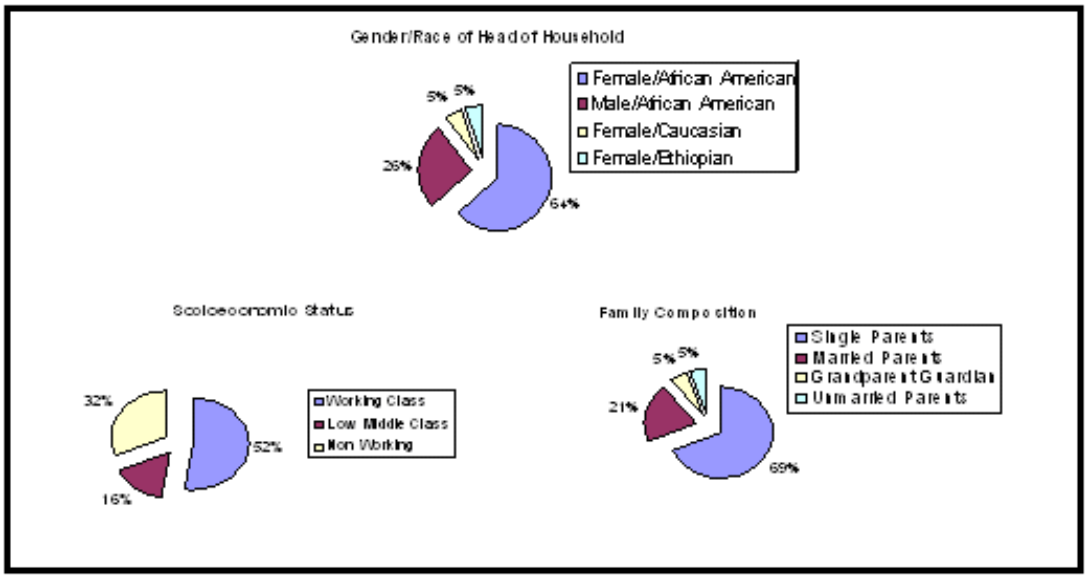
Engaging parents in quality communicative processes are best realized when communication is used to mutually empower and enrich teachers and parents (Swick, 2003). In an effort to empower parents to become socioculturally savvy, teachers must first listen and learn about the culture of the families they serve. As stated in Eberly et al. (2007), "listening to parents…needs to be seen as a crucial element in any attempt to improve home/school relations…It [listening] can make schools aware of the families of their pupils and of the communities in which they are located (p. 9)." Through mutually communication teachers and parents learn from one another, thereby creating common norms and expectations which increasing sociocultural capital.

METHODOLOGY

The major goal of this study was to examine which teacher initiated communication activities were most influential in getting parents involved in the classroom. The research project was a part of a dissertation based on autoethnographic and narrative research approaches. The data was collected through the use of observational notes, journal entries and informal conversations with parents. Grounded theory was used to structure a step by step process for coding and analyzing the data for patterns and themes. Grounded theory also afforded accurate contextual descriptions and created space to compare the narratives with the perspectives of the participants. Narrative analysis coupled with grounded theory methods were employed to assist in developing effective and accurate narratives. In addition, a narrative protocol was developed to minimize bias and create consistency in each narrative's purpose, validity and reliability.

PARTICIPANTS

The narratives provide an insight into an urban elementary second grade classroom in a Midwestern city. The elementary school was 96% African American and 4% white or other. The class consisted of nineteen students, eight girls and eleven boys. The racial composition consisted of one white and seven black females, and eleven black males. The socioeconomic status ranged from working poor to lower middle class. Family composition included single parent, married parents, and grandparent guardians. The parental composition is important because it describes the nature of the parent community of the classroom (see graphs below). The teacher was an African American male with ten years of urban teaching experience.



Graph 1. Family Composition

NARRATIVES VIGNETTES

The brief synopses of the narratives are an attempt to capture the essence of the parent-teacher interactions. The culturally relevant parental involvement theory was used to analyze teacher-parent interactions.

Quality Parent Involvement

This narrative describes how parent involvement emerged out of classroom needs into a more meaningful event. Although jobs are provided for parents to choose (Berger, 1995), a space was also created where parents could explore emergent interest and ways of helping (Emmons, Comer, and Haynes, 1996). Although the classroom is very organized, there was always a pile of organized papers to grade. Mrs. Wiston was an excellent assistant with paperwork. In fact, she was a law clerk and seemed to enjoy organizing, grading, working with groups of children, and creating our monthly attendance awards. In this narrative, a parent was empowered to ask to assist in the classroom and consequently relieved the teacher of stress as well as finding her space in the classroom culture.

A strong attribute needed for parent/teacher communication is the ability of the teacher to be real. "Being real" is directly correlated to being self-reflective and critical of ones abilities. Teachers should not propose to know everything (Plata, 2008). As Dodd and Konzal (2002) share, "since no one knows everything or has all the answers, everyone needs to work together to find better ways to educate children (p. 290)". Teachers must communicate their need for parental help and use their parents' perspectives as tools for teaching and learning (Emmons, et al., 1996). Teachers should not hide behind academic degrees and pseudo notions of superiority as if teacher authority is also a reason to promote parent marginalization (Plata, 2008). Teachers who use their authority as a means of superiority (intentionally or unintentionally) limit the opportunities to "accurately perceive, understand, and integrate into classroom practices the

meaning that students attach to their own experiences, beliefs, values, and expectations" (Plata, 2008, p. 12). Teachers should, however, acknowledge that in order to be more effective and culturally relevant, effective communication with parents is required (Emmons, et al., 1996).

Although, it is very important to provide parents with jobs or opportunities to help in the classroom, it is also important to allow space for their help to emerge from necessity or interest (Goodwin and King, 2002). Research has found that parent involvement is most satisfying when the teacher displays a sense of need, a desire to be helped, and a spirit of welcome (Schecter and Sherri, 2009). As a result of a weekly letter and face to face communication parents felt welcomed to assist in the classroom.

Parent and Teacher Relationship

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. Through consistent calls, notes, newsletters and parent visits, respect was built, the teacher-parent-student relationship was strengthened and student academics improved.

Although, as a teacher, it is easy to blame parents for the failure of their children, and give excuses why schools are so inept to teach basic skills (Kohn, 1999), it's important to neither blame nor 'pass the buck.' Instead of focusing on what culturally diverse students "don't have and can't do" (Edwards & Kuhlman, 2007), it is imperative to move beyond personal beliefs and values, and examine what students have and can do. Therefore, teachers must deal with the issue of student failure and find success with students and parents.

To support the academic relationship with parents in the learning community there were basic tenets that helped the teacher sustain healthy parental partnerships. The first was parenting (Epstein, 2001). Just as many teachers don't want parents to tell them how to teach, the same should be said that at no time should teachers tell parents how to parent. Parenting is specific and unique to each family (Bastiani, 1997). Although teachers are able to suggest activities that will enhance the education of the child, we must not cross the line and force personal sociocultural beliefs and attitudes on parents. In fact, to sustain parent-teacher communication the notion of home learning must be addressed (Berger, 1995; Epstein, 2001). Home learning goes beyond homework and interactive family experiences (Epstein, 2001; Schecter and Sherri, 2009). Home learning also encompasses what teachers can learn from the home environment. Home learning allows teachers to learn from the students' cultural background and then become more accountable to use culturally relevant pedagogy in the classroom (Amatea, 2009).

The second tenet that supported healthy teacher/parent relationships was culturally responsive communication (Epstein, 200l). Responsive communication to urban parents is often a challenging task for teachers. With the increase in ESL students, coupled with African American and other linguistic styles, teachers must make it a priority to develop culturally responsive and multiple forms of communication (King and Goodwin, 2002). In this narrative the teacher responsively communicated with the parent via calls, notes, face to face and newsletters.

Building Trust beyond the Classroom

Lamont was a comedian. He enjoyed making people laugh and he was effective. However, his natural talent to bring the moisture of laughter into dry places can also be seen as playful and immature behavior. His former teachers neither tolerated nor channeled his talent into structured learning outcomes. Instead, Lamont had disciplinary forms written and was either sent to in-school suspension or put out of school (Irvine, 1990). Although Lamont's comedic expressions were inappropriate at times, the learning community learned to embrace, ignore, or redirect his behaviors. During a particular period however, his behavior became uncharacteristically negative and aggressive. The teacher tried everything to help in class but knew it was time to contact his mother to ensure a positive change. After failed attempts with calls and notes a home visit was the last resort for successful intervention.

If teachers are to become involved in getting parents to participate in the classroom, then reflection on the best methods and strategies to include and assist families must be prioritized. Hale (2001), suggests that if teachers are going to be a viable part of the village of learning, then home visits and parent partnership must be a high priority. In fact, home visits were seen as a high impact communication strategy for the teacher in this study. 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).

In an effort to establish trust teachers must gain an understanding of cultural ways of knowing of the student they serve. Developing a knowledge base about students allows teachers to understand how students may behave and how that is representative of their cultural background (Gay, 2002). When a teacher is comfortable in going out into the community where the school is located or the community center where children attend afterschool care, it also shows a genuine interest in learning about cultural differences and similarities. Those excursions can provide another opportunity to build trust outside of school between teachers, parents and students.

Consistent Communication

Without fail, the teacher sent a newsletter home at the beginning of every week. The teacher believed that letters were “an effective means of communicating an idea or message to parents” (Berger, 1995, p. 361). As a result, each week parents would respond via phone calls, notes, and visits.

Through the weekly newsletters parents were informed of the important events of the week as well as interesting happenings in the classroom. In some letters, for example, times were posted for classroom senate meetings or student research presentations. Also posted were results of senate meetings, birthdays, awards, field trips, learning opportunities outside of school, special guest, conferences, and in school programs. The four staple components found in every parent letter included, a call for consistent attendance, daily reading experiences, a note of individual and class praise, and a note for good work habits for student success at home. In addition, parents were always invited to respond with things they did at home, visit

the classroom and "a standing invitation for readers to communicate their opinions" concerning the classroom (Dietz, 1997, p. 42).

Consistent communication was the key to getting and keeping parents involved. While newsletters were used as a regular form of communication it was ranked as low impact and rarely used as the sole means of communication. To create a more responsive newsletter the teacher was careful not to use overly fluffy or harsh language and stayed away from educational jargon. Yet, he was conscious not to water down any written communication (Dietz, 1997). There was a direct tone to the letters that encouraged parents to act, be involved in the educational process, as well as warn them of challenges, thank them for their help, and invite them to participate in the classroom. In order to produce responsive newsletters, teachers must "know the audience" and tailor the tone and content of the newsletter "to the audience and its information needs" (Dietz, 1997, p. 41).

RESULTS

Themes emerged in two categories: teacher initiated communication and culturally responsive strategies for parental involvement. While each theme seemed isolated teacher initiated communication was ineffective without culturally responsive methods. First, teacher initiated communication strategies were developed through an analysis of the narratives based on the teacher's response to engaging parents. 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 that parent involvement was most effective when multiple forms of communication were used. The 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 1 displays the Teacher Initiated Communication Scale (TICS).

TABLE 1
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

The use of culturally responsive strategies also yielded a number of themes including empowerment, responsive planning, cultural knowledge and trust as related to responsively engaging parents. Table 1 provides a list of the data narratives, the results and the teaching initiated communication strategy used to engage parents.

TABLE 2
Data Narratives with Descriptions and Findings, Indicators

Date Narratives	Brief Description	Results/Findings	TIC
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.	3 & 4

In an effort to forge effective partnerships the data revealed that 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 and 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, and 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 as a byproduct of amassing cultural knowledge and may also help parents feel accepted and at ease in the classroom.

CONCLUSION

Research on responsive teacher initiated communication can reveal a great deal about the impact of communicative strategies in engaging parents. Unfortunately, resistant behaviors concerning responsive communicative strategies for parents are common throughout
urban schools. In an effort to quell resistant behaviors, teachers must include parents and support their sociocultural norms and expectations.

While many initiatives are designed to improve parent teacher communication in urban schools, these initiatives rarely focus on the sociocultural aspect of responsive communication. In order to promote effective communication between teachers and parents a focus on the value of empowerment, responsive planning, developing cultural knowledge and establishing trust, must be a priority.

In an effort to learn more about the progressive nature of responsive communication further research on the TICS and its relationship to culturally appropriate communication strategies will be conducted.

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