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Deconstructing Parental Involvement in Education: A Review of de Carvalho's Work

Jane A. Smith

In *Rethinking Family-School Relations: A Critique of Parental Involvement in Schooling*, Maria Eulina Pessoa de Carvalho (2001) addresses the many complexities and implications involved when policy makers attempt to engage parents in their child's education. By offering a critique of parental involvement policies, this book provokes thought and challenges current rhetoric among educators. In the first pages, the author places herself in direct opposition to current educational research and policy that presents parental involvement as a remedy to educational problems (Swap, 1993). Even though de Carvalho (2001) can see parental involvement as a "sensible idea" (p. 4), she opposes a policy that disregards differentiation across families, adds to parental stress, and possibly reinforces social inequity.

Background

Educational researchers have been exploring the benefits of parental involvement for the past two decades, consistently finding children with involved parents achieving greater academic success. Reformers have quickly followed with policies designed to create connections between the home and the school. De Carvalho critiques one of the best-known parental involvement models when she points out perceived methodological problems in Joyce Epstein's work (Epstein, Sanders, Simon, Salinas, Jansorn, & VanVoorhis, 2002). "This model, however, is based on a small number of actual successful school-family-

community partnerships and on the characteristics of the already involved parents and communities, and their schools” (de Carvalho, 2001, p. 2). These policies, de Carvalho states, encourage a romanticized view of the family and can result in teachers blaming parents when children struggle academically. Since low-income, minority parents are involved at lower rates (Epstein et al.), current parental involvement policies may “consecrate and increase discrimination” (de Carvalho, 2001, p. 6). Taking a decidedly opposite stance to educators encouraging broad policies for engaging parents in their child’s education, de Carvalho goes on to lay out her argument in four chapters.

Contents

In her first chapter de Carvalho lays out the foundation of her argument, setting forth the concept of the unequal distribution of cultural capital. Low-income parents, with less cultural capital, are not as able to help their children succeed academically (Lareau, 2000). The author goes on to give her readers an historical view of the complex relationship between the home and the school. On page eighteen, a thorough list of the problems with broad parental involvement policies is given, including, for example, a lack of attention to the power relationships in schools, a disregard for the professional status of the teacher, and the diversity of families filling today’s schools.

The second chapter brings in the author’s personal experience as a student, a parent, and an educator in the U.S. and in Brazil. She describes the development of her stance on parental involvement over the years as she observed the role of parents in relation to the school. Near the end of the chapter she concludes that school and family share a “division of educational work and responsibility for children” (de Carvalho, 2001, p. 42). This idea finds support in Lareau’s (2000) research demonstrating the desire of low-income parents to leave the job of teaching with the teacher. The parents in Lareau’s study were not abdicating responsibility, but were honoring the preparation and experience of the classroom teacher.

In her third chapter, de Carvalho considers “equity implications of educational policy prescribing a family-school partnership in terms of parental involvement in schooling and parental implementation of academic activities in the home” (p. 43). She goes on to describe the belief that schooling only reinforces social inequalities, instead of eliminating them. She describes the majority culture bias in schools and the disparity in educational experiences across income and racial groups. Instead of improving academic performance for minority students, according to de Carvalho, current parental involvement policies only increase the already gross inequities.

Homework is the subject of the fourth chapter. Current parental involvement policies encourage parents to provide a quiet space and to engage in educational activities with their child. The author provides a historical view of the role of and research in support of homework. According to de Carvalho, homework may only increase academic difficulties for at-risk students when parents cannot, because of their own educational problems or life stress, provide the help requested.

An epilogue closes de Carvalho's thoughtful work. She states in closing, "I can neither find fault in parent's interest in their children's education and school success, nor favor parental involvement in schooling as a state policy mandating that all parents be involved" (p. 139). Instead of parental involvement policies as a reform to help students with poor academic performance, de Carvalho recommends "equal educational opportunities while compensating for unequal social conditions" (p. 139).

Concluding Thoughts

If one of de Carvalho's goals was to provoke thought and discussion, she easily meets that goal. With research support and her own life experience, she calls into question parental involvement policies at the local, state, and federal level. Even though a broad injunction against these policies may not be in order, the author clearly provides a significant argument for further analysis of these policies.

A small group of educational researchers have proposed parental involvement policies and practices designed particularly for low-income, minority communities. James Comer's (1984) School Development Plan provides a model for parental participation at all levels resulting in enhanced school climate and improved academic performance. O'Connor (2001), after interviewing parents and educators in a low-income school, provides clear recommendations for involving family members, including involving parents in decision-making and providing learning communities for parents which can empower and guide the involvement process. In their research in an economically diverse school, Abrams and Gibbs (2002) found the potential for meaningful parental involvement to change the imbalanced power relations between educators and low-income parents. Each of these researchers give clear evidence of the potential to create meaningful parental involvement with low-income families that does not further the discrimination de Carvalho speaks so eloquently against. Rather than deconstructing all parental involvement policies, it seems that with thought and compassion parents and educators might work together to create strong learning communities for their children.

Author's Biography

Maria Eulina Pessoa de Carvalho was born in João Pessoa, Paraíba, Brazil, in 1956. She has a bachelor's degree in education from Federal University of Paraíba (UFPB), where she has worked as a teacher educator since 1979. In 1979, she obtained a master's degree in educational psychology from Campinas State University, in São Paulo, where she worked with *favela* children in after-school programs. From 1993 to 1997, she lived in East Lansing, Michigan, where she attended Michigan State University and earned a PhD in Curriculum, Teaching and Educational Policy, under the advice of Professor David Labaree. She currently teaches education research courses at undergraduate and post-graduate programs in education at UFPB.

Rethinking Family-School Relations: A Critique of Parental Involvement in Schooling (2001) was based on her PhD dissertation and won the 2000 AESA (American Educational Studies Association) Critic's Choice Award. In Brazil, she has published articles and books on gender and education and family-school relations.

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