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Teacher Perceptions of Parent Involvement in Literacy Education

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Parent involvement appears to hold great potential for the improvement of literacy education. Without the coordination and support of the classroom teacher, however, the effects of such involvement may not be maximized. A question central to the development of parent involvement programs is, "Do teachers recognize and support parent involvement as a significant component of children's education?" The purpose of this informal study was to describe perceptions of parent involvement in literacy education. Over sixty teachers from a cross section of schools in a Midwestern metropolitan area were interviewed in depth about their attitudes toward parent involvement in reading. A structured interview combining closed and open-ended questions was used to gather data. Results indicated that teacher perceptions of what constitutes parent involvement differed by grade level. Over 90 percent of the teachers recognized the importance of involving parents. Less than 5 percent, however, supported involving parents as partners. Teacher perceptions of the role of parents appeared to restrict involvement and limit dialogue.

Introduction

Parent and family involvement in children's learning has long been recognized as a key to assisting children in overcoming learning difficulties (Dewey, 1898; Huey, 1908; U.S. Department of Education, 1987). Research on early readers (Clark, 1976; Durkin, 1966; Teale, 1978) has also recognized the importance of parents in children's literacy learning. For example, Durkin found that early readers tended to have parents or family members who: served as literate models, read aloud to the child,

took time to interact with the child, and provided reading and writing materials. Henderson (1988) reviewed 43 studies on the subject and found that almost any form of parent involvement appeared to produce measurable gains in student achievement. Thus, a well-respected research base has been established to support parent involvement in the development of literacy.

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"Get parents involved" is, therefore, a cry often heard mandated in many government sponsored and initiated programs. However, educators' views on what constitutes appropriate parent and family involvement have varied throughout the major historical periods of American education (Sturtevant and Linek, in press). Since the inception of the War on Poverty and Head Start, past practices of one way communication from school to home and asking parents to monitor homework are being replaced by models of family literacy (Silver and Silver, 1991). These models recognize the importance and validity of the home and community as centers for literacy learning and of true partnerships between home and school.

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Thus, parent involvement in literacy education of children has gained considerable support and direction in recent years (Anderson, et.al., 1985; Fredericks and Rasinski, 1990; Rasinski and Fredericks, 1989a). Parent involvement can range from home supplementation of instruction that is delivered at school to working with children in classroom settings (Rasinski and Fredericks, 1989b). However, regardless of the great potential that is apparent in parent involvement in literacy education, without the coordination and active support of classroom teachers, the effects of such involvement may be minimal.

Research by Baruth and Manning (1992) found that similar valuing systems are held by parents and teachers regarding the importance of education and literacy. Studies of teachers' willingness to support parent involvement efforts specifically in reading education, however, have not been forthcoming (Linek and Rasinski, 1991). Most work has focused on parents' willingness to involve themselves in the reading education of their children.

Work by Walde and Baker (1990) revealed that teachers do not feel parents are sufficiently concerned to support their children's general education adequately. They argue that parents are the problem because they are uncaring, lack basic skills, and are irresponsible. They document this perspective with poor attendance at conferences, minimal time spent with offspring, and not meeting the physical needs of children. They argue that problems encountered by teachers in dealing with parents lead to negative teacher perceptions of parent involvement.

Similarly, Williams and Stallworth (1983-1984) found that while school personnel were generally in agreement with the proposition of greater parent involvement in education, they felt that appropriate roles for parents were in tangential, non-instructional activities such as PTA, fund raising, and booster clubs. Parents, on the other hand, wanted substantive involvement in assisting in, assessing, and evaluating their children's learning and the educational decision-making process. In essence, parents wanted to be co-learners and partners with educators.

Thus, despite growing recognition of the importance of involving parents in general education, teacher support for such involvement is not necessarily forthcoming. This study, therefore, focused specifically on elementary and middle school reading teachers' perceptions of parent involvement in literacy education.

Method

This descriptive study was conducted over a period of two semesters. Questions guiding this study were: 1) Do teachers perceive parent involvement in literacy education as important? 2) How do teachers actually involve parents in reading instruction? 3) How satisfied are teachers with their attempts at parent involvement in reading curriculum? 4) How do teachers view the role of the parent when it comes to making decisions about reading instruction in their own schools and classrooms?

The initial pool of subjects were teachers who had volunteered to allow preservice teachers to complete a reading diagnosis and assessment field experience in their classrooms. To gather data, subjects were interviewed in depth about their perceptions of, applications of, and attitudes toward parent involvement. Subjects were also observed 2-1/2 hours weekly for a 10 week period and conversed frequently with one of the authors.

Interviewer/observers were preservice teachers enrolled in a reading diagnosis and assessment course. The researchers used preservice teachers as interviewer/observers so as to elicit a less guarded view of parent involvement than the researchers themselves might have evoked. All interviewer/observers had completed at least two prior literacy methodology courses. The researchers instructed, modeled, and provided guided practice for the interviewer/observers on how to ask questions and probe using a scheduled standardized interview. Interviewer/observers were also instructed on how to seek consistency between self-reported data and observed behavior.

Overall, subjects were observed a minimum of 10 times, at least two times prior to the interview and at least 4 times after the interview. At the end of the semester, interviewer/observers submitted all notes from the interview they conducted, a summary of the interview, and a summary of their observations. They also submitted a paper analyzing whether or not the data collected in the interview was consistent with subject behavior. Only subjects whose interview answers were considered consistent with observed behavior were included in this study.

The final pool of subjects included 64 teachers from a cross section of schools in a Midwestern metropolitan area. Of the 64 teachers included, 38 taught primary grades, 22 taught middle school grades, and 4 were specialists working with both primary and middle grades (Mean = 3.18, SD = 2.04, n = 60). Years of teaching experience in the sample ranged from 0 to 36 (Mean = 15.78, SD = 8.95, n = 64).

During the interview, subjects were asked to rate the importance of parent involvement in the reading instruction occurring in their own classrooms and discuss their reasoning. Subjects were also asked if they currently involved parents in their classroom reading curriculum and, if so, how. If they did not involve parents, they were asked to elaborate on why they chose not to. Subjects were then asked to rate their satisfaction with past parent involvement in their classroom reading curriculum and to provide a rationale for their rating. Finally, subjects were asked if parents should have a say in the way reading is taught in their school or classroom and to provide the reasoning behind their thinking.

Ratings data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Data were also blocked and reported by grade level (primary and middle). Qualitative response data were analyzed using a constant comparative method (Goetz and LeCompte, 1984). Responses were searched for emerging themes. Themes were supported by categorized and elaborated responses included in the results section.

Results

Results are divided into four sections. The first section reports on perceived importance of parent involvement. The second section deals with actual involvement of parents by teachers. The third section discusses teacher satisfaction with parent involvement. The final section reports on the issue of teacher beliefs related to parent empowerment in literacy education.

Importance of Parent Involvement. When teachers were asked how important parent involvement was in their classroom reading curriculum about 90% responded that it was important or very important, about 10% were neutral, and none perceived it as unimportant (see Table 1). There were no apparent differences by grade level.

Table 1

Ratings of Teacher Perceptions of the Importance of Parent Involvement in Classroom Reading Curriculum Blocked by Grade

Rating	Primary	Middle	Total
Very important	83.9	89.5	86.2
Important	6.5	0	5.2
Neutral	9.7	10.5	8.6
Somewhat unimportant	0	0	0
Very unimportant	0	0	0

Note. Results are reported in percentages.

When teachers were asked why they had responded as they did (see Table 2), the majority who saw involvement as important (55.8%) cited affective factors such as parent expectations influencing student attitudes, motivation, and performance. Approximately 33% viewed parent modeling of literate behavior as a key issue and 25% believed that reinforcement of reading skills and understanding the process of reading was a key issue. Less than 10% of all teachers cited parents as providers of reading materials. Middle school teachers, however, were more likely to cite affective factors than primary teachers. Primary teachers were more likely to cite reinforcement of skills and understanding the reading process as key issues than were middle school teachers.

When the small number of teachers who had neutral perceptions of parent involvement were asked why they felt that way (see Table 2), primary teachers cited a lack of parent reading and writing skills. Middle school teachers mentioned changing parent priorities (less focus on children as they become older) and prior experiences with parent involvement that had been both positive and negative.

Table 2

Reasons for Teacher Ratings of the Importance of Parent Involvement

Reasons	Primary	Middle	Total
Teachers who rated parent involvement as important or very important cited:			
Affective factors	40.6	80.0	55.8
Role models	31.3	35.0	32.7
Reinforcement of skill & understanding the process of reading	34.3	10.0	25.0
Providing reading materials	6.3	10.0	7.7
Teachers who gave parent involvement a neutral rating said:			
Parents can't read or write well themselves	66.2	0	40.0
Can be positive or negative	0	50.0	20.0
Parents less involved at this age because of changing priorities	0	50.0	20.0

Note: Results are reported in percentages.

Current Parent Involvement. When teachers were asked if they currently involved parents in their classroom reading curriculum about two-thirds answered yes (see Table 3). Surprisingly, close to 50% of the primary teachers answered no, but only slightly less than 16% of the middle school teachers gave such a response..

Table 3

Current Teacher Involvement of Parents in Classroom Reading Curriculum

Involves Parents	Primary	Middle	Total
Yes	50.0	84.2	65.6
No	47.1	15.8	32.8

Note. Results are reported in percentages.

When those teachers who involved parents were asked how they involved parents (see Table 4), over one-half said that they sent homework or reading materials home and close to 30% said that they had in-class volunteers. Although middle school teachers were less likely to have in-class volunteers, they mentioned other types of involvement not specified by primary teachers. For example, middle school teachers involved parents by: 1) communicating study progress through report cards, interim reports, telephone calls, and notes; 2) having parents take their children to the library; and 3) having their classrooms open to parent visits.

Table 4
Types of Parent Involvement Currently Used

Types of Current Involvement	Primary	Middle	Total
Why teachers answering "yes" involved parents:			
Send homework or reading materials home	55.6	57.9	56.8
In-class volunteers	38.9	21.1	29.7
Communication	0	26.3	13.5
Take children to library	0	5.3	2.7
Open door policy (most choose not to come)	0	5.3	2.7

Note. Results are reported in percentages.

When those teachers who did not involve parents were asked why, over 40% said that there were no parents who could serve as volunteers at school (see Table 5). Surprisingly, only primary teachers gave this answer. Over 30% of all teachers cited a lack of parent interest in children. Some teachers cited a lack of parent time due to work or being a single parent. Others cited too much teacher preparation time as being a factor in not involving parents. Less than 10% of all teachers cited previous bad experience with in-class volunteers, but 33% of middle school teachers cited this reason.

Table 5

Reasons Why Teachers Did Not Involve Parents

Reason	Primary	Middle	Total
Why teachers answering "no" did not involve parents:			
No volunteers at school	47.4	0	40.9
Parents not interested in their children	31.6	33.3	31.8
Parents work	15.8	33.3	18.2
Too much time to prepare for in-class volunteers	15.8	0	13.6
Single parent families	10.5	0	9.1
In-class scheduling problems	5.3	33.3	9.1
Previous bad experience with in-class volunteers	5.3	33.3	9.1

Note. Results are reported in percentages.

Teacher Satisfaction. When teachers were asked how they felt about past parent involvement in their classroom reading curriculum, a high degree (over 60% indicated dissatisfaction or ambivalence (see Table 6). Primary teachers (over 45%) were more likely to respond that they were dissatisfied. Middle school teachers (over 47%) were more likely to be ambivalent.

Table 6

Ratings of Teacher Satisfaction with Past Parent Involvement in the Classroom Reading Curriculum

Rating	Primary	Middle	Total
Very satisfied	9.1	10.5	8.5
Satisfied	27.3	21.1	30.5
Neutral	18.2	47.4	28.8
Somewhat dissatisfied	30.3	10.5	20.3
Very dissatisfied	15.2	10.5	11.9

Note. Results are reported in percentages.

When asked why they felt as they did, teachers who were "very satisfied" focused on parent attitude and interest. For example, three teachers cited parent openness to conferencing and willingness to help when needed. One teacher said that parents called to find out what was due or to clarify assignments; another stated that in-class volunteers wanted to be there and did not undermine what was taught. One teacher thought that, in general, there was lots of parent interest.

Teachers who were "satisfied" cited 4 reasons why they were less than "very satisfied". Four teachers mentioned that they wanted more parent involvement but that changing lifestyles had limited parent time and interest. Four teachers said that sometimes cooperation was not apparent because it depended on the group of students and parents that made up the class. One teacher stated that parents of students in top groups showed concern but many parents of students in low groups did not. Finally, one teacher cited a bad experience with a previous volunteer's behavior and language in the classroom.

Those teachers who were "neither satisfied nor dissatisfied" fell into two categories according to the grade level taught. The only reason cited by primary teachers for ambivalence toward parent involvement was that they did not have a volunteer at school. Middle school teachers noted six reasons for their ambivalence. Two teachers mentioned a lack of teacher time to set up a program and prepare for a volunteer. One teacher said that her satisfaction depended on the reading ability of the parent and the child. Another cited a bad past experience. One said that too many parents were working; another said that a minority of parents set good examples for their children. Finally, one teacher cited an instance in which parents had lied so that their children could get credit in the Pizza Hut Book It Program.

Teachers who were "dissatisfied" cited a variety of reasons for their dissatisfaction. Seven said that there was little parent interest in or involvement with their own children. Four teachers stated that parents did not give their children enough encouragement. Two said that the parents

had refused to take their own children to the library for research projects. One said that parents were just too busy and another said the in-class volunteers lacked the skills really needed to help. All of the teachers who were "very dissatisfied" said that there was a general lack on parent interest, concern, and response.

Probing of teacher reasoning in the dissatisfied categories revealed two limitations. First, most of the teachers admitted that between 80-85% of the parents were interested and helpful so their dissatisfaction was based on a minority of parents. Second, dissatisfaction was mainly based on communication through students rather than direct communication with parents. For example, one teacher cited an instance where a child told the teacher that her research project was not completed because her father had refused to take her to the library. The same teacher, however, admitted that she had not called the parents to verify the information.

Parent Empowerment. When teachers were asked if parents should have a say in the actual way reading was taught in their school or classroom, the majority had no opinion (see Table 7). Of the 40% who had opinions, the ratio was 4 to 1 against letting parents have a say.

Table 7

Teacher Opinions on Whether or Not Parents Should Have a Say in the Reading Curriculum

<u>Opinion</u>	<u>Primary</u>	<u>Middle</u>	<u>Total</u>
Yes	2.9	15.8	8.1
No	31.4	36.8	32.3
<u>No opinion/undecided</u>	<u>65.7</u>	<u>47.4</u>	<u>59.7</u>

Note. Results are reported in percentages.

When asked why they answered as they did, only two of the teachers answering "yes" did not qualify their answers. One said that parent input was important because it got children involved. The other stated that if there was a problem parents should have a say in how to fix or improve the situation, but that parents should also help in implementing the program at home. These two teachers appeared to perceive parents as partners.

The remainder of the teachers who answered "yes" or were "undecided" qualified their answers. Most prefaced their statements with the

words "only if" during probing. Nine of the teachers said that suggestions were okay but that they reserved the right to make all final decisions and three said that they would accept parent input only if they as teachers agreed with the idea. Probing revealed that there were two distinct categories: the first open to suggestions and the later closed. Five of the teachers stated that parents should have input only if they were knowledgeable in all aspects of teaching and reading. Four believed parents should have input only if there was a problem with which the teacher needed help, such as, gaining the child's interest. Two thought parent input should be limited to censoring what their child was reading. Two others thought that input should be limited to the right to request a retest if parents disagreed with reading level placement. Finally, one teacher said, "Only if they are unhappy with their child's performance. Finally, one teacher said, "Only if they are unhappy with their child's performance." Overall, this group appeared to accept the idea of parent input but believed in maintaining teacher control and power.

The overwhelming reason 29 out of 64 teachers answered "undecided" or particularly "no" to letting parents have a say was that they believed parents were unqualified because they lacked the knowledge and training of an educated teacher. Two teachers believed that parent input would be harmful to the professionalism of teachers. Two teachers said that parents should help at home, not at school. Two said, "Parents can't tell me how to teach, but I'll listen to helpful suggestions." One teacher believed that parents should only reinforce what the teacher had taught at school, and one stated that parents should have input only if they were educated professionals. Overall, this group appeared to believe in maintaining teacher superiority and for the most part rejected the idea of parent input.

Discussion

Overall, teachers appeared to perceive parent involvement as important particularly for the purpose of modeling and motivation. More teachers tended to involve parents than not. Perceptions of what constituted parent involvement, however, appeared to differ by grade level.

Although primary teachers were more likely than middle school teachers to involve parents in their classrooms, they were more likely to say that they did not involve parents. They appeared to have a perception of parent involvement that was often limited to in-class volunteers. Middle school teachers actually involved parents less in class, but believed that they involved parents more because of an expanded definition of parent involvement.

The finding that primary teachers appeared to place more of an emphasis on involving parents with reinforcing skills and understanding the reading process was not surprising. It was not surprising because deciphering the graphophonemic system works is often the focus of reading instruction in primary grades. Middle school teachers, on the other hand, tended to believe that parent involvement was important for affective reasons. For example, modeling enthusiasm for reading and encouraging children to actively participate in reading activities like the Pizza Hut Book It Program were mentioned.

Overall, a majority of teachers were dissatisfied or ambivalent about past parent involvement. Reasoning for this negative perception, however, was often grounded in a focus on a minority of parents and indirect communication filtered through children. Close to one-half of the teachers also believed that parents should not have a say in the reading curriculum because they lacked the knowledge and training of an educated teacher.

The current findings appear to be fairly consistent with the findings in general education (Walde and Baker, 1990; Williams and Stallworth, 1983-1984). That is, teachers believe parent involvement is important and beneficial, but that many parents don't care or have the time to be involved with their children. Teachers believe that parents should be involved, but that they should be ready to respond and be involved on teacher's' terms. Some teachers believed that problems they had encountered in dealing with parents had led to their negative perceptions, yet admitted that those perceptions were based on a minority of parents.

Are these negative perceptions and lack of implementation totally due to, as Walde and Baker (1990) suggest, problems encountered by teachers in dealing with parents? We think that this is just one tiny slice of the parent involvement pie.

Overall, there appeared to be a high level of dissatisfaction and lack of involvement. For example, only 2 of the 64 teachers in the study viewed parents as partners. The remainder appeared to preclude meaningful dialogue with parents on the teaching of reading with "only if" qualifications, or responding that parents should not have a say in the reading curriculum. The vast majority therefore, appeared to prestructure a negative WE-THEM interactional context. Collaboration was accepted only if the teacher needed help or if parents had complaints. Thus, the overwhelming majority of teachers appeared to support systematic professional exclusion of parents from the decision-making process.

Parents, on the other hand, have appeared to want substantive involvement in discipline and evaluation/assessment of their children's learning, to be included in decision-making, and to be viewed as co-learners with educators (Williams and Stallworth, 1983-1984). The current study and previous research (Bricklin, 1970; Lightfoot, 1978), however, support teacher and parent anxiety and role expectations from prior experience affecting relationships and blocking effective communication. Thus, to what extent are parents not involved because they feel rejected and/or alienated from school because they are not the "experts" in education and literacy? To what extent might teachers' own definitions of and beliefs about what constitutes appropriate parent involvement erect barriers and be factors in their own anxiety and frustration?

Should we therefore bash teachers the way Walde and Baker (1990) bashed parents? No, we view that response as a release of frustration that attempts to shift blame rather than provide a mode of investigation that attempts to determine and change factors influencing the situation. Our research had led us to believe that the underlying factors and professional

barriers that have been erected go much deeper. Often parent involvement has been ignored while negative views of parents have been ingrained in many teacher education texts and courses for at least the last century (Sturtevant and Linek, in press).

Should we bash teacher education and teacher educators? Again, the answer is no for two major reasons. First, societal needs focusing the purpose of American education have changed with history. For decades many public schools were preparing immigrants and blue collar Americans for our expanding industrial workforce (Sturtevant and Linek, in press). This model has guided research, influenced the writing of texts, shaped teacher education, and continues to mold much of the teaching in our schools.

Thus, the question remains, how can teachers come to see parents as partners in literacy education? How can we, as a profession, begin to see parent input as an opportunity to educate parents about reading, literacy, and literacy learning? At the turn of the twentieth century, Huey commented on children's literacy learning and what he saw as the reality of home and school situations by saying:

[A] good home is usually a better place ... [than school for literacy learning] ... provided parents can give them a little time every day and can have proper instructions about assisting with home learning. But many parents do not have the time or the intelligence, and the schools are not yet prepared to assist them effectively. (1906, p. 336)

Will educators be prepared to meet Huey's challenge as we enter the twenty-first century? The findings of this study evidence: 1) a continuing gap between the value teachers attach to parent involvement and what actually occurs; 2) barriers to communication with parents; and 3) a lack of knowledge about how to effectively involve and educate parents in literacy development. Thus, to prepare for the next century, it appears that instead of bashing anyone, what we need to do is recognize where we are, why we

are there, figure out how to move forward, and identify the barriers to change.

Today, we have begun accepting the value of multiculturalism while moving away from the deficit model of education which blames the victim. Inservice facilitating this shift will help us to move forward with parent involvement because it permits valuing of knowledge and understanding outside the narrow world of formal education. A barrier, however, is the continuing focus by many on the limited, Euro-centric view of education, history, and how those values are translated into everyday life as being the "right" view.

Today, many educators, businessmen, and the general public have come to recognize that learning to think and solve problems is more important than remembering specific information. Inservice focusing on interpersonal communications and portfolio assessment that collaboratively involves parents and students in assessment and evaluation will help. These vehicles will reduce the anxiety and role expectations that stifle communication and create turf battles while providing a positive environment for parent involvement. A barrier, however, is the continuing general acceptance of traditional standardized testing systems focusing on skills and factual knowledge for evaluation and comparison.

Today, we are recognizing that to break the cycle of under achievement we must provide literacy experiences that benefit all members of the family. Models of parent involvement, such as the Family Reading workshop model (Goldsmith and Handel, 1990; Handel, 1992), the paired reading project (Rasinski, et.al., 1991), or family support teams (Slavin, et.al., 1990) could be developed. Inservice and increased prominence, time, and space in teacher education texts and literature should be given to successful models of family literacy to expand teacher perceptions of parent involvement and literacy education. Barriers, however, are limited by funding for teacher inservice at local levels, perceptions by some teachers that their responsibility begins and ends with teaching children at school,

and turf battles among social service agencies generate a scramble for funding.

Can we change Huey's view of the reality of home and school situations by the year 2000? We have barriers, but we have identified the means and we have the time to further break them down in the next few years. The challenge for the immediate future is to help education professionals evolve their perceptions of parent involvement so that they view parents as partners in the twenty-first century.

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