Empowering Parents Through Classroom Participation

by

Kari Petzold

A Paper

Presented to the Gordon Albright School of Education

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Education

EEA655 Leadership Thesis

May, 2018

Empowering Parents Through Classroom Participation

APPROVED:

Charles Scott

_____ (Faculty Advisor)

Arch Hley

_____ (Principal of Canadian Programs)

Acknowledgement

Abstract

Educators are ever searching for strategies to increase student learning, and research has shown that meaningful parent participation in schools is an effective way to support academic and social-emotional growth in children. Many parents, however, do not participate in their children's education for a variety of reasons, and the current research sought to determine whether inviting parents into a grade two classroom to support literacy centres empowered parents to be more active in all aspects of their child's education. The author used a qualitative, case study design involving classroom observations and interviews with one teacher and four parent participants. From the interviews emerged six themes surrounding the benefits and challenges of classroom participation, including Making a Difference, Increased Understanding, Level of Comfort, Communication, Time Constraints, and Training Required. Results show that although the parents noted there were challenges to be overcome, each participant interview revealed that the process of participating in their child's classroom empowered the parents to better understand the language and procedures of the school, and thereby more effectively support their children's learning at home. These findings suggest that it is well worth the effort for schools to be purposeful in overcoming parents' barriers to participation and in developing relationships of trust for the benefit of all learners.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

According to the British Columbia Ministry of Education, the goal of the school system is to enable students to "develop their individual potential and to acquire the knowledge, skills and abilities needed to contribute to a healthy society and a prosperous and sustainable economy" (Province of British Columbia, 2018). Educators are ever searching for the most effective ways to assist students in achieving this individual potential. Much research has been done in this area, and one of the factors shown to promote student learning is parent involvement in the process. This paper will examine the research regarding the benefits of parent involvement, the barriers to that involvement, and how these barriers can be overcome. Then it will look more closely at a case study involving parent participation in a grade two classroom, to determine whether increased parent involvement empowers parents to become active partners in the education of their children.

Background to the Problem

Berger (1991) outlines the history of parent involvement in schools, and notes that in the 1950s schools began to become more consolidated and children had to travel further for their education. This resulted in less parental involvement, and an increase in school administrator leadership over the education process. However, research in the 1960s already showed the benefits of early childhood education, including support for the whole family. As a result, throughout the 1970s there was a general focus on the family-school relationship which assumed that parents want to be involved but are not sure how to do so. Educational leaders and researchers maintained that parents and teachers must work together and learn from each other.

There are a considerable number of factors that contribute to a child's successful learning experience. Epstein (1995) highlights the importance of a warm environment where home, school, and community collaborate to meet the child's needs. More recently, in his book on community and belonging, Peter Block (2008) outlines the critical importance of all members of the school community—students, staff, and parents—feeling that they are valued members with a voice that is heard. This recognition of the need for the child's learning to be supported across environments is a key element of Bronfenbrenner's (1994) bioecological model, in which the home, school, and community "microsystems" interact and the experiences in one environment impact those in the others. Academic and social emotional learning are most effectively accomplished when school staff work together with families and caregivers to teach the generalizability of skills throughout the microsystems (Wright, Masten, & Narayan, 2013). However, despite the decades of research highlighting the value of collaboration between the home and school, parents continue to be an underused resource in the education system.

Statement of the Problem

As an educator faced with students struggling to achieve success in their primary school years, this author began to explore ways to support students beyond what was being done in the traditional classroom. Significant research points to the benefits to be found through meaningfully engaging parents within the school (Epstein, 1995; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Smith, 2006). However, the school which is the centre of this current research is located in an area of the city characterized by older, often run-down homes. Many of the families attending the school are renting the homes, and frequent movement is the norm. Roughly half of the families are considered to be of low socioeconomic status, and many of the students in the school

participate in both the free breakfast and subsidised lunch programs. A small percentage also receive donated backpacks of food each Friday to support the families throughout the weekend. It is common for parents to share their own negative school experiences, and thus their hesitation to be comfortable members of the school community. Along with the mixture of middle to low-income families, there are also many students hailing from countries other than Canada. Students from India, Ivory Coast, the Philippines, and Syria are among the population. Many of these students and their parents are in the process of learning English. Statistics on the demographic profile of the school's catchment area show that over 37% of the population speaks a first language other than English, and 29% of the population is a visible minority (City of Abbotsford, 2014). Crozier and Davies (2007) have found that families who are part of a minority culture or who are of lower socioeconomic status are less likely to be involved in their children's schools than are their middle class, majority culture peers. Researchers believe there are a variety of reasons for this, and therefore these barriers must be acknowledged and addressed by schools in order to be overcome.

Purpose of the Study and Research Question

Research has shown that parents representing minority cultures or low socioeconomic status are less likely to engage in the school community (Daniel, 2015). Four years of observations at the focus school have provided the researcher with anecdotal support of these conclusions. However, studies by Epstein (1995), Smith (2006), and Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) clearly show that this need not be the case. With dedication to collaboration and community, the school can effect change and dramatically increase the volume and effectiveness of parent engagement in the school. Research indicates that often parents are interested in participating at the school, but are unsure of how to do so (Crozier & Davies, 2007). In their

research on parent participation in schools, Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (2007) found that

"(p)arents who believe they should be involved in their children's education and schooling *and*

who have a positive sense of efficacy about the usefulness of their involvement are likely to be

involved" (p. 26). The purpose of this research, then, was to contribute toward helping parents

develop the skills and confidence to engage in their child's learning. Specifically, the researcher

sought to determine if inviting parents into a grade two classroom to support literacy centres

empowered them to feel more engaged in their child's learning process.

Importance of the Study

Parents who feel empowered to support their children in their school journey are parents

who can join with staff and students in feeling like valued and integral members of the school

community. The information gleaned from this study can help school district staff better

understand the perspective of parents regarding involvement in the school. Much of the research

to be discussed outlines the misconceptions held by school staff toward parents, and this study

can help increase this understanding of parents' perspectives toward education. As a result, it is

hoped that school personnel will be better able to develop programs to reduce the barriers

preventing parents from engaging more actively with the school, thereby empowering them to

support their children with a sense of purpose and efficacy.

Definition of Terms

In their study examining barriers to parent participation in schools, Baker, Wise, Kelley,

and Skiba (2016) differentiate between the terms *parent involvement* and *parent engagement*.

The former they define as merely parental presence in the schools, while the latter represents

those parents engaged in outside activities to promote their child's education but who are not

able to actually be in the building. While this distinction is an important one, throughout this

paper the term parent involvement will be used to reflect those interactions that influence both the home and school settings (El Nokali, Backman, & Votruba-Drzal, 2010). More specifically, Epstein (1995) outlines six types of parental involvement, including: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community. Therefore, the ideas of both parent involvement and parent engagement are encompassed in the one term of parent involvement.

It is the focus of this paper to determine whether parents will feel empowered to support their child's education through classroom participation. Chamberlin (1997) defines empowerment as an individual's ability to access relevant information and choose meaningfully from a range of possibilities in an autonomous manner. Page and Czuba (1999) stress that empowerment is a social process which occurs across dimensions and allows people to have control over their lives. In this paper, therefore, parent empowerment refers to a parent's ability to understand and support their child's education, including questioning, discussing, and collaborating within the school and community settings.

Scope of the Study

This paper is a case study examining the experiences within one elementary school in British Columbia. One teacher and four parents were interviewed, and classroom observations were done to determine the effect of classroom participation on a small group of parent volunteers. The results of these interviews and observations support extant research regarding the importance of meaningful parent involvement in the schools to promote student success. However, due to the small sample size and the lack of multiple methods of data collection, the results are not generalizable to the larger group of parents and schools.

Summary of the Chapter

The modern education system has as its goal that all students will be successful learners capable of contributing to the larger society upon graduation. Educators recognize that this is a tremendous task, and engage a vast number of strategies to achieve this goal. Research has long shown that one of the most effective tools for increasing student success is the meaningful participation of parents in the education process. However, despite its proven effectiveness, parent involvement in many schools is minimal. The purpose of this research is to examine parent and teacher attitudes at one inner-city school to determine if purposeful classroom participation empowers parents to be more active in all aspects of their child's education.

Outline of the Remainder of the Paper

The following section of the paper contains the literature review, in which the author examines the research around parent involvement in schools. The themes include the benefits of parent involvement, the barriers to that involvement, and an examination of ways in which those barriers can be overcome.

The chapter on methodology explains the qualitative, case study design used in this study. Interviews and classroom observations were used to explore the benefits of parent involvement in a specific classroom environment. The chapter outlines the process for choosing participants, ensuring confidentiality, and analyzing interview data to determine themes.

In the results chapter those themes are examined, based on transcripts of participant interviews. A discussion of those themes in light of current research follows in the discussion section, and recommendations are given for future program development and implementation. Finally, conclusions are drawn based on the results of this study and its place among the extant literature on parent involvement in the classroom.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction to the Chapter

Educators are continually working to find ways to increase student success. Research has shown time and again that parent participation in the learning process is beneficial both in the area of academics and social development. This literature review will examine the various forms of parent involvement, how this involvement has evolved over the years, and how parent empowerment through participation promotes student success. Following that will be an examination of the research studying the barriers which too often prevent meaningful parent engagement in schools. Finally, research surrounding ways to overcome these barriers will be addressed as a means of increasing parental involvement. The chapter will conclude with a summary of the research and its relevance to the current research question examining whether inviting parents into a grade two classroom for literacy centres empowers them to feel more engaged in their child's learning process.

Engagement versus Involvement

It is important to note that not all meaningful parent participation must occur inside the school. Baker, Wise, Kelley, & Skiba (2016), focus on parental engagement in such areas as homework and sports, as opposed to exclusively within-school involvement. Analysis of interviews with minority culture parents showed many parents in the focus groups said that they do outside activities to promote their child's education, but are not able to actually be in the building; they felt that this should qualify as parent participation equally to the school staff. Early work by Dauber and Epstein (1989) shows that this has been a concern for decades. The authors found that school staff felt parents were not involved, nor had the desire to be. The parents, however, protested strongly that they wanted to be meaningfully involved but were unsure of

how to do so. A similar notion is expressed in Daniel (2015), where parents indicated that they

remained engaged in other areas of their child's life—such as with homework and extra-

curricular activities — throughout the later years. Recognition needs to be made by school staff

that through meaningful participation outside of the school, it is possible for parents to be

empowered to understand and support their child's education.

Historical View

In her article examining the history of parent involvement in schools, Berger (1991)

outlines how philosophies and perceptions have changed in education over the centuries.

However, there are many elements that remain constant. For example, Berger explains that

"parent education in early Greek society was for the benefit of the state, not the family" (p. 210),

reinforcing the idea that education helps to prepare students to serve a larger societal purpose.

The warring philosophies of the early 1800s in the United States — children are evil and need to

be punished for guidance versus children are good and require love and nurturing for guidance

— are ones that are still in evidence to some degree in education today. In the article, the

development of the school system and its partnership with parents is outlined decade by decade,

beginning in the 1880s up until the 1980s. Throughout that time, Kindergarten was introduced

into the US with a focus on parent involvement and education, which became stronger as more

immigrants entered the country and officials saw the school system as a way to impart the

dominant culture to the new families. A focus on addressing mental health in children began in

the 1940s, which Berger explains as being necessary considering the numbers of war recruits

who were unable to serve because of mental health concerns. During the 1950s schools began to

become more consolidated and children had to go further for their education. This resulted in less

parental involvement, and an increase in school administrator leadership over the education

process. However, research in the 1960s already showed the benefits of early childhood education, including support for the whole family. As a result, throughout the 1970s there was a general focus on the family-school relationship which assumed that parents want to be involved but are not sure how to do so. Educational leaders and researchers maintained that parents and teachers must work together and learn from each other. Berger's advice for the future — given in 1991 to upcoming educators —was to include parents as active partners and decision makers in the educational process. A focus on collaboration between home, school, and community was the way to address the changing societal needs and prepare students for their futures.

Warren, Hong, Rubin, and Uy (2009) support the theory that the lack of parental involvement in schools is as a result of the growing isolation between the school and its surrounding community. Their solution is to better integrate community-based services with the school itself, as together these institutions can better serve the families in need. They address the need to "bridge the gap in culture and power between parents and educators" (p. 2210). This is particularly challenging because educators are most often middle class, are university educated, and understand the jargon and environment of the school. Parents, especially those in low-income areas or who are new to the culture, may feel at a disadvantage. The authors assert that the best way to counter this power imbalance is to increase parents' leadership capacity: to empower them to become meaningfully engaged in all aspects of their child's education.

Importance of Parent Involvement

The benefits of empowering parents through participation in their child's educational process have been shown throughout the literature. Among these are the academic and social-emotional benefits shown in students from elementary through to secondary school. This

participation is not solely when parents are in the school, but is also shown through meaningful engagement with academics in the home.

Academic and social-emotional benefits. According to Gonzalez-DeHass, Willems, and Doan Holbein (2005), parental involvement has a noticeable impact on student motivation, and "is related to the following motivational constructs: school engagement, intrinsic/extrinsic motivation, autonomy, self-regulation, mastery goal orientation, and motivation to read" (p. 100). When parents are closely involved in their child's education, children are more likely to take responsibility for their learning and develop the intrinsic motivation necessary for perseverance through tasks and overall academic success. Similar results were found by Hill et al. (2004) in a longitudinal study on the effects of parent involvement on adolescent academic skills and aspirations. These effects were particularly noteworthy for those families of a minority culture.

Decusati and Johnson (2004) studied the effect of parent volunteers on the literacy scores of Kindergarten students, and found that increased parent support did lead to an increase in literacy scores. Moreover, there were social-emotional benefits to the parents' presence, and the children valued the additional support. In his work on social-emotional learning and self-regulation, Shanker (2013) highlights the critical nature of emotional regulation in relation to learning; thus the benefits of parent involvement in this area of student growth is noteworthy.

In a study focused on parent involvement among low-income families, Smith (2006) found that inviting parents into the classroom not only had a positive effect on students' academics, but the teachers also noted an increase in student motivation and confidence. Trotman (2001) studied parent participation in minority cultures, and showed that parent empowerment gives parents the tools to help children both at home and at school.

In a study examining the social-emotional functioning of secondary students, Wang and Sheikh-Khalil (2014) found that parent involvement in the secondary grades both increased academic success, and decreased students' rates of depression. They note that as the volunteer opportunities for parents at the high school level are more administrative and less interactive than those found in the younger grades, parent participation at this level was evidenced by supporting extra-curricular activities, expressing interest in homework, and the emphasizing value of education. These effects were found for both majority and minority culture families, as the expectation of within-school participation was less at the secondary level.

Benefits over time. A longitudinal study by Mo and Singh (2008) confirms previous findings that parental involvement diminishes after the elementary school years. However, their study supports the great importance of continued parental engagement for student achievement through adolescence. Daniel (2015) examined the change of parent participation over time, and did find that parent involvement in their child's school community waned over time, particularly in families of low socio-economic status and limited English. Hill et al. (2004) emphasize the beneficial effects of positive home-school interactions for adolescent students' success. This finding is corroborated by Epstein (1995), who has also found that the majority of students at all age levels want their parents to be involved and are willing to increase efforts to communicate more effectively.

Barriers to Parent Involvement

The benefits of parent participation in their child's education have been shown in the research over many years. However, educators know that encouraging this participation is an ongoing struggle, and both school staff and parents have noted a variety of barriers to parent engagement.

Minority cultures and low-income families. Research supports the recognition that parent participation among low-income and minority culture families is considerably lower than that of middle-class or affluent majority culture families. Crozier and Davies (2007) and Daniel (2015) discuss the particular vulnerability of families with a low socioeconomic status or those from a minority culture. Families in these demographics are much more likely to be marginalized in the school community, in part because of the unwritten cultural codes and unspoken messages of which those from a minority or uneducated culture would be unaware. In addition, parents living in poverty tend to work longer hours, have less flexibility with their jobs, and have fewer resources with which to advance in the workplace. As a result of their responsibilities in the workplace, these parents have less time to spend with their children (Berk, 2013).

While Kim and Bryan (2017) emphasize the benefits of parent involvement on student success, the authors caution that we must be aware of the power differential between school staff and parents; if it is not addressed, then it is possible that 'parent involvement' on the school's terms will only serve to minimize parents' voices. They discuss the role of "social capital" in parents from middle-class and affluent backgrounds in already providing the empowerment necessary to successful navigate the school system. Parents who are lower income or who do not speak the majority language are far more likely to require empowerment in order to overcome the power differential in the school.

This concept of a power differential has been found by other researchers. As a result of their interviews with Bangladeshi and Pakistani parents in Britain, Crozier and Davies (2007) found that from the parents' perspective, the schools are hard to reach due to unstated expectations and a narrow view of involvement; the unspoken message to parents is that if they are not going to fit into the school's culture, then their help is unwanted. Furthermore, their

conclusions are that schools do far too little to encourage parent involvement while putting the

blame on the parents for poor communication and poor commitment to the effort. This is, the

authors suggest, primarily because schools adopt the "expert model" policy toward parent

relationships, wherein the educators regard themselves as experts in charge of disseminating

information, not collaborators. These key elements regarding the power structure of schools

similarly emerged through parent interviews in a study by Baker et al. (2016).

   While confirming previous research indicating that parents from minority cultures are

less likely to participate in their child's school, Tang (2015) has found that the reasons for this

may be varied, depending on the cultural beliefs of the family. An example she gives in her

research is that Mexican American families may be less likely to engage with the teacher due to

cultural beliefs that the teacher is the expert and deserves deference and respect. Conversely,

Tang explains that East Asian families may be less likely to participate in schools because of a

cultural belief that it is the child's responsibility to achieve academic success, while it is the

responsibility of the parent to provide economic support. Tang stresses that the methods for

overcoming the lack of parent participation for minority families, therefore, must reflect the

reasons for that lack.

   Lack of communication or welcome from the school. Numerous studies have found

that a lack of welcoming and inflexible attitudes of teachers in schools have negatively affected

parents' participation in their children's learning. In a study of junior high school parents and

teachers, Halsey (2005) found that many of the teachers felt that their traditional forms of

institutional communication were adequate for the parent-teacher relationship. Parents, however,

perceived this differently and felt that the school's communication lacked the warmth of personal

invitation. This disparity of perception led to a feeling of dissatisfaction between the parents and

teachers. Crozier and Davies (2007) found in interviews with both minority culture parents and the school staff teaching a variety of grades that each group felt strongly that the other was responsible for the lack of parent participation in the schools. School staff felt that the parents were hard to reach, distant, and indifferent to their children's schooling; conversely, the parents felt that the school should reach out purposefully and make a concerted effort to overcome language and cultural barriers.

Ineffective communication was noted by Baker et al. (2016) in their study examining barriers to parent engagement. The parents who were interviewed felt that increased communication by way of social media, texts, or letters would help them to feel more comfortable and welcome at the school. They emphasized that proactive communication that informed them of both struggles and successes of their children would be welcome as a way to build trusting relationships.

This lack of communication is not limited to North American schools. In a study examining the barriers to parent involvement in Swiss schools, Straumann and Egger (2011) address the level of frustration felt by many administrators over the lack of ability to engage parents effectively. Much of this, they conclude, is due to a belief by Swiss educators that parents do not belong in the classroom. Each case study revealed that schools ensure that the legalities of parent involvement are met, such as mandated school meetings to discuss student progress or transitions. However, at no time did those in the case studies see evidence that parents were invited into or involved in the classrooms.

Logistical challenges. When questioning focus groups on barriers to parent engagement, Baker et al. (2009) found that along with a lack of school communication, the most significant barriers noted by the parents were those of logistics: time constraints, child care, conflicting

work schedules, and transportation. The authors found that the vast majority of the parents in

their study were interested in participating more fully with the school, but were hampered by

factors such as lack of childcare or transportation, conflicting work schedules, and inadequate

communication of events from the school. Similarly, Trotman (2001) found that parents' lack of

involvement may be perceived by school staff as indifference, but may in fact be due to logistics.

Overcoming the Barriers to Parent Involvement

Along with the research outlining the barriers to parent involvement, there are many

studies highlighting the positive message that these barriers of power differential, insufficient

communication, lack of welcome, and logistical challenges can be overcome. The work of

several key researchers has provided the theoretical framework for the current understanding of

the benefits of parent involvement and the most effective ways to overcome these barriers and

promote parent empowerment.

Theoretical framework. Among the pioneers in parent participation research, Epstein

(1995; Epstein & Salinas, 2004) has provided the framework for building rapport and for the

collaboration of home, school, and community for supporting the child. At the centre of

Epstein's research lies the belief that "(i)f educators view students as children, they are likely to

see both the family and the community as partners with the school in children's education and

development" (Epstein, 1995, p. 81). Decades of research has led to the creation of Epstein's

widely cited "Six Types of Involvement" which highlights the benefits of interconnectedness

between the spheres of home, school, and community. One type of involvement that Epstein

discusses is volunteering in the classroom; however, the other five types focus on effective

parenting, communication between home and school, meaningful learning support at home,

community program collaboration, and the inclusion of parents in the school decision-making

process. Each of these types of involvement is necessary for empowering parents to participate

as partners with educators to provide the environment to best support their child's learning.

To facilitate putting theory into practice, Epstein and Salinas (2004) advocate for the

creation of school Action Teams, which work to create a school learning community focused on

collaboration between educators, parents, students, and members of the community to develop

and strengthen learning opportunities for students. The purpose of the Action Team is to ensure

that this partnership between school community stakeholders is purposeful and systematic,

recognizing the importance of the contribution of all members to help all children succeed.

Multiple studies in a variety of school communities have shown that these Action Teams,

focused on the six types of involvement, do increase home-school communication, meaningful

parent involvement, and the building of trusting relationships between members of the school

community.

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) provide the theoretical framework for

empowerment through meaningful participation with effective communication between all

school community members. This research provides the foundation for efforts to increase

parents' sense of efficacy when supporting their child's educational activities. Particularly, their

research suggests that those parents with a stronger sense of personal efficacy are more likely to

be involved in multiple areas of their child's development, including behavioural, cognitive-

intellectual, and in monitoring their child's personal progress in school. Of note from the

research from Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) as well as Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2005) is

the evidence that in order for parent participation in schools to increase parents' sense of efficacy

and empowerment, there must be a welcoming invitation from the school, and their volunteer

roles must be purposeful and meaningful. Studies have shown that if intentional steps are taken,

these gains are to be found in varied populations and in all grade levels from elementary to secondary school.

Further exploration of these themes is addressed by numerous other researchers, who together articulate the theoretical assumptions which underpin this current study.

Encourage meaningful involvement. The work of El Nokali, Bachman, and Votruba-Drzal (2010) has shown that parental involvement in schools, if it is to affect academic and social-emotional growth, must be intentional. Smith (2006) states that while parent engagement does not require that parents are present in the schoolhouse, it does require steps taken by the school to assure parents that their contributions are valued and appreciated. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) showed through their research that the critical elements in meaningful parental involvement were that parents believed that they should be involved, and that they were capable of supporting the learning process. This sense of efficacy is key, the authors say, to developing a sense of parent empowerment in collaborating with the school to engage students. Furthermore, this feeling of efficacy in parents translated into increased support at home. Mapp (2003) found that those parents who participated in school activities increased their willingness and ability to support their children when completing homework. Parents in the study indicated that the development of a trusting relationship with the school and the exposure to the academic expectations of the teachers increased their confidence in their own abilities to be a crucial part of the learning process. Targeted, meaningful collaboration between the home and school can have lasting effects on student success, as "parents can become empowered when they participate in their child's educational process" (Trotman, 2001, p. 278).

Establish rapport. There is significant research which outlines that establishing warm, welcoming school communities and actively building relationships based on effective

communication with parents is the most effective strategy (Epstein, 1995; Mapp, 2003). Schools can greatly increase parents' desire to participate at the school by consistently greeting them with a welcoming and respectful attitude, one that recognizes the importance of relationship-building among all of the school community. In their study, Warren et al. (2009) discuss the benefits of a collectivist mentality, wherein parents are concerned not only with the well-being of their own children, but with that of all the children and families in the community. This shift in focus, they found, results in parents feeling empowered by this shared sense of responsibility. Trotman (2001) encourages educators to build rapport by contacting parents to share positive updates on their child's progress, rather than using parental contact only as a means to convey a child's mistakes.

In a study examining strategies for engaging low-income parents in the school, Van Velsor and Orozco (2007) suggest that school counselors can play an integral role in developing relationships with families, if this process is seen as a priority for school administrators. School counselors are an excellent resource for sharing relationship-building strategies with teachers, and for facilitating programs to make the school the centre of the community.

For those parents of minority cultures, Shillady (2014) found that celebrating the various cultures within the school was an effective method for increasing parent participation. Examples of celebrations included international nights, which provided a forum for children and families to share their traditional clothing and food. This strategy was most successful when classroom teachers embraced this diversity and included it in class lessons. Furthermore, the school highlighted in Shillady's study instituted a process wherein teachers attended the parent committee meetings. This gave all parties a common ground on which to build trust and the appreciation of differences.

Embrace non-traditional engagement. Recognizing that parent participation does not need to be in the school to be effective, researchers have been exploring alternate methods of parental involvement. Olmstead (2013) determined that emerging technologies such as websites, online curriculum, and a variety of assessment apps are helping parents of elementary through to secondary level students become more proactively involved in their child's learning, even if they are not present in the school. The use of technology was similarly explored by Salmon (2014) to determine the benefits of parents engaging with their children using electronic books. Salmon found that through the use of the interactive features available in electronic books, parents were able to meaningfully support their child's literacy learning in a variety of environments, thereby increasing the children's literacy levels.

Provide logistical solutions. McDonald, Miller, and Sandler (2015) suggest that if they prioritize the resources, schools can provide transportation and childcare, thereby eliminating these barriers. Furthermore, by providing interpreters for meetings and ensuring that communication from the school is in a format parents can understand, schools can demonstrate a willingness to communicate effectively. The authors emphasize that positive interactions between parents and staff will increase parent confidence and as a result, their engagement.

Promote overlapping spheres. Epstein has researched parent participation in schools for decades, and strongly advocates for collaboration between home, school, and community in the quest for student success (1995; Epstein & Salinas, 2004). She contends that too often schools and families each maintain a philosophy of separate spheres: "You do your job properly, so that I can do my job." Thinking of the spheres — including community — as overlapping changes that comment to: "We need to work together to meet the needs of the child." This attitude shift requires reciprocal trust and respect, the two values that underpin a successful working

relationship. Through her research, Epstein has focused on six types of involvement: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with community. Each of these requires cooperation between all parties (home, school, community) to be effective. This approach, called the Epstein Model, was used by Bower and Griffin (2011) to increase the parent involvement at an elementary school through validating parental involvement outside of the school, and creating a warm and welcoming atmosphere within it. The authors note that this focus on overlapping the spheres of home, school, and community increased the participation of their low-income families and built stronger relationships within the school community.

In her study of the evolution of parent participation in schools, Berger (1991) similarly promotes the development of a strong home–school–community relationship for the betterment of students. This teamwork approach and appreciation for the contributions of all elements greatly enhances parental engagement, teacher motivation, and student success (Smith, 2006).

Summary of the Chapter

Parent participation in schools has long been shown to have a beneficial impact on student learning. This literature review examined several of these benefits, along with a number of barriers preventing parent participation. Research examining the importance of parent engagement both at home and at school was addressed, as was the literature outlining the historical view of parent participation in schools.

Among the social-emotional benefits seen in students as a result of parent participation, studies have shown increased intrinsic motivation, greater ability to self-regulate, increased levels of confidence, and a decrease in rates of depression. Academic benefits resulting from parent participation can be seen in increased literacy rates, levels of perseverance, and an

increase in overall academic success. These benefits are particularly noticeable when an increase

in parent participation is seen in families of a minority culture or low socio-economic status.

Although the levels of parent involvement wane over time, research shows that parent

participation is equally important in the middle and secondary school years.

   While researchers recognize the importance of parent involvement for student success,

there are many barriers to meaningful involvement. Families who are from a minority culture or

of low-income have been shown to participate less often in schools than do their majority culture

and middle to affluent class peers. This has been shown to be due to language barriers, cultural

differences, and a power differential that decreases parents' sense of empowerment. Other

barriers to parent participation include a lack of proactive communication from schools, and an

inflexible, intimidating reception by school staff. Finally, research shows that logistical

challenges present a barrier to many parents, as they struggle to find child care, transportation, or

time away from work schedules in order to participate in schools.

   Strategies to overcome these barriers have been studied, and researchers have found that

there are a number of means through which schools can accomplish this goal. Meaningful

engagement has been shown to be a significant method of increasing parents' sense of

empowerment, through which they are better able to engage in the learning process with their

child. Taking the time to establish rapport through warm and welcoming relationships is a key

component to increasing parent participation, and this is especially true if schools are cognizant

of the cultural beliefs and practices of their minority culture families. For those families

struggling to overcome logistical challenges, research is emerging regarding creative ways to use

technology to bring parents, teachers, and students together in an online learning environment.

For other families, providing services such as transportation or child care may be enough to

overcome barriers and give them the opportunity to become involved. Finally, the research

demonstrating the importance of investing in the home-school-community was examined.

Encouraging these overlapping spheres promotes strong relationships between all members of

the school community and provides opportunities for increased levels of success for all learners.

   This literature review provides the foundation for understanding the importance of the

current research examining whether inviting parents into a grade two classroom for literacy

centres empowers them to feel more engaged in their child's learning process. In the following

chapters the author will outline the methodology used to address the question, as well as the

results of the study. The meaning of these results in light of this research will be discussed, along

with recommendations for future study, in the final chapter.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction to the Chapter

The purpose of this study was to determine if inviting parents into a grade two classroom to support literacy centres empowered them to feel more engaged in their child's learning process. For the study, a qualitative research design was chosen. Qualitative research does not try to prove causality or provide objective descriptions of the relationship between variables, as does quantitative research (McMillan & Wergin, 2010). Rather, it seeks to examine the perspectives of those who are being studied, providing an in-depth description of the personal experience. As the purpose of this study was to examine parents' perceptions of the classroom experience, this research design was a natural choice.

Description of Research Methodology

The research methodology for this study is a qualitative, case study design. A case study allows for an in-depth look at the personal views and experiences of parents regarding engagement and participation in the school community (Cozby & Rawn, 2012). As a type of ethnography, a case study is a form of qualitative research focused on "a specific aspect of a cultural group and setting" (Creswell, 2012, p. 464). The case study differs from other types of ethnography in that it permits the researcher to focus on the activities of participants in a particular setting, rather than looking for patterns of behavior over time. The benefit of a case study lies in its ability to look closely at the lived experience of participants. Thus in this study, the approach offered a more comprehensive understanding of the parents' experience, including the effect of efforts to increase their level of empowerment. However, due to the small sample size of participants in a case study, the results, while valuable, are not generalizable to a larger population.

In order to develop a comprehensive understanding of the participants in a case study, the researcher collects relevant information using a variety of methods (Creswell, 2012). Gathering information for this case study involved three forms. Firstly, the researcher conducted an interview with the classroom teacher of the grade two class (Appendix A). This provided a foundation for understanding the history of parent volunteers in the classroom and the steps the teacher had taken to engage parents up to that point. Secondly, the parent participants were interviewed in a one-on-one setting at the school (Appendix A). While the researcher had a set of questions with which to begin, the qualitative nature of the study encouraged the exploration of themes that were of importance to the parent participants and the teacher, and new areas of thought were addressed that were not outlined in the questions. Therefore, the interviews were semi-structured, based on open-ended questions (Creswell, 2012). These questions focused on the teacher's and parents' experiences as related to the research question, including how they felt about the volunteer experience, and any changes in interactions with their children as a result of their classroom participation. Each participant was asked the same set of questions, but the transcription shows that the interviewer used the semi-structured format to ask probing questions to clarify or elaborate on responses given by the interviewee. As a result, the researcher was able to maintain the focus of the research question while encouraging new areas of thought to emerge.

Finally, the researcher attempted to observe parent participants as they volunteered in the classroom using an observational protocol to record field notes (Creswell, 2012). It was hoped this would allow the researcher to observe parent experiences and emotions as they interacted with the students. Observation as a method of data collection can be a valuable way for researchers to gain a participant's perspective on a situation and to observe body language and social cues of which the participant may not be aware. However, researchers must also be aware

of the possibility that their presence may affect the behavior of participants, thereby rendering

the data invalid (Cozby & Rawn, 2012). It is therefore important for a nonparticipant observer to

build rapport with participants, take careful field notes, and remain unobtrusive (Creswell, 2012).

Selection of Subjects

The participants in this study were parents of children in a grade two class, as well as one

classroom teacher. The parents were from the community surrounding the school and represent a

mix of ethnicities. There were four parent participants and one teacher, all female. The age range

of the parents is between 25 and 40 years. It is noteworthy for the purposes of this research that

the parent of Indo-Canadian decent possesses a graduate degree from a Canadian university, and

each of the parents is from the middle-class population of the school. Participants received a

$5.00 gift card to Tim Hortons as a token of appreciation for their time and contribution.

Participants were made aware that if they withdrew, they would still receive the gift card. The

gift card was given at the time of the interview.

Participants were recruited from a list of parents who had previously indicated that they

were interested in volunteering in a grade two classroom and had signed the school district's

Volunteer Application Form. These parents were contacted through a notice asking for

participants in this study (Appendix B). A classroom teacher sent home the notice to the parents

who volunteered in her class via the students. Interested parents returned a portion of the notice

to the classroom teacher (either through their students or by taking it directly to the teacher), who

forwarded them on to the researcher. The researcher then followed up and contacted the parents

(Appendices C & D).

Ethical Considerations

The research proposal and design were submitted to City University of Seattle's

Institutional Review Board (IRB) for ethical review; the proposal and design were approved by

the committee. Informed consent is an ethical requirement for all research using human subjects

(Government of Canada, 2018), and this occurred in stages. The first recruitment notice that

went home to parents included informed consent information (such as the voluntary nature of the

study, the fact that withdrawal without penalty was possible at any time, and that all personal

information would be kept confidential on the researcher's password protected computer). After

parents expressed an interest in participating in the study, they were contacted to set up a

meeting time. At that meeting, details about informed consent were again addressed. The

researcher had the informed consent form, read it to the participant, and then gave the participant

time to read it over and ask questions. If the participant felt comfortable with proceeding, she

then signed the informed consent form and the interview began. This was the case for all

participants. As the interview progressed, the researcher monitored the participant for signs of

discomfort or distress. If this had occurred, the participant would have been reminded that they

are within their rights to withdraw without penalty. The Tim Hortons gift card that was given as

an incentive to participants would have be given regardless of withdrawal or completion. None

of the participants showed signs of distress or a desire to withdrawal during the interviews.

The participants of this research were unlikely to be of a vulnerable population. The

participants were adults who are not in prison, and to the best of the researcher's knowledge

none of them were pregnant. The interview questions were designed to discover participants'

feelings about something which is not deeply personal or disturbing. Furthermore, the

participants were each taken from a pool of parents who had already displayed an interest in

volunteering in the classroom. This indicates that they were not likely to be distressed by the

interview questions. If, however, the interview questions had caused distress in the participant,

she would have been reminded that withdrawal is possible. This would have alleviated the

distress and no further action would likely be required. If parents had experienced stress, they

would have been referred to a registered, community-based counsellor.

Data Collection and Recording

Collection of data was done through interviews and through observational field

notes done by the researcher. The observations occurred two times per week (Monday and

Wednesday mornings for 30 minutes at a time) over a four-week period, resulting in eight

observations. Observation field notes were intended to be recorded on the researcher's password-

protected computer. However, on each occasion that the researcher observed the class, no parent

volunteers were present; therefore, no notes were taken. Possible reasons for this are addressed in

the discussion section of the paper.

The interview questions were administered in a quiet room in the school by the

researcher. Interviews took an average of 15 minutes. The researcher recorded the interviews and

then transcribed them before coding the responses. The information gathered from all the

interviews was recorded using a password-protected note-taking app on the researcher's

smartphone. Once the interviews were completed, these interviews were transcribed by the

researcher and the information stored on a password protected computer. Participant information

(including pseudonyms) was likewise stored on a password-protected computer. When

referenced in the study, the participants were given pseudonyms and only the researcher knows

which participant matches which pseudonym.

Data Analysis

Following the recorded interviews, the interviews were transcribed by the researcher. The information was then coded based on emerging themes, a process outlined by Boyatzis (1998). The researcher first read through all the interviews, informally determining commonalities. The interviews were then read again more formally by colour-coding the various themes as they emerged. While a time consuming process, the themes emerged clearly. These themes were examined and analyzed by the researcher in light of the theoretical framework provided by the extant literature concerning parent involvement and empowerment (Epstein, 1995; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997).

Methodological Assumptions

Wargo (2015) outlines the importance of acknowledging the assumptions made in the study. In this research, the author assumes that the responses made by the teacher and parent participants during interviews were honest answers. Furthermore, it is assumed that the participants were motivated by a sincere interest in the topic under discussion, as opposed to cooperating simply for profit. This is assumed as the gift card given as an incentive was of a minimal amount, and was unlikely to have been a persuasive motive for participation.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study. Firstly, the participants were chosen based on their previous expression of interest in volunteering in a classroom. As such, this case study design used purposive sampling, a form of non-probability sampling which limits the generalizability of the results to groups outside of parents of elementary students who are already interested in classroom participation (Crozby & Rawn, 2012).

A second limitation lies in the fact that all participants, including the teacher and the parents, were mothers of elementary aged children. This limits the ability to generalize interview themes to males or to the parents of children in middle or secondary school. A third, related limitation can be found in the middle-class socioeconomic status of all participants. Thus, the results of the study are not generalizable to parents who are low-income or affluent members of a school community.

Finally, the sample size of parent participants is small, with only one teacher and four parents interviewed. In a meta-analysis of qualitative studies, Marshall, Cardon, Poddar, and Fontenot (2013) determined that there is no optimal number of participants for a case study design. However, it is recommended that the number be large enough to provide for a variety of perspectives, which is less likely in the small sample size seen in this study.

Summary of the Chapter

A qualitative, case study design was chosen for this examination of parents' perspectives of the experience of classroom participation. Interviews were conducted with the classroom teacher and four parent volunteers, and classroom observations were attempted to view the parents in their volunteer role. Steps were taken to ensure informed consent was granted, and that participants understood the purpose for the research along with its potential risks. Interviews were conducted in a one-on-one setting, and upon transcription, emerging themes were examined and analyzed. Limitations to the study are noted, and while these impact the study's generalizability to a larger population, do not detract from its importance to the elementary school setting.

Chapter 4: Presentation of Findings

Introduction to the Chapter

The purpose of this research is to determine whether inviting parents into a grade two classroom to support literacy centres empowers them to feel more engaged in their child's learning process. The interview questions asked of the four parent participants (Appendix A) centred around their experiences in the classroom, their feelings around being a part of the school, and whether they felt that volunteering in the classroom had an effect on their interactions with their own children. Similar questions were asked of the teacher, to gain her perspective on these same issues. The interviews stand alone as data for this research, as on the eight occasions of classroom observation, no parents were present for the literacy centres. However, from the interviews have emerged six themes surrounding the benefits and challenges of classroom participation, as well as the greater effects on these parent's engagement with their own children's learning. The themes that emerged through thematic analysis are: Making a Difference, Increased Understanding, Level of Comfort, Communication, Time Constraints, and Training Required.

Interview Data Analysis

Making a difference. The theme of making a difference for children was immediately clear from all of the parents. Three of the four parents regularly participated in other school activities along with the literacy centres in the grade two class, and the feeling of meaningful support was noticeable in all of the interviews. "I loved being a part of my kid's class," said Parent D. "Just having that influence, like being a positive influence for the kids because I can tell that they respond to me, my positive input; and so it's kind of a rewarding relationship." The

Teacher confirmed that the students are "just excited to have another adult. One parent comes in

and does baking, and the kids just love that time, and the pride of making something."

For Parent A, a key component was "that feeling of helping...like, giving back" to the

school. While she would be willing to volunteer elsewhere if needed, she stressed that "I think

the results are fabulous if you're doing it in the same school where your child is."

The sense of making a difference was very clear from Parent B.

Yes, I think there's like a sense of pride; like, you're helping this child and – for some

kids you can tell that they don't get this attention quite so much at home – and so you feel

kind of motherly. And then you see their progress and you're proud. You kind of want to

take them under your wing.

She went on to say, "I had a checklist to make sure that I wasn't missing anyone. So, we did that

and it was really rewarding, because you could see the progress they made from the beginning of

the year to the end of the year."

Parent C felt that her sense of making a difference depended greatly on the opportunities

provided by the teacher. In the case study class, she was able to work closely with students and

was very enthusiastic about it: "I love it; I think it's great! It's so much joy seeing how they all

work." However, previous experiences in classes where she had less teacher direction were less

positive. "Uh, it was okay," she said of her time in the room. "I didn't really do much; I just kind

of sat around, made sure the kids didn't need help or whatever with their school work." She

would rather that the volunteer opportunities be purposeful and child-centred, as "I prefer to be

helping them, than just wandering around."

Increased understanding. The emergence of this theme is key to answering the research

question, and the Teacher and all of the parents noticed an increased level of understanding about

the procedures and language of the school through the volunteer experience. Several of the

parents had been able to transfer this new understanding to the interactions with their own

children.

Parent D particularly appreciated getting a closer look at the operations of the school as a

whole.

Coming in, it has totally opened my eyes to how school works, how the administration

works; the different people, their different roles, and stuff like that. And then,

understanding what my kids are actually doing, and what the teachers are looking for in

their work, and all that kind of stuff.

Originally, Parent A expressed doubt that her participation in the classroom had changed

her interactions with her son at home. However, upon reflection, she said, "Maybe it has

impacted, because in India, everything is so study, study, study. Here, it's more play, so I've

tried to change things around for him" when they work on academic skills in the home. Parent A

also noted that parents have "a chance to see how things are done, if you are actually present or

volunteering, stuff like that."

Parent C had noticed a difference in the home: "Well, actually, it does make things a little

bit easier at home, because there's different ways I can help them study their spelling words, and

do math, and do the list words; stuff like that." Furthermore, she said, "then I kind of have an

idea of what they're working on; what they are doing."

Parent B noted,

I was really happy to work in the class and understand the language that the teacher uses,

so I can use that language with my kids; we have a common language in learning. And

especially with their, like, green zones and things like that; their self-management stuff. I

still use some of that terminology with them, and they understand, and they can process

better and calm themselves. So that's where I find that I was really thankful, because I

felt lost in the first little while, because I didn't know the same language they were using.

For Parent D, "it doesn't really change what we do at home, other than just being able to talk about what's happened during the day." For her, it makes a difference when speaking with her children that, "I know that kid you're talking about; I know that teacher you're talking about. Just the knowledge that I feel more involved and in charge of what's happening to my kids. It changes our conversations."

From the Teacher's perspective, "I haven't seen anything of them taking it home – not yet. But I could imagine that at least two of them would be taking it home" in the near future.

I have one parent who has asked for...not lessons where she was in the classroom for, but

things that she's heard that we've done. And she's come in and asked about those

lessons, and how she can do something like that at home with the other children.

Level of comfort. Feeling comfortable with the process of having parent volunteers was mentioned by the Teacher as well as all of the parents. Each recognized that the relationship between the parent and teacher is key to engaging ongoing classroom volunteers, and that this requires effort and acknowledgement from both sides.

Parent D was "surprised at how welcoming the school was to have parents come. Not being a teacher at all, and not understanding how schools run, to me being a teacher looks very difficult. To manage so many children all at once; I'd be so overwhelmed!" She elaborated: "Just being welcomed in as a volunteer, even as a lunchtime supervisor, I was just surprised that they want us. I don't have any training."

Parent B commented that the more time she spends at the school the more comfortable she gets, as she has built the relationships to make that possible.

> I think, because of my work with the PAC [Parent Advisory Council], that I've gotten to know all the teachers at school. If I hadn't done PAC stuff, I don't think I would be involved as much with the school, globally. I think I would stick to just the classes that I know, with the teachers my kids have. I would be more comfortable there, because I have that current relationship with them. Really, it was more PAC stuff that made it so that I got to know more of the staff and the teachers and feel more comfortable in the school in general.

Now, after many hours spent in the school, "I'm at home here!" However, the time spent volunteering in the classroom alone was not enough to generate this level of comfort. With the original classroom teacher who designed the literacy centres off on leave, she was less comfortable joining the classroom.

> I think it might be a little bit weird, because it's a different teacher. But she's always been friendly to me, so I don't know...I think she'd let me come in and keep it up. I mean, there was a notice sent home saying you're still welcome to come. I'd like to get back to it!

As a suggestion for building the comfort level among parents, Parent B noted that "I do know that a lot of parents like to come to the Crescent Beach field trip, so maybe if there was a school wide field trip near the beginning of the year, where it's more community building within the whole school?"

Parent D was enthusiastic about her children's response to her presence in the school, and shared,

> They absolutely love me being here. I love it, because I get to connect with them briefly. And yeah, it's very positive for them. They don't mind me getting to know their friends. My daughter wants to emulate what I'm doing, so she's trying to boss the other kids around!

She said that she feels more comfortable working in the school now, "so then I would be happy to help, you know, for different things; if they wanted it." She went on to say that she would love to help in the classroom more, though she finds that "I've asked, but (her son's teacher) has everything the way she wants it, and doesn't really need help. So, that's okay...but if they asked, I'd be in that class in a heartbeat." Her son "loves" to have her volunteer in the classroom, and she said she is "more likely to help out in a class than I am with handing out hot lunch or something like that."

For Parent A, it is an important part of a parent's role to support the school, and she said that because "you guys do such a great job, then I should be willing and open to do something." She continued to say that "it feels great" to volunteer in the classroom, and that her son "likes it too. And he wants me to come back in the class more often."

> The teacher noticed the increased level of comfort among the parents.
>
> There's one parent who came in and she was very nervous and very timid. Like, she chose the names of the students that she wanted to work with, but she wouldn't call for them. And now, she doesn't hesitate; calls the names, interacts more, and she's more relaxed and enjoying herself.

As for herself, the teacher admitted, "For me, parents have always kind of been an intimidating wall, because these are their children; their babies. I hope that they're happy with what I'm doing and how I do things. They're the biggest critics, in my eyes." The experience of purposefully

including parent volunteers into her lessons, however, has also greatly increased her comfort level: "I think as much as it's intimidating at first, it's probably the best step I've ever taken."

Communication. The theme of communication emerged from the interviews, as the Teacher saw increased communication, while two of the parents commented on the need for more communication from the school regarding the need for volunteers.

"This year has been amazing," said the Teacher.

At first my nerves were a little bit high, but after getting to know the parents and seeing

them in a different context, it's giving me more information on how to communicate with

them; and them, with that comfort level in the classroom, they are more open to

communicating. So, it's helped me develop an easier communication style with them.

And yeah, we're relaxed and talking, but we can actually communicate now, and that

goes beyond anything.

The Teacher saw increased communication between the parents, too.

Some of them are starting to talk to each other, too, about everything. And they are

parents that would never communicate; like, even if they're standing outside the door

waiting for their child, they would never talk to each other. But now they are! So the

community builds, and it's worth it."

While the Teacher observed increased communication as a result of the classroom literacy centres, the parents focused on the lack of communication they frequently noticed at the school. However, they addressed the need proactively and several of the parents had ideas for increasing communication between the school and parents. "Just keep telling people," suggested Parent C. "Just keep reminding them 'we need your help, we need your help!' Because there are people that don't necessarily come into the school very often, so they don't know." She went on

to say that a monthly newsletter would be a great idea for parents who do not come into the school often. However, Parent A cautions that "when there's East Indian families, sometimes their English isn't that great" so having events with someone to translate would be helpful for getting those parents into the school.

Recruiting volunteers through email was a suggestion from Parent A, who said that even a person like me who's so busy and stuff, if I'm talking, then things fall through. Email is there and you can accept at that time, put it in your calendar, then it's there and you won't be booking that time for something else. It's a priority set now, that you have to do.

Having teachers reach out through emails or newsletters is key, as "more teacher momentum will help a lot."

Time constraints. In their interviews, each of the parents addressed the theme of time constraints as a barrier to classroom participation.

Parent A has a busy work schedule that limits the amount of time she is able to be at the school, but she makes a concerted effort to participate in some classroom activities because "to me, it seems like parents actually should be putting more time coming in."

Even those parents who do enjoy volunteering regularly are conscious of the demands on their time. When asked what she thought about the teacher's request for volunteers, Parent D was candid and said, "I only thought of my time constraints! And also, when she asked parents to be involved in the mornings, I said that doesn't work for me because I'm usually not quite ready at 8:30 in the mornings." She went on to note that she was already working at the school in another capacity, and "because of my other commitment to the school, at other times of the day, it was

too much." Despite that, though, she made the effort because "I wanted to be involved, just in the school in some way."

Parent B noted that,

I was doing those literacy centres for a while, and then I kind of got out of it because I had health issues for a month. And now every morning I still have the reminder on my phone, and I'm like, hmmm, not today. So, I don't have a reason; it's laziness or I have enough stuff going on at school this week that I don't want to put in the extra half hour.

The Teacher recognized that not all parents would like to or are able to participate in the classroom, and said, "I know a lot of the parents work, and they just drop the kids off and run."

The perception that volunteering in the classroom will take a great deal of time can prevent parents from getting involved. However, Parent C offers the reminder that "people don't need to be volunteering all day! It can be half an hour, it can be an hour; just anything helps."

When asked about suggestions for overcoming time constraint barriers and increasing parent involvement in the school, Parent B commented that parent groups within the school have similar difficulties in retaining parents.

You know, at the beginning of each year, when we start our PAC meetings and stuff, we try and figure out how to get more volunteers and get more helpers. And we do get a couple, at the very beginning of the year, but then it just kind of tapers off and then it's the same old, same old by Christmastime.

She laughed and said, "So, I don't know the answer to that!"

Training required. Some of the parents felt more comfortable supporting students than others. Two of the parents clearly expressed a desire for training in the academic and behavioural strategies they saw teachers using. Parent D said she loved working with

students, but "the only problem was that I felt I was not trained properly. How do I encourage a

kid to learn how to read?!" She went on to say that she "would kind of ask the teacher, okay,

what do you want me to do? So she would let me know, but still, I don't have the theory behind

learning styles, or going over list words. I just tried my best, you know."

On the other hand, Parent A suggested that "I think it [the learning centre activity] should

be a little more complicated because it seemed like kids just knew it. But maybe I didn't choose

the right games, because the teacher had said it's me who can choose which games to play and

stuff." She wondered, "How should I handle this particular situation?"

Teacher direction is key to valuable parent support in the classroom, Parent D explained,

saying,

> I guess certain kids just kind of catch on easily, and then others don't. So, I was reading
>
> with the ones that aren't catching on as easily, so then I just stare at a paper and go, okay,
>
> now you need to do these words. And then I don't know how to help them, other than just
>
> spending time with them, and encouraging them verbally.

The teacher had met with her beforehand: "Like just, kind of do this, and do that, kind of thing. I

don't know what more I would need, short of having teachers' training to actually know what

was helping them."

Summary of the Chapter

Interviews of four parents and one teacher were done to answer the research question of

whether inviting parents into a grade two classroom to support literacy centres empowers them to

feel more engaged in their child's learning process. From a thematic analysis of the interviews

emerged six themes: Making a Difference, Increased Understanding, Level of Comfort,

Communication, Time Constraints, and Training Required. An examination of these themes

shows that all of the parents desired to support their child's learning in the classroom, and felt

that their presence in the classroom was able to *make a difference* for other children. Each of the

parents noted an increased *level of understanding* regarding both the language and processes of

the school. Upon reflection, all four parents as well as the teacher were able to recognize that

participation in the classroom had impacted their conversations and ability to support their

children outside of the school. Similarly, the parents and teacher noted an increase in the *level of*

comfort in the interactions between the teacher and the parents. This comfort level, however, did

not extend outside the classroom, unless the parent had reason to participate in the school on a

larger level (such as through the Parent Advisory Council). When the classroom teacher at the

centre of this study went on a leave, the comfort level parents felt with her did not extend to her

replacement teacher. Thus the participation ceased and there were no parent participation

opportunities for the researcher to observe.

Analysis of the interviews shows that the teacher noticed an increase in *communication*

between herself and the parents, and felt this was a very positive element of the volunteer

process. However, the parents noted that aside from this particular teacher, communication from

the school in general was poor. They offered suggestions for its improvement.

Two of the themes that emerged surrounded barriers to parent participation, as noted by

the parents themselves. The first of these was the factor of *time constraints*, which these parents

had overcome by making a concerted effort; they felt participation was a priority, so took steps

to fit it into their schedules. The second theme involved the desire for *additional training*, as two

of the parents felt that they did not possess the skills to be able to support students either

academically or behaviourally. Increased direction from the classroom teacher, they suggested,

would enable them to assist the students more effectively.

      The meaning of these results, their implications for future research, and recommendations for program implementation will be discussed in the following chapter.

Chapter 5: Summary, Implications, Recommendations, and Conclusions

Summary

It was the purpose of this research to determine whether parent participation in the literacy centres of a grade two classroom would empower parent volunteers to engage more effectively with their own child's learning. An examination of the literature concerning student academic and social-emotional success shows that meaningful parent involvement plays a critical role in the education process. Despite this understanding, however, studies in multiple countries show that parent participation in schools remains low. Indeed, the parent participation at the school studied for this research is limited to a few regular volunteers. As approximately half the students in Kindergarten to grade three at this school are not yet meeting provincial expectations for reading, the author recognized that improved measures for student support were needed. Thus the research question of this paper was to determine whether providing parents with opportunities for purposeful classroom involvement empowered parents to become active partners in the education of their children.

A qualitative, case study design was used, with data collected through both classroom observations and interviews. However, data were collected solely from the interviews as observations of the parents as volunteers in the classroom were attempted, but at the scheduled times, no parents were present. Parent participants were recruited from those parents who had previously expressed interest in volunteering in the grade two classroom in question, and all four of the respondents were female. The classroom teacher was also interviewed. Although approximately half of the school's student population is considered an English Language Learner from a minority culture, all of the parent participants were fluent English speakers. One of the parents was of a minority culture, but had been raised and educated in Canada and therefore was

not impacted by many of the barriers often facing parents from a minority culture. Similarly, while many of the families who are part of the school community struggle with poverty, the parents who responded for this study are of a middle-class socioeconomic status.

Classroom observations were attempted on eight occasions. However, during the time of the parent and teacher interviews and before the scheduled commencement of the observations, the classroom teacher for this grade two class went on a medical leave for the remainder of the year. This meant that a different teacher took her place. The parents who had previously been volunteering in the class explained in the interviews that while the new teacher had indicated she was open to the idea of parents in the class, she had made no effort to purposefully include those parents as had her predecessor. Lacking the meaningful engagement, the parents stopped participating. However, while the author was unable to observe the parents in the class, those parents shared willingly about their experiences while they lasted.

A thematic analysis of the parent and teacher interviews determined that indeed, parent participation in the classroom empowered the parents to engage more meaningfully with their children. The parents noted, sometimes with surprise, that their time in the classroom had allowed them to understand the "language of the school." After time spent in the classroom, each parent commented that she was better able to discuss both academic and self-regulatory concerns at home, and that she felt confident in offering her support. Moreover, the parents each commented on an increased level of comfort within the school, a greater appreciation for the procedures of the school, and on their delight in feeling that their classroom participation made a meaningful difference for the students.

Implications

  The implications of this study for educators are tremendous. Teachers and administrators often lament that "students these days" lack the skills of the past. Student anxiety and depression are significant factors in schools (Shanker, 2013), and this has a negative impact on both academic and social-emotional success. Many parents are uncertain of how best to support their children. Empowering parents to work together meaningfully with the school is an effective strategy for overcoming these challenges. The research studied has shown that teachers feel frustrated that parents are not doing enough in the home to support learning (Crozier & Davies, 2007), while parents feel that the schools are inflexible and unwelcoming (Baker et al., 2016). This can be overcome. The research examined in the Literature Review highlights that there are several steps schools can take to embrace their families. The current study suggests that if parents are invited in, they will gain skills and confidence to better support their children. There is urgency when addressing the academic and social-emotional needs of students, and educators—led by their administrators—must begin to act on the research-based recommendations.

Recommendations

  An examination of the research surrounding parent participation shows that there are several purposeful steps that educators can take to increase parent involvement in their schools. Parents want to be a part of their child's learning, but most often are unsure of how to do so (Epstein, 1995). The onus, then, is on the schools to intentionally initiate this worthwhile relationship with parents.

  Encourage meaningful involvement. As shown both in the extant literature and in the experiences with the two classroom teachers in this study, parent participation is most effective

when it is intentional. Just as teachers approach the current curriculum in a new way to

accommodate the needs of all learners, so too can educators begin to approach the classroom

environment with an eye for meaningful parent involvement. Literacy centres in all primary

grades can be supervised by parents, under the guidance of the teacher. Small after-school

workshops can be given to interested parents to acquaint them with the classroom expectations

and procedures, along with a brief overview of the pedagogy behind the literacy centre tasks.

This would address the concern brought forth by the parents in this study regarding a need for

greater training prior to classroom participation. A similar format can be used in intermediate,

middle, and secondary grades, with parents facilitating activities designed by teachers. With the

realization that parent involvement must be intentional for its effects to translate into parent

empowerment in other environments, it behooves educators to plan for this meaningful

engagement from the outset.

   Establish rapport. The development of a warm, welcoming school community is at the

centre of a successful and healthy learning environment for all members, not just students.

Creating and sharing this safe place in which school staff and parents interact with respect is a

task that must be done intentionally, and was noted by the parents in this study as an important

element to promoting parent participation. Teachers must realize the potential power differential

between themselves and their parents, and take steps to show parents they are open for

discussion. One of the most effective ways of doing this is to communicate openly with parents

regularly, not just when something has gone wrong. Sharing the positive growth of a child,

regaling parents with a humorous story from the day, and working together with parents to come

up with collaborative solutions for challenging behavior are all ways to build rapport. Having

translators present for meetings is a gesture of respect that districts can provide, recognizing that

those parents who do not speak the majority language have great contributions to make regarding

their child. Schools can similarly use translators when inviting non-English speaking parents into

the classroom, as these parents often have incredible life-stories to share. For all school

community members, evening events in which to share food and games are a meaningful way to

build relationships and break down barriers. With strategies provided by a dedicated leader,

school staff can grow to appreciate the tremendous benefits of establishing trusting relationships

with the school families.

   Embrace non-traditional engagement. Participation in their child's education does not

require that parents must be inside the school (Daniel, 2015). With the proliferation of social

media and assessment and communication apps, schools can provide parents with timely

information regarding school events, student successes, upcoming deadlines, and curriculum

developments. At the school studied in this research, the vast majority of parents had access to a

smartphone, even if they did not possess a computer. With this technology they are able to access

online communication immediately once a teacher has posted relevant information. A challenge

is ensuring that teachers and parents are trained in the possibilities to be found in technology.

However, if this is addressed as a priority, school administrators can ensure the appropriate

training is provided.

   Provide logistical solutions. For some parents, it is the lack of childcare or

transportation that prevents them from participating at the school. For others, it may be time

constraints or conflicting work schedules, as mentioned by the parents in this study. The first

step in overcoming these barriers is for the school to determine what they are. Then it can

become standard procedure to send a staff member with a van to pick up interested parents, or to

help parents research the best bus route to the school. For those parents for whom childcare is a

concern, the school can facilitate conversations between those parents looking for childcare and those parents offering it in their homes. When parents are working multiple jobs and simply are unable to find time during the day, unconventional methods may work best, such as the technological possibilities outlined previously. Of great importance is that school staff recognize that oftentimes parents are very interested in participating at the school but are inhibited by other commitments. Of paramount importance is that teachers show understanding and compassion to parents in this situation, rather than judgement and frustration.

Promote overlapping spheres. In his ecological systems theory, Urie Bronfenbrenner (1994) highlights the importance of supporting a child's development in the various "microsystems" of his environment. The home, school, and community are each microsystems that interact in Bronfenbrenner's "mesosystem." Learning, the theory tells us, is most effective when the adults in each of those microsystems works together to understand and support the child to generalize his skills to all environments.

This concept of supporting through multiple environments is the key element of Epstein's (1995) advocacy of the home, school, and community being overlapping spheres in a child's world. To accomplish this, educators must be willing to expand their view of learning as happening in all environments; not just the school. An essential first step is for educators to validate the learning that occurs on family holidays, extracurricular activities, and at the hands of elders or other learned family members. This can be done through allowing students and their families the opportunity to share important knowledge with the class using pictures, videos, or artifacts.

Due to union restraints, teachers' interactions with students are often confined to the hours of work outlined in the collective agreement. However, meaningful interaction between

spheres indicates that not all interaction need occur within the school day. Educators would have

crucial opportunities for building relationships with families during weekend community events,

particularly if these events were of importance to the less empowered families of minority

cultures. As with any initiative, creating these opportunities outside of the school would require

planning and creativity, along with the most important quality of all: a desire to build

relationships built on trust and collaboration.

Conclusions

This study supports the extant research concerning the minimal parent participation from

those parents who are of a minority culture or are of low socioeconomic status. Although parents

of both types were contacted for volunteering by the classroom teacher, none accepted the

invitation. Rather, it was the parents who were of middle-class status and majority culture (or

trained by and fluent in the majority culture) who answered the teacher's request. Overcoming

the barriers to parent involvement must begin with the school, and several recommendations

have been given for undertaking this immense task. It is not something that can be done by one

person, or in one year. It is a task that requires full administrative support, coupled with the

desire of all school staff to work collaboratively with parents. Building relationships takes time

and perseverance, and must be driven by an urgency to provide the best opportunities for success

to all students. Research has shown that engaging parents in the learning process is beneficial to

student growth, and the current study has affirmed those results in an examination of the

experiences in one classroom.

Final Statement

While the results of this study confirm previous research around parent participation in

schools, there is much more to be learned. Would these same results be found in this inner-city

school if every teacher embraced parent volunteers? If there was a school-wide acceptance of

parents in the classroom, would those parents heretofore reluctant to participate begin to engage?

What of the use of technology; would apps such as [FreshGrade](#) bridge the communication gap

between teachers and parents in such a way that parents felt empowered to continue the support

at home? Each of these questions lends itself to further research, and the author feels that there is

an urgent need to explore these possibilities in a wide variety of schools. It is a challenge all

educators need to embrace in order to help all students achieve their incredible potential.

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Appendix A

Questions for Classroom Teacher and Parent Volunteers

Questions for the Classroom Teacher:
1. Can you describe your experience with parent volunteers in the classroom?
2. Can you describe any steps you have taken regarding parent participation in your classroom?
3. What was the reaction of parents when you indicated you were looking for classroom volunteers?
4. Can you describe your expectations for the classroom with the presence of parent volunteers?
5. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about his topic that I have not asked?

Questions for Parents:
1. How did you feel when Mrs. _____ asked for classroom volunteers?
2. Have you volunteered in a classroom or for large school events before? Please tell me about why or why not and if so, how you liked the experience.
3. Can you describe how you feel when you are in the classroom working with the children?
4. How do you think your child feels about your presence in the classroom?
5. What are some things you like to do together as a family?
6. How do you feel about helping your child with his or her homework? Has this changed since you started volunteering in the classroom? Please explain.
7. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about this topic that I have not asked?

Appendix B

Parent Participation Recruitment Notice

To: Division 7 Parent Volunteers

My name is Kari Petzold and I am the learning support teacher at _____ Elementary. I am working on my Master's degree in Educational Leadership through City University.

As part of my program, I am studying the benefits of parent participation in the classroom. To gather information on what it is like to be a parent volunteer, I would like to interview parents to learn about your experiences. These interviews would take place at the school in May, 2017 and would be at a time that is convenient for you. I expect each interview to last approximately 30 minutes.

If you would like to be interviewed as part of my study, please fill out the information below and return it to the school. Information gathered in the interviews will be kept confidential, and pseudonyms will be used in my final report.

Parents who volunteer to be interviewed will receive a $5.00 gift card to Tim Hortons as an expression of thanks.

Those who agree to be interviewed can at any time withdraw from the study with no penalty.

Sincerely,

Kari Petzold

_____

I am interested in volunteering to be interviewed by Kari Petzold, who is doing a study on the benefits of parent participation in the classroom.

To set up an interview time, I can be contacted at _____ (phone number).

_____   _____
              Parent name   Date

Appendix C

Participant Recruitment Follow-Up

*This phone call will occur after receiving back notices from parents indicating that they are interested in volunteering for interviews.

"Hi, there. This is Kari Petzold, the learning support teacher at _____. I got your notice saying that you are interested in being interviewed for my research study. Thank you so much!"

After participant responds…

"I would like to set up a time for us to meet for the interview. I anticipate that it will take about thirty minutes, but it may be as long as an hour. Are you able to come to the school for that amount of time some time in the next week?"

Set up time for interview at the school.

"That sounds great! I'm looking forward to meeting with you. I'll make sure to meet you at the front door on our meeting day so that you know where to come. If you have any questions between now and then, I can be reached at _____(*school phone number*). I'll see you then!"

Appendix D

Initial Meeting Script

Welcome participant into my room.

"Thank you for volunteering to be a part of my study! I am looking forward to hearing your thoughts about participating in classroom activities."

Hand out Informed Consent page.

"This sheet explains about Informed Consent. What it means is that you have the right to understand exactly what I will be doing and how the information I find will be used. I'll read this through with you, and feel free to stop me if you have any questions."

Read the Informed Consent page out loud (along with a summary of the purpose of the study, this includes the fact that participation is voluntary, information will be kept confidential, and withdrawal can occur without penalty at any time; pause or read slowly to ensure understanding. Answer any questions the participant may ask.

"I need to make sure that you understand what I have read. Do you have any questions?"

Answer any that are asked.

"Take a few minutes to read it over yourself. If you feel comfortable with proceeding with the interview, please sign here to show that we discussed the study and you understand its purpose."

Move to the other side of the room to give space. After two minutes or when form is signed return to the participant.

"All right, then! Let's begin the interview. If you feel uncomfortable at any time you have the right to withdraw from the interview without any penalty. Please let me know if you have any questions or concerns as we proceed."

Begin interview questions.