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## Parent as participant or outsider : establishing positive relations between schools and all families

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## Parent as participant or outsider : establishing positive relations between schools and all families

### Abstract

The purpose of this review is to help elementary school educators to gain important information which may help them build positive relations with all parents. This review will not address special education teachers and programs directly, because of the particular case of federally mandated roles for parents working with educators, for which preservice special education teachers receive training. Likewise, national standards for preparation of early childhood educators provide for training in working with families of young children. This review is designed for elementary educators who do not have backgrounds in early childhood nor special education, although information cited might apply in some cases.

Parent as participant or outsider: Establishing positive  
relations between schools and all families

A Graduate Review

Submitted to the

Division of Reading

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in Partial Fulfillment

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University of Northern Iowa

by

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positive relations between schools and all families

Has been approved as meeting the research requirement  
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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Building positive relations with families is a personal goal for myself as an experienced teacher. While working as a Title 1 Reading Teacher, serving children in Kindergarten through Fifth-Grade, I struggled to meet this goal with all the families I worked with. With no formal course work or training in working with parents, I relied on my own experiences as well as assumptions and beliefs I held about families to guide communication efforts. Traditional methods for communicating with parents (which will be explained later in this review) worked for most of the families of the children in my program, however, they were not effective for all. How could I build positive relations with all the families I worked with?

The purpose of this review is to help elementary school educators to gain important information which may help them build positive relations with all parents. This review will not address special education teachers and programs directly, because of the particular case of federally mandated roles for parents working with educators, for which preservice special education teachers receive training. Likewise, national standards for preparation of early childhood educators provide for training in working with families of young children. This review is designed for elementary educators who do not have backgrounds in early childhood nor special education, although information cited might apply in

some cases.

Families are diverse in nature. Dr. David Elkind, Professor of Child Study at Tufts University, described today's family as "mirroring the openness, complexity, and diversity of our contemporary lifestyles" (Scherer, 1996, p.4). As a result of a mobile population, the demographics of schools are changing. Families are more geographically dispersed, consisting of one-parent, foster, or blended families, and are more culturally and linguistically diverse (Conyers, 1996; Epstein, 1988; Scherer, 1996).

It is important to note that this diverse population does not confine itself to racial/ethnic minorities, or low-income families. Only one-third of children of poverty are from racial/ethnic minorities, and middle-class and working-class families are diverse as well (Allington, 1991). "Family types cross economic lines and are not exclusively poor or uncaring" (Epstein, 1988, p. 58).

Changes in technology and transportation after World War II added to the complexity of the modern world, geographically distancing educators from families. "Prior to the war, the United States consisted mainly of rural and small town areas, and cities were like clusters of small towns" (Comer, 1986, p.442), making it common for families and educators to interact regularly in their communities. As a result of the changing demographics related to the technological and scientific revolution that occurred after World War II, transformations occurred in the relationship between home and school. In today's world, children and



parents rarely engage in informal academic conversations with teachers within the community context. As a result in the decrease in contacts within the child's community context and the complexity of our population, children need more adult help in their lives now than did children in the past, and "direct parent participation in the schools" is needed as a result (Comer, 1986, p.443).

Research supports the important role parents play in their children's success in school (Baker, Serpell & Sonnenschein, 1995; Clark, 1988; Coleman, 1987; Morrow, 1995). Parents' educational practices have had an effect on student achievement. For example, student achievers spent at least 20 hours a week outside of school in activities such as reading, writing and speaking with adults and doing other activities that cognitively challenge the student (Clark, 1988).

Traditional family outreach efforts by schools, typically termed parent involvement have been shown to be effective as a means of communicating and involving many families in their children's education. Benefits of parent involvement are "higher test scores, long-term academic achievement, positive attitude and behavior, more successful programs, and more effective schools" (Henderson, 1988, p.60).

Although traditional family outreach efforts have been successful for many people, there is still a large group for whom they have not. Changes in the demographics of our schools may have an effect on how parent involvement is

approached (Kahn, 1987). Traditional parent involvement activities that were effective in involving parents in the past, such as memos and other written communication from teachers, conferences, encouraging reading-aloud at home, talking with the teacher before or after school, and volunteering, do not fit the life-style of many families today. Many of the traditional activities occurred during the day (such as class parties and plays), which are not practical for parents of the present who work outside the home. "Today, half of the mothers of one-year-olds have already returned to work" (Kahn, 1987, p.10).

Many parents find the thought of participating in school activities threatening as a result of "specific majority culturally-based knowledge and behaviors about the school as an institution" (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991, p. 21). For many underclass children, and children not of the middle-class mainstream, the culture of school differs from the home culture, and school activities may have little meaning for these parents and their children (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Heath, 1983). For example, Heath (1983) discovered that ways children related to books varied across middle and working class families, which can have direct implications for school success.

While the middle-class children learned to relate to books and conduct themselves in ways that matched school practices, children of the working class learned to relate to literacy in ways that often conflicted with school. The parents of the non-mainstream children did not have the

majority culturally-based knowledge in what was expected of their children at school.

Many of today's educators struggle to involve all parents, but realize that they do not know what to do when they are not successful with certain parents. In some cases, educators alienate parents but do not realize it. This is illustrated in the fact that many parents report not being asked to do anything by their children's teacher, including not being contacted in even the traditional methods described earlier (Chavkin, 1989; Clark, 1988; Epstein, 1986; Leitch & Tangri, 1988).

Many educators, either deliberately or unconsciously, operate under false assumptions about families, particularly parents of linguistically and ethnically diverse students (Come & Fredericks, 1995; Comer, 1986; Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Jenkins, 1981). Educators often view parents of these populations and specifically of lower socioeconomic status who do not get involved as uninterested, and educators may not make any further efforts to reach them based on this assumption (Jenkins, 1981). However, parents who do not participate may not view the activities the teacher promotes as important, or may see the teacher as the primary authority in their child's learning at school (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991).

Another assumption that some teachers make is that children in homes of single-parents are less advantaged educationally. Epstein (1988) challenged this assumption:

In our research, we found that single parents and working parents are as likely or more likely to spend time with their children at home to assist them in school activities....Some of the least involved are well educated parents whose children attend elite private schools. (p. 58)

Additionally, Svanum, Bringle, and McLaughlin (1982) found that there was no difference in achievement among children from single- and two-parent environments. Additionally, more recent research indicates that parents from all socioeconomic backgrounds can have positive effects on children's learning, which means that parent participation has powerful outcomes independent of family background effects (Keith, Keith, Troutman, Bickley, Trivette & Singth, 1993).

Often unaware of the work of Epstein and others, family outreach efforts are narrowly aimed at hard to reach parents, often defined as low income, immigrant, or minority families, rather than other populations, because of a deficit philosophy (Auerbach, 1989). Deficit views of families "depict inactive parents...as incompetent and unable to help their children because they have a different language, work long hours away from home, belong to different ethnic groups, or are just not interested" (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991, p. 22).

Research contradicting the deficit view finds that all parents, regardless of education level, class, or race believe involvement in their child's education will help their children. Further, most parents recognize the importance of a positive home literacy environment (Auerbach,

1989; Delgado-Gaitan, 1987). Research has suggested that many immigrant, low income, and minority families provide "a rich context for literacy development" (Auerbach, 1989, p. 166; Delgado-Gaitan, 1987; Heath, 1983; Morrow, 1995; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988).

Several researchers have identified miscommunication and a mismatch between school and parent values (Auerbach, 1989; Heath, 1982). In their conclusions and implications, the researchers put the responsibility on schools to adapt to the family's social reality. These researchers urge educators to acknowledge "the family's social reality and focus on the family's strengths" (Auerbach, 1989, p. 165). As a part of participation programs which involve the whole family, Morrow (1995) suggested that we study family literacy from a broad perspective, taking a social-contextual approach which validates existing practices occurring in all families.

Practices in the home that are a part of the daily routine can be viewed as a resource to help inform teachers (Auerbach, 1989; Moll & Gonzalez, 1994). Moll & Gonzalez refer to this idea as "viewing households from a funds of knowledge perspective" (p. 444). More specifically, this means acknowledging that there are cultural resources in the homes of children and their communities which can be used to foster the children's development. For example, after visiting the households of her students, a teacher incorporated what she learned about family funds of knowledge about the curative properties of plants into the curriculum. This teacher discovered that many of the families she visited

had considerable knowledge about plants and herbs as medicine. She used this information to create a theme unit which reflected this knowledge (Moll & Gonzalez, 1994).

Morrow (1995) offered examples of cultures in which there are no books, but rather, storytelling is a part of the literate environment. Morrow explains that storytelling can be regarded as a strength, in spite of the fact that the practice of storytelling differs from the culture of traditional schools which predominately use books for storytelling.

In the views of those who support the idea of family involvement in literacy development, parents can be observed as partners in educating their children, rather than as individuals who need to be fixed or informed in order to meet existing school values which may not be a match with their values. In light of the research on family involvement in literacy development, which contradicts assumptions educators make about parents and the mismatch of values between school and home, a more social-contextual approach to parent involvement makes sense.

Adopting a social-contextual approach to family outreach means that educators must be willing to adjust traditional roles that may not match the social reality of families and instead share responsibility with parents (Fredericks & Rasinski, 1990). For example, a traditional parent involvement program might include encouraging parents to promote good reading habits, sending home books and practices from school to use at home with their children, and in

coaching parents in effective parenting (Auerbach, 1995).

"Parents often have the perception that they are being provided a service because they are incapable of doing it on their own" (Fredericks & Rasinski, 1990, p. 76). Rather, the teacher might provide opportunities for parents to contribute to their child's education rather than repeatedly providing them with information or tasks to complete, to capitalize on their literacy strength (Lazar & Weisberg, 1996). This can be attained by an ongoing communication effort between parents and schools. For example, educators can provide a regular time or opportunities in which parents can share what they know about their child's learning at home (Dye, 1989; Lazar & Weisberg, 1996). Children can benefit when "adult-child language interactions at school...successfully build upon the child's existing knowledge and experience" (Dye, 1989, p. 21).

Many teachers are unaware of the real reasons why parents are hard to reach. When educators operate from a deficit philosophy of parent involvement, programs become designed around the schedules and needs of educators. Decisions are based on false generalizations about what they think parents need, rather than molded around what parents want (Come & Fredericks, 1995; Fredericks & Rasinski, 1990). To include all families in parent participation programs, educators must be aware of differences in parents' schedules and in their goals and needs. This awareness can lead to a more sensitive and socially aware approach when working with all families (Epstein, 1991).

Educators must collaborate with parents to tailor parent participation efforts to fit the people they work with. Collaboration is an essential element of successful relationships between educators and parents, empowering both educators and parents to develop ownership in children's education (Epstein, 1986; Fredericks & Rasinski, 1990; Williams & Chavkin, 1989). Educators who develop a mind set that favors collaboration assume that "schools and families share responsibilities for the socialization and the education of the child" (Epstein, 1986, p. 277).

Epstein (1988) points out that the single most important factor in productive parent partnerships with schools, is the practices of the teachers. "It wasn't the education, marital status, or work place of parents" that interfered with parent participation in their children's education (Epstein, 1988, p. 58). Therefore, the responsibility lies within the educator to make the first move in sparking such collaborations. What changes in educator mind sets about families need to be made, and as a result, what strategies will emerge to help establish positive relations between schools and all families?

#### Statement of the Problem

It is the purpose of this paper to synthesize research about relationships between parents and schools to provide educators information which will help them to establish positive relations with all parents. The following questions will direct this exploration:



1. What are some of the different perspectives that exist on what the relationship should be between schools and families?

2. What dynamics occur between the expectations and needs of parents and those of educators, and what are the implications?

3. What strategies can educators use to communicate with all families with the goal of establishing positive school and home relations?

#### Significance of the Study

There is a need for educators to strive for positive relations with all parents. It is important to identify the false assumptions made about poor, ethnically diverse and linguistically diverse families. Equally important is recognizing the need to extend efforts in building positive relations to an often overlooked group of the working class. The need for parent participation and involvement in education in general will be explored as well as opposing perspectives of school and family relations. In addition, barriers to positive relations between educators and parents will be examined. Concluding the review is a list of my fundamental beliefs about parents and educators relations. A discussion of adaptations to traditional parent involvement techniques is also included.

It is intended that through this research, educators will gain important information which may help them use a combination of practices to advocate positive home and school relations with all families, whether rich, poor, middle class

or non-mainstream.

### Organization of the Paper

This paper is organized in the following manner. Chapter 1 includes an introduction, overview of the problem to be discussed, and definitions of important terms. Chapter 2 will examine the research on relations between home and school from two opposing perspectives. Chapter 3 will explore the barriers to positive relationships that often occur between parents and educators. Chapter 4 includes fundamental beliefs about parent and educator relationships from the perspective of an educator, followed by explanations of traditional parent involvement strategies which can be adapted in ways that establish positive relations between schools and all families.

In this paper, the following definitions will be used. The term parent refers to the primary care giver of children. This term is not to be confused with the use of the word care giver in Early Childhood Education, which often refers to the child's teacher. Parent may mean a mother and father, single parent, foster parent, grandparent, or any other person or extended family who is responsible for the direct care and schooling of a child.

The term educator, for the purposes of this paper, typically refers to a child's teacher, but may include other school personnel such as the principal, special education and Title 1 staff, social worker, school psychologist or other support staff.

The terms parent involvement and parent participation apply to any effort in which parents and educators communicate. Communication may occur through parents contacting educators, educators contacting parents, or a two-way communication effort.

In relationships between parents and educators, the term partnership "encompasses long-term commitments, mutual respect, widespread involvement of families and educators in many levels of activities, and sharing of planning and decision making responsibilities" (Swap, 1993, p. 47).

## Chapter 2

Historically, the roles of educator and parent have been distinct and separate. Parents were expected to be responsible for teaching morals and values to their children, acting as the primary socializer, while schools were in charge of the academic instruction of children (Flaxman & Inger, 1992; Scott-Jones, 1988). The home was the center of one's life, operating from the notion that children should be protected, women should stay at home to fulfill a maternal instinct (with the societal belief that if they did not, something was wrong with them) and men worked and provided for the family (Elkind, cited in Scherer, 1996).

Parents traditionally have viewed the teacher as the person in charge and as the primary educator of their children at school (Delgado-Gaitan, 1987; Epstein, 1986). Schools existed to teach academic subjects. Parent-teacher communication often occurred only when something bad happened or when teachers reported progress. Sometimes communication was avoided all together. Parents were expected to support the school by making sure their children had the supplies they needed and that they attended school regularly and completed their assignments. Many educators felt (and many still feel) "Without parent involvement...there were fewer student behavior problems and fewer conflicts between parents and schools" (Comer, 1986, p. 442).

When teachers did implement parent involvement practices, efforts were geared toward a family in which someone was available to the school during the day, usually the child's mother; one who could participate as a room mother, classroom aide, or helper with class parties and field trips, for example (Kahn, 1987). These types of activities were a match for the "traditional family," and are still effective for families such as these today in which a parent is home and available to the school during the day.

There has been growing awareness that children benefit when their parents are involved in the schools. Christenson and Cleary (1990) found the following outcomes to parent involvement:

1. Students' grades and test scores improve; they complete more homework and are more involved in classroom activities.
2. Teachers...are recognized by parents as having better interpersonal and teaching skills, are given higher teacher evaluation scores by principals, and indicate a greater satisfaction with their jobs.
3. Parents show an increased understanding of the function of schools and improve their communication with their children and educators in general and concerning school work in particular. Parents also participate more with learning activities at home.
4. Schools are rated as more effective and present more successful school programs. (p. 221).

When parents are involved in their children's education, children increase their levels of achievement. In fact, in a series of studies of 49 parent involvement programs conducted by Anne Henderson, an associate for the National Committee for Citizens in Education (NCEE), no matter what the form of the parent involvement, positive results were established (Henderson, 1988).

Research such as Henderson's leads one to think that any effort to involve parents would result in positive school-home relations. However, traditional efforts that entailed connecting with the school during the day are increasingly less practical for many of today's families. When defining "the contemporary U.S. family" we find that it "reflects every imaginable configuration, ranging from two-parent, to one-parent, to multigenerational, to various forms of blended families" (Robinson & Fine, 1994, p.11).

The fact that the traditional family is changing, no longer including two parents with the mother staying at home, forces us to take a fresh look at how we approach home-school communication efforts. There are still parents who can respond to traditional parent involvement activities, but educators should think about ways to reach those who cannot but still desire to "remain connected to the school" (Kahn, 1987, p. 10).

The roles of parent as socializer and school as primary educator are no longer as distinct and separate. Not only is the school an academic institution, but also a center for dealing with social issues as a result of added stress on the

family such as increases in poverty, mobility, and divorce. The broadening role of schools is sometimes attributed to the disintegration of the traditional family and its "inability to cope with societal problems" (Flaxman and Inger, 1992, p. 16). Elkind (1996) agreed that families are under greater stress, vulnerable to outside pressures; however, he cautioned against the presumption that the nuclear family was good, and that the alternative family of today is bad. Taking it a step further some analysts point out that "it is the lack of social, political, and economic support for parents that puts their children at-risk" which puts pressure on the school to serve this supportive role (Auerbach, 1989, p. 175).

Besides modifications in the school's role, the parent's role in their children's education is also changing. Traditionally, "America's public schools have...acted on the...assumption that parents--and poor parents in particular--should be excluded from participation in educational policymaking" (Jenkins, 1981, p. 21). Parents, however, now have more legalized power in making legislative, personnel, and curriculum decisions in schools, which used to be primarily the domain of the school professionals (Flaxman & Inger, 1992; Scott-Jones, 1988).

Through legislation, at least seven states have given parents the power to enroll their children in virtually any public school in the state, putting pressure on public schools to compete in a market-like setting (Flaxman & Inger, 1992). Additionally, many demand that parents have more power

in school decisions; many citizens feel that the government has no right to command parents to do anything, nor that schools have any right to impose curriculum and content that parents object to (Burron, 1996). All schools in Chicago, under Chicago School Reform and most schools in Kentucky, under the Kentucky Education Reform Act, are required to include parents on school councils to help principals and teachers make decisions about student learning (Bryk, Sebring, Kerbow, Rollow & Easton, 1998; Rasmussen, 1998).

What then are the responsibilities of the school and the family in children's academic and social development? Contrasting views about the most effective relationships between schools and families have emerged. Different ideas about these responsibilities arise from differences in basic philosophies about the roles of parents and the roles of teachers and schools. Epstein (1986) has described two perspectives on school and family relations: "Perspective one emphasizes inherent competition, incompatibility, and conflict between schools and supports the separation of the two institutions. Perspective two emphasizes coordination, cooperation, and complementarity of schools and families and encourages communication and collaboration between the two institutions" (p. 277).

Educators tend to ally themselves with one perspective or the other, although they may combine aspects of the two in the way they conduct themselves professionally (Epstein, 1986). In the following sections, each of these two perspectives will be explored, describing the philosophical



basis for each, practices which are typically involved, the research which supports each perspective and the concerns about programs which reflect each perspective.

### Perspective One

#### Description

Perspective one often falls under titles such as Parent Involvement, the Protective Model (Swap, 1993), and/or a Transmission Model of School Practices (Auerbach, 1989; Swap, 1993). Communication between educators and parents is either not encouraged or is one-way--from school to home.

#### Philosophical Base

Perspective one is seeded in specific beliefs about parents' and educators' roles and responsibilities when it comes to the child. These roles are thought to be best fulfilled either separately from one another, or the school should inform the parents as to what should be done in the home to support the child's academic achievement.

Educator and parent roles should remain separate either because of conflicting views or because the participants simply believe that the two are not meant to work together, that educators and parents can best fulfill their roles independently (Epstein, 1986). In addition to the belief that the two play separate roles, parents are seen as the primary socializers of their children, and teachers are the educators. Therefore, educators should inform parents in a Transmission-of-School-Practices in which the school tells the family what to do at home with their child in order to

help their children fit better with the school practices. Communication is flowing in one direction, from the educator to the parent.

School personnel direct the school bureaucratic decision-making and classroom judgments about children, and parents maintain judgments about their children at home (Epstein, 1986). Educators working from Perspective One feel "their professional status is in jeopardy if parents are involved in activities that are typically the teachers' responsibilities," (Epstein, 1986, p. 277), and many parents feel the teacher is in charge of their child's behavior and learning when the child is at school (Delgado-Gaitan, 1987).

### Practices

An element of Perspective One that emphasizes the separate roles of schools and parents is a Protective Model which works to protect the school from parent interference (Swap, 1993). Three assumptions drive this practice: "1. Parents delegate to school the responsibility of educating their children; 2. Parents hold school personnel accountable for the results; 3. Educators accept this delegation of responsibilities" (Swap, 1993, p. 28). Attempts to collaborate with or involve parents in decision-making are seen as a disturbance to the educator's job; hence such activities are seen as inappropriate (Swap, 1993).

Differing slightly from the Protective Model is the Transmission-of-School-Practices Model. Rather than keeping the two parties entirely separate, proponents of this model recognize that parents play an important role in their

children's education and encourage educators to help parents understand and support school objectives (Swap, 1993). The Transmission-of-School-Practices Model can be seen in traditional parent involvement strategies (Auerbach, 1989):

The model starts with the needs, problems, and practices that educators identify, and then transfers skills and practices to parents in order to inform their interactions with children, its direction moves from the school/educator to the parents, and then to the children (p. 169).

Teachers provide skills to parents to work on school tasks at home; thus the responsibility is on the educator to communicate with parents. This one-way communication usually comes in the form of information which is sent or offered by the teacher, such as newsletters, district handbooks, written reports, parent education workshops, and teacher-prepared enrichment packets and worksheets to work on school tasks at home. Communication is one-way, informing parents about school practices.

#### Research in Support

An advantage to Perspective One is that this type of program is "very effective at achieving its goal of protecting the school against parent intrusion in most circumstances" (Swap, 1993, p. 29). Also, some parents prefer to be independent from the teacher, maintaining minimal contact with the school and sometimes supplementing their child's education without direction from the teacher (Vincent, 1996).

In addition, the practice of providing parents with learning activities to use with their children at home is welcomed by many parents. "Over 80% [of parents] said they would spend more time helping their children at home if they were shown how to do specific learning activities" (Epstein, 1986, p. 280). Through such activities, educators "can generate important and useful connections in the areas of communication, support for parents, parent support for school, and home learning" (Swap, 1993, p. 30). Giving parents knowledge in how to work with their child at home is expected and appreciated by many parents. Parents involved in a study exploring parent involvement activities "overwhelmingly agreed teachers should involve parents in learning activities at home, and that homework was useful for their children" (Epstein, 1986, p. 280).

Moreover, a "clear transmission of information can be a welcome offering to parents, particularly when they have not had access to the social mainstream and seek access for their children" (Swap, 1993, p. 30). For example, making explicit to parents what they can do at home to help their children, particularly in terms of literacy instruction, can help families, specifically nonmainstream families, learn the culture of power. Delpit (1991) explains:

Whenever you have people who are not part of whatever culture that you're trying to teach from, it's easiest if you make the rules more explicit...they also need to talk about the notion that these conventions are the conventions of edited English, a political entity, one

that the political nature of this society demands that people be able to control if they are to be successful. (p. 542).

### Concerns

Although one-way communication can inform parents about the school's plans and practices, some parents are left out of this process. Many educators make assumptions about families that cause them to hold back on reaching out to different groups of parents. Some educators may not see any reason to reach out to parents whose children are succeeding in school, or parents who help their children at home without input from the teacher (Epstein, 1986). With other groups, particularly in linguistically and ethnically diverse families, teachers assume that there is a deficit in the literacy practices of the home. The teachers believe that communication should flow only one way, with the school transferring knowledge to the family. The following assumptions (Auerbach, 1989) are made about families, thus supporting this transfer of skills approach:

1. Language-minority students come from literacy-impooverished homes where education is not valued or supported.
2. Family literacy involves a one-way transfer of skills from parents to children.
3. Success is determined by the parents' ability to support and extend school-like activities in the home.
4. School practices are adequate and it is home factors that will determine who succeeds.

5. Parents' own problems get in the way of creating positive family literacy conditions. (p. 169-175).

These assumptions can isolate parents from educators, as the emphasis is placed on the school to tell parents what to do, and it is assumed that educators know what is best for parents. It can cause parents to feel as if they are unskilled at what they may already be doing to help their child (Fredericks & Rasinski, 1990).

More recent evidence contradicts the assumptions made in the Transmission-of-School-Practices model. For example, research refutes the first assumption, that linguistically diverse children come from literacy-impoverished homes, (Auerbach, 1989, p. 166; Delgado-Gaitan, 1987; Heath, 1983; Morrow, 1995; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988). Although the literacy practices of these populations may not be "school-like," Delgado-Gaitan (1987) found a rich context of language and literacy used in Mexican immigrant homes where functional reading such as newspaper reading and reading and writing letters to family members occurred in both English and Spanish.

Another commonly held assumption, that the natural direction of literacy learning is from parents to the child (the parents transmit literacy skills to the child), has also proven false. Both parent and child may be learning English, for example; therefore many families have a two-way support system as family members help each other learn the language, which makes up their literacy instruction (Auerbach, 1989).

The belief that children succeed because their families do certain school-like tasks with them at home, that structured home-learning activities are the key for developing literate children, has also been refuted. Time spent on literacy work with children at home does not have a large impact on children's overall achievement (Chall & Snow, 1982); it is how parents use literacy in socially significant, purposeful ways that influence a child's literacy development (Auerbach, 1989). The ways of using print in middle class (mainstream) homes complement the structured format of school practices; however, nonmainstream home practices do not always match school practices yet use literacy for different, meaningful purposes (Heath, 1983). Rather than the home changing to accommodate school practices, Auerbach (1989) argues that the school needs to change to fit the family practices.

The final false assumption is that family problems and cultural values are obstacles to learning and get in the way of children's development. Furthermore, the obstacles should be fixed by following a "from the educator to the parent" model; however, "being expected to conform to culturally unfamiliar expectations and practices may intimidate parents and drive them away" (Auerbach, 1989, p. 176). Instead, Auerbach contends that family issues and cultures can be used for instructional purposes; differences can now be viewed as strengths and avenues which can "bridge the gap between home and school" (p. 176).

Many educators also make the assumption that because children come from families with low incomes, any learning problems they have must be blamed on deficits in the home environment (Allington, 1991). The research of Birman (1988) refutes this assumption by revealing that schools with high concentrations of children who are poor typically schedule less literacy instruction. Many current parent involvement practices and communication efforts are based on the assumptions discussed above. Working from these assumptions, educators assume all of the decision-making and responsibilities, basing decisions on what they think is best for parents and children, which is the transfer of knowledge and ideas to parents (Fredericks & Rasinski, 1990).

Time factors and schedules also have an impact on decisions educators make, thus communication efforts are often formed around the convenience of educators and not parents (Fredericks & Rasinski, 1990). When educators do try to schedule for parents' convenience, many use only traditional activities. For example, the open house, one of the most popular parent involvement events, takes several forms, one of which is a welcome back night at the beginning of the school year in which parents tour the school, informally meeting teachers. Another form may be a day set aside when parents are welcome to watch their child's class and have lunch with them. Educators and parents may have different agendas for the open house.



Parents may believe that an open house is an opportunity to discuss their child's progress and share information about their child with the teacher. Educators may view the open house as an informal meeting time in which many parents visit the classroom at the same time, receiving information from the teacher about homework and where the child sits in class, for example.

Educators usually feel it inappropriate to engage in lengthy, individualized discussions as other parents are in the room. Parents may feel that the open house does not provide adequate time to discuss their children with the teacher; thus they must wait until a scheduled time during conferences later in the year. These differences in expectations can lead to disappointment and dissatisfaction which may set up barriers while attempting to establish positive relations with schools and all families.

#### Perspective Two

##### Description

Perspective two is a viewpoint which "assumes that schools and families share responsibilities for the socialization and the education of the child" (Epstein, 1986, p. 277). Proponents of this perspective often create programs and form relationships that they regard as collaboration or partnerships. Communication tends to be two-way "allowing parents to feed into the school their knowledge, concerns and desires and requires interaction between the participants" (Berger, 1994, p. 124).

### Philosophical Base

An emphasis on two-way communication and a sharing of common goals which can be met most effectively through collaboration between teachers and parents is the basic premise behind perspective two (Epstein, 1986). Educators who operate from a perspective two philosophy "established more equitable programs, involving parents regardless of their educational backgrounds" (Epstein, 1986, p. 283). Recall that Perspective One encourages parents to "maintain their personal, particularistic standards and judgments about their children at home" (Epstein, 1986, p. 277). Contrast that with the Perspective Two philosophy in which educators attempt to seek out all parents' viewpoints and participation.

### Practices

An element of continuity encompasses the practices of perspective two, based in Bronfenbrenner's (1979) concept that "human development occurs in a context of overlapping and interdependent systems of social and cultural organization" (Baker, Serpell & Sonnenschein, 1995, p. 236). Specifically, practices encourage continuity among home, school, and the community because connected social and cultural contexts are believed to positively influence how children learn. The idea is that "learning doesn't begin in the classroom and end at the edge of the playground" (Henderson, 1988, p. 62). A practice that reflects this notion would be to develop a curriculum based on a community's values and cultures, and to invite community

members to help develop it. This type of collaborative effort can build working partnerships between educators and families (Dye, 1989; Stokes, 1997).

Another practice encouraging continuity and a cultural exchange between the school and home would be for a teacher and a parent to exchange written journal or diary entries of literacy events. Proponents of Perspective Two believe parents are educators of their children and know more about them than anyone else. The dialogue between teachers and parents can be used to guide instructional decisions and to learn about and incorporate the literacy contexts of the home into the classroom (Baker, Serpell & Sonnenschein, 1995; Lazar & Weisberg, 1996). Other examples of Perspective Two methods involve taking the traditional "parent information" practices discussed earlier such as newsletters, notes sent home, handbooks and written reports, and making adaptations such as writing them or audio taping them in the language understood by the family.

Educators who operate from Perspective Two respond positively to pressure from parents and the community to improve the quality of education, and agree that parents should be involved in school decision-making (Flaxman & Inger, 1992), believing in shared responsibility (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991). Sending home surveys to find out what the parents' goals are for their children and expecting more from a school's PTA than raising money (Kahn, 1987) are examples of practices that may encourage parent input in school decisions. Involving parents in designing, implementing, and

evaluating parent involvement programs as well as other programs promotes home-school collaboration in school decision-making (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991).

### Research in Support

Instead of focusing on transferring school-practices into the home context, proponents of Perspective Two ask, "How can we draw on parents' knowledge and experiences to inform instruction?" (Auerbach, 1989, p. 177). Two-way communication between parents and schools can inform educators about the cultures and home practices of their students in order to help them reach all families.

Recent research supports the contention that social and cultural contexts influence how children learn (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Heath, 1983; Hendersen, 1988; Stokes, 1997). Shared responsibility between teachers and parents in the education of children can build positive relations between home and school (Swap, 1993). Positive home-school relations are established when inviting parents to share what they know about their children with educators. This can help educators plan instruction which can better meet the needs of students.

Journal writing between educators and parents can support a child's learning both in and out of school (Lazar & Weisberg, 1996). The Reading-Language Arts Center at Beaver College in Pennsylvania (1986) provided a context for studying the use of parent-educator journaling to help inform instruction for children in the Center. Parents learned about what was happening with their child's literacy development at the center, and educators gained a better understanding of

the home literacy practices. For example, a portion of one journal entry from a parent stated (Lazar & Weisberg, 1996):

Rachel had some problems with reading tonight...her father became impatient so she read with her sister. Over the weekend I may just have Rachel read to herself and have her tell me about what she just read...what are your views? (p. 232).

This mother identified tension between father and daughter and made plans to change the reading arrangements. Rachel's teacher noticed the tension as well and wrote an entry in response containing positive comments about what Rachel was doing well in school. The teacher could also use this information to plan instructional opportunities at school for Rachel that would help her feel success and more at ease as her reading experiences at home were sometimes tension-filled.

The "diverse worlds of home, school and the outside world" (Dye, 1989, p. 32) can be brought closer together when parents share with educators what they know about their children. This practice has proven to promote positive home-school relations when examining the study of a parent involvement program in the schools of Outer London (Dye, 1989). Participants were assigned to an experimental group (parent involvement program) or control group (no parent involvement program). Of the measure areas, the experimental group showed significant gains on 22 of the 44 areas and the control group 3 of the 44 areas. Many of the areas which showed gains dealt with language and social development as

well as understanding basic concepts. These results supported the hypothesis that "children experiencing the parental involvement program made greater progress in a range of skills and abilities than those experiencing their normal level of parental involvement at school" (Dye, 1989, p. 24).

Unlike many parent involvement efforts which exclude some parents (Chavkin, 1989; Come & Fredericks, 1995), all parents were invited to participate in this program. Parents met with teachers once a week, sharing what they knew about their children's learning at home. Parents appreciated this regular opportunity to share with their children's teachers and learned more about the curriculum and school. In addition, parents were encouraged to share special skills they had with the children at school. The children kept an All about me book containing information such as local outings enjoyed by the family, photos of family food and clothes, and important times in the child's day.

These practices helped the teacher learn about the child's culture and social practices at home, helping to "bring their diverse worlds of home, school and community more closely together" (Dye, 1989, p. 21). These activities provided a context in which home experiences could be integrated with those of school through discussion and development of curriculum decisions. "Home and school language styles are mixed together and children benefit from these tangible, informal rehearsals and links in their activities" (Dye, 1989, p. 23).

Ultimately, when teachers reach out to families through the types of two-way communication mentioned above, teachers learn to communicate more confidently and effectively with parents. An increase in morale results in ways that can motivate them to take more risks in reaching out to parents (Dye, 1989; Ribas, 1992).

Head teachers in the Dye (1989) study reported that teachers in the parental involvement program (none of whom had worked with larger groups of parents before or had shared the decision-making in curriculum matters in such an in-depth manner) expanded their abilities to work with parents in ways which probably would not have occurred without participating. A teacher from New York City, Desiree Sanchez, has found that her job has become easier since being involved in the Institute for Responsive Education which seeks to make families and teachers partners in educating children. She comments, "If I have quick access to a parent, I have quick access to the solution to a problem" (Jennings, 1990a, p. 27). Additionally, principals find that they can reduce the time and energy they typically spend as mediator between parents and teachers when teachers become more confident in working with parents (Ribas, 1992).

### Concerns

Adopting a mind set of Perspective 2 embodies a paradigm shift for many participants who are used to the traditional practices of Perspective 1. Routman (1996) discusses the difficulties involved in change in American schools:

The change process in contemporary American schooling is very fragile. Those who want to make schools fairer and more humane, more democratic and caring, face a very difficult battle....The history of American schooling has been a history of struggle for control of what schools should be and for whom they should be. (p. 55).

Educators have strong feelings which may be difficult to change about what should or should not be expected of children and parents. Some educators feel parents should not get involved in their children's education because after school time should be saved for extracurricular interests and for building socialization skills (Epstein, 1982). Teachers may also feel parents spending time on academic tasks at home put too much pressure on the children to perform which can cause psychological stress (Epstein & Becker, 1982).

Building collaboration between parents and educators involves a great deal of time and commitment (Epstein, 1991; Swap, 1993), sometimes more time than one teacher planning by himself or herself (Stokes, 1997). Teachers' lack of time for preparing school volunteers, for example, poses a concern as educators may be reluctant to take parent volunteers if they do not have time to effectively train them (Epstein & Becker, 1982).

Once the planning and commitment is made, regular, continuous efforts must be undertaken to sustain the programs (Fredericks & Rasinski, 1990). This can be too much for parents (Lazar & Weisberg, 1996) and educators (specifically administrators) to handle without some sort of compensation,



as they may feel stress because too much is already being expected of them (Epstein & Becker, 1982; Jenkins, 1981).

Educators can feel uncomfortable when involving parents in school-decision making (Jenkins, 1981; Swap, 1993). Principals may not want parents included in decision-making because "the power they [principals] once had has already been usurped by other groups" (Jenkins, 1981). Some teachers feel they are being insulted and devalued professionally when parents are included in planning curriculum, and believe parental inclusion leads to inappropriate curriculum selections (Swap, 1993).

Additionally, the idea of encouraging continuity between home and school contexts by incorporating practices which support the diverse cultures of families is controversial. Some educators feel the large numbers of cultures possibly represented in a classroom could lead to a "fragmentation of effort or trivialization of cultures" (Swap, 1993, p. 45) making it difficult to adapt curriculum for everyone. Educators may ask, what is the school's responsibility in educating children with diverse backgrounds? "Is there a majority culture and should it be taught to all, or should the diversity of our children be reflected and valued in the curriculum?" (Swap, 1993, p. 45).

### Summary

Perspective One emphasizes independent roles for parents and educators, either entirely keeping the two separate, or educators dispensing information to the parent. Communication between educators and parents is either not encouraged or is

one-way; from school to home. These practices stem from a philosophy that parents are responsible for the behaviors and learning of children at home, and teachers are accountable for the child's learning at school (Delgado-Gaitan, 1987). Practices typically involved in this perspective are often based on educators' false assumptions about families. As a result, educators' views work from a deficit philosophy, and may result in miscommunication between educators and parents. Many parents prefer an independent role from educators, and supplement their child's education without teacher input (Vincent, 1996). Additionally, one-way communication (Transmission-of-School-Practices Model) is welcomed by many parents who expect and appreciate learning activities they are given to use with their children at home.

In contrast with Perspective One, Perspective Two encourages two-way communication and a spirit of collaboration between parents and educators. An assumption that both families and schools are responsible for the education of children drives the philosophy behind Perspective Two. Some concerns of this perspective include the great deal of planning and time to establish a collaborative relationship between educators and parents, and the long-term commitment required to maintain relationships (Comer, 1986; Fredericks & Rasinski, 1990). Recent research, however, shows the effectiveness of incorporating practices which support the diverse cultures of families (McCarthey, 1997) because social and cultural contexts influence how children learn (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Heath, 1983; Henderson,

1988).

Although it may appear that one perspective may have either more or less strengths or concerns over another, one is not superior. For example, Community A teachers and families may respond well to traditional forms of parent involvement, welcoming suggestions from teachers as to what they can do at home to help their children. Community B may have other issues that require different practices to meet the needs of families and educators.

Specifically, Community B, having a large population of parents who speak a language other than English, would require different practices than Community A in which only one home language is spoken. Sending home the same newsletters and homework ideas to Community B as Community A is not practical and does not make sense without making some alterations such as sending home communication in the language spoken at home. In School C teachers and parents may already be involved in a number of projects that require time and commitment from educators. Adding a change in parent involvement practices to the already complicated schedule may be too much for everyone to handle.

Taking into consideration the concerns and strengths of each perspective, one must build the type of parent-educator relationship to fit the needs of the parents and educators in a particular community. This may involve merging elements typical to each perspective to tailor programs to fit the needs of all families and educators. There are still parents who can respond to traditional parent involvement activities,

but educators should think about ways to reach those who cannot but still desire to "remain connected to the school" (Kahn, 1987, p. 10). As stated earlier, a great deal of time and effort for parents and educators is involved in building collaborative programs, and change in America's schools can be complicated. The overall goal, however, must be to establish positive home-school relations no matter what combination of practices or philosophies of parent-teacher communication are utilized.

### Chapter 3

Although many positive, collaborative partnerships between educators and parents do exist, currently many relationships do not work that way. Educator and parent views of each other and their expectations of one another can result in either barriers or open doors to positive home-school relations. In this chapter, barriers to positive home-school relations will be explored with the intent that, by identifying barriers, educators can begin the process of addressing them in order to move toward the ultimate goal of positive relations with all parents.

#### Judgments and Beliefs About Families and Educators

Barriers to building home-school collaboration can result from "teachers' and parents' lack of knowledge about ways they can use each other more effectively" (Leitch & Tangri, 1988, p. 71). Assumptions made about parents and about educators often stand in the way of the two parties working together in ways that will benefit the child's education.

Educators' efforts to build positive home-school relations are frequently influenced by false assumptions they hold about parents in general and their needs, rather than on what is actually the case (Auerbach, 1989; Chavkin, 1989; Fredericks & Rasinski, 1990). These assumptions pose barriers to positive home-school relations as participants are misunderstood.

Many educators make assumptions about employed parents, particularly single parents, and as a result, do not make efforts to help these parents participate in their children's education. Researchers analyzing parent and educator views found that the most frequently reported reason teachers gave for parent uninvolvement and one of the main reasons for not asking parents to participate, was parent employment or single parent employment (Leitch & Tangri, 1988). However, research indicates that single and working parents are not "less involved." More than a third of surveyed parents reported they had not been asked to participate in anything and many of these parents said they wanted to do more at school. This is a large group of parents who are not being utilized to their potential or to their expectations.

When teachers were surveyed about barriers to improving home-school collaboration, "Nearly 50% of teachers attributed barriers to parents." The issues relating to "problems with parents" most frequently cited included: "Parents' unrealistic expectations of the school's role, large families, parents' attitude that school isn't important enough to take time from work, parents' inability to help with the school work and parental jealousy of teachers' upward mobility" (Leitch & Tangri, 1988, p. 73).

Differences in social class, ethnicity, gender, and education level, can make both parents and educators feel threatened (Swap, 1993; Vincent, 1996). For example, educators in urban schools, who are predominantly white and middle-class, sometimes set up barriers by not realizing the

negative feelings they could create in parents and children by their lack of understanding and appreciation of children's cultures (Jenkins, 1981). "Despite teachers' first steps to welcome diversity, (teachers) reinforced middle-class literacy values while inadvertently ignoring or devaluing (mostly through lack of knowledge) literacy practices in non-middle-class homes" (McCarthy, 1997, p. 147). Specifically, educators from middle-class European-American backgrounds may provide a curriculum which is "more congruent with middle class, home literacy experiences than working class experiences" (McCarthy, 1997, p. 145).

Differences in education levels of teachers and parents can also influence how the two groups relate. Some parents feel teachers look down on them if the teachers are more educationally and economically successful; parents perceive the teachers unspoken message as "I got mine, and you got yours to get" (Leitch & Tangri, 1988, p. 74). The superior "attitude" that parents feel educators convey may result from a misperception of what educators think parents want them to be and act like.

Positive relations may not emerge when educators are not trained in what parents want as they may inadvertently turn away parents through certain offensive behaviors. For example, some educators believe that it is good practice to appear professional and business-like when working with parents as they will gain respect by adopting such mannerisms. In contrast, parents see educators' demonstrations of professionalism as patronizing and want a

less formal relationship (Lindle, 1989).

Finally, sometimes parents and educators have different goals for children. Unknowingly, they may differ in their perceptions about the proper role of the school in children's education. Results from interviews of urban and rural teachers and parents found that parents most frequently identified education and academics as the goal of the school (30%), while in contrast, a majority of teachers (56%) felt the goal was preparing students vocationally (Mundschenk & Foley, 1994). When teachers and parents are not aware of these differences in their goals and expectations, it can cause friction. For example, at conference time, when parents come to talk about what they feel is important, they may be silenced by educators who dominate with discussions about what they feel are the areas of greatest significance.

#### Inadequate Teacher Preparation in Theories and Methods

The misinformation educators may have about how to relate to parents can be attributed to a lack of experience or teacher training in how to connect with parents and how to find out more about the families of the children they work with.

Most teachers and administrators are not selected for their ability to relate to colleagues, parents, or other staff members. Nor are they taught how to work with parents or use them as allies in promoting the growth and development of students (Comer, 1986, p. 444-45). It is important that educators are competent in working with parents. Teacher initiative and knowledge of practices that



help to build positive relations with parents can make "the difference in whether parents (are) productive partners with schools in their children's education" (Epstein, 1987, p. 58). In an ongoing study investigating school and family relations, J.C. Lindle (1989) reflects:

As a former principal, I cannot recall a single day...when I did not meet with at least 4 or 5 parents or help a teacher prepare to meet with a parent...nearly all of us walked away from many conferences wondering, 'what do parents want?' (p. 12).

Educators want to know more about how to work with parents and list their own lack of skill in utilizing parents as a barrier to home-school collaboration (Leitch and Tangri, 1988; Ribas, 1992). Educators are frustrated by a lack of training and materials available to them to help build positive relations (Southwest Educational Labor Research cited in Chavkin, 1989). With the exception of Early Childhood Education and Special Education Programs, which are required by standards and or regulations to provide such training to preservice teachers, "Teachers are never taught how to work with adults...there's never any discussion of the tension that exists there" (Jennings, 1990a, p. 31).

### Time

Both educators and parents can experience limited time for communication between home and school. Time poses a concern when both teachers and parents have limited time for communication, and as a result, finding a common time or enough time at all can pose a barrier to effective

collaboration. For example, parents invited to participate in journal writing about their children's learning at home and school with a teacher expressed their expectation that it would take up too much of their time (Lazar & Weisberg, 1996). Jennings (1990a) describes results of a Newsweek poll, conducted in the spring of 1990:

More than  $\frac{1}{2}$  of all parents surveyed had not attended a single back-to-school night since the school year began, while 54% had not gone to a single parent organization meeting. Parents most often blamed their low participation on lack of time and conflicting work schedules. (p. 28).

Without a time commitment from both educators and parents, parent involvement activities are not predicted to be successful (Epstein & Becker, 1982).

Many teachers would like to know how to be more proficient without a greater time commitment when communicating with parents. Parents can feel anxiety when teachers do not provide enough time to listen to them or have a conversation about their child. In some cases, educators are concerned about satisfying some parents' expectations of frequent and lengthy conversation about their children (Ribas, 1992). In other cases, educators have concerns about the parents who profess limited time to contribute to their children's education. Teachers become hesitant to contact the latter because of perceived time constraints on the family. For this reason, educators wonder if they should ask them to

spend time at home on academic or social development activities, or if they should ask for help at all (Epstein & Becker, 1982).

The parent-teacher conference is an example in which time expectations may pose a barrier to positive home-school relations. Parents have stated that they would prefer a less formal relationship between themselves and teachers and want "more regular, informal contacts through less time consuming phone calls or notes...saving the conferences for the BIG things" (Lindle, 1989, p. 13). Some teachers think this is asking too much of their own professional time.

#### School Climate and Trust

A school's climate can provide a barrier to positive home-school relations. Many parents feel that the climate of their children's school is less than hospitable and believe that educators are "cool and indifferent to them" (Aronson, 1996, p. 58). A practice that was in effect at a school in Washington sent the message to families that they were not welcome in their children's classrooms despite a policy stating otherwise. Jennings (1990a, p. 28) notes the experience of a mother of three children in the Washington schools: "For years, her daughter's elementary school had a policy inviting parents to visit the school at any time. But no visitors were allowed on the 2nd floor of the building, where all of the classrooms were located."

Contradicting messages such as this can cause parents to lose trust since they do not know what to believe. Contacts with parents about their children only when something bad has

occurred send a negative message and discourage parents from visiting the school. In addition, parents' own negative experiences with school in the past cause them to lack trust in schools. Limited interactions such as communicating through writing, sending messages home, and contacting parents only when something negative happens at school can remind parents of the bad experiences they have had with school in the past (Jennings, 1990a). "A mother's or father's feelings of intimidation, their need to defend a child, or their angry reaction to a teacher may represent the triggering of old hurts and may be unconnected to an actual current event" (Robinson & Fine, 1994, p.11). Mr. Mardirosian of the Parent Institute comments about the effect a school's climate can have on parents: "We have to actually teach poor parents what middle-class parents already know from their own experience--that school can be a positive, supportive place" (Jennings, 1990a, p. 26).

Teachers presenting themselves as knowing all there is to know can also make parents feel uncomfortable and contribute to a negative school climate for parents (Ribas, 1992). Before the Davis Ellis School in Boston established a parent-involvement program, parents were intimidated and felt unwelcome in school. Doris Wilson, a parent at the school states, "It seemed like a lot of the teachers were on an ego trip...unless you had a teaching license, they'd look down on you" (Jennings, 1990a, p. 26). Another example illustrating how a teacher's coolness can keep parents away from school and keep them from corresponding with their children's

teacher has to do with a note sent home about homework. A teacher sent home a note which explained to parents the importance of helping their child with homework, while allowing the child to work through it on his/her own. Parents were unsure what the teacher wanted them to do. Should they help their children with homework or were they to have their children work through it on their own? They wondered if it was acceptable for them to call the teacher about homework or if it was their children's responsibility. The teacher, appearing to be strict, formal and unapproachable to the parents, intimidated them. Instead of calling the teacher, parents called each other, amplifying their confusion and frustration (Rotheram, 1989 cited in Robinson & Fine, 1994). The school's physical characteristics can also provide a negative climate. Prior to parent involvement program efforts, the exterior of one school displayed a sign which read, "Parents: Wait outside for your children" (Jennings, 1990a, p. 27).

#### Administrator Support

Issues involving the administrator's philosophy of parent involvement, the way schools have been traditionally managed and lack of monetary support provide barriers to positive home-school relations. Principal and teacher leadership is a key factor in why some schools have been able to develop positive relations with families while others continue to struggle with low levels of involvement. "It is usually the principal who reached out and took the first steps toward better communication and collaboration...not

waiting for parents...to take the initiative" (Davies, 1996, p. 48).

In contrast, ineffective principal leadership can develop a them-versus-us mind set, or a professional-client relationship which discourages partnerships between educators and schools (Jenkins, 1981; Lindle, 1989). Leadership from administrators is a particularly influential factor in encouraging or discouraging teachers' parent involvement practices. For teachers to put on workshops for parents, for example, they need the principal's support in acquiring a room, materials, and other school resources (Epstein, 1987).

With notable exceptions such as the Chicago School Reform, Comer Schools, and Central Park East Schools in New York City, administrators' traditional views about the parent's role in education set up barriers to positive relations as conflicts in attitudes and beliefs arise between parents and administrators. Administrators support the traditional roles for parents of "audience, home tutor, and school program supporter" more than decision-making, collaborative parental roles in education (Chavkin & Williams, 1987, p. 172). As a result, parents are engaged in few activities that actually constitute change or involvement in decision-making. When interviewed about their interaction with schools "78% of parents maintained that their opinions were never solicited by school personnel prior to making any decisions" (Mundschenk & Foley, 1994, p. 19).

Traditional parent involvement activities such as the annual open house, a few parent-teacher conferences, calling when a child has misbehaved and a parent-teacher association whose purpose is to raise money are viewed as "holding parents at arms length" (Davies, 1996, p.44). Parents do not want to be held at arms length, rather they expect to have the final word and feel competent making school decisions: "More than 70% of the parents agreed that they should have the final word in decisions about their children's education, but only 22% of the administrators concurred." In addition, "Only 34% of parents interviewed felt they *did not* have adequate training to participate in school decision-making, while over 81% of superintendents and 72% of school board presidents felt parents *did not* have adequate training" (Chavkin & Williams, 1987, p. 178). Reasons for a lack of funds to sustain programs include cost-conscious school boards and legislators who are not easily convinced of the importance of the programs, and as a result, relinquish funds which often support such programs (Jennings, 1990a).

Some state government officials are going to the extreme by threatening parents with fines, jail sentences, and cutbacks in welfare payments if they are not involved in their children's education. Arkansas, Maryland, Mississippi, and Texas have made such threats to parents who do not attend disciplinary or parent-teacher conferences. In Wisconsin, parents who fail to control their children's behavior or whose adolescents do not attend school regularly receive decreased welfare payments (Jennings, 1990b).

Penalizing parents, especially through monetary avenues, sets up more barriers between parents and educators. Coordinator of the Los Angeles Unified School District's student-discipline-proceedings office, Hector Madrigal, feels penalties like these do more harm than good, providing yet another obstacle in poverty-stricken parent's efforts to survive. He states, "One law is not going to reconstruct a family with a homicidal father and a drug-addicted mother, who is in a gang, to make them better parents" (Jennings, 1990b, p. 30).

"Whether barriers to a productive partnership are school-based, parent-based, or a combination, they restrict the use of problem-solving strategies and detract from child's quality of education" (Christenson & Cleary, 1990, p. 241). The barriers explored in this section must be recognized by schools and systematic efforts should be made to assess what barriers currently exist before positive relations can be established between schools and all families.



## Chapter 4

The purpose of this chapter is to explore ways teachers can work effectively with all families. I believe a blueprint for the perfect parent participation program which works with all families and educators does not exist. The practices and strategies educators use to communicate with all families depends on the uniqueness and diversity of the people in these families. Prescriptive programs are often based on false assumptions about the people involved, which is counterproductive to meeting the ultimate goal of establishing positive relations between home and school. It is not enough to say traditional practices are appropriate or not. Instead, we should keep what works, make changes in those that do not so that they will work, and create innovative techniques when needed.

A positive attitude about parent participation is an important element of a philosophical framework that works from the belief that parents and educators share responsibility in children's education. It is not enough only to have a positive attitude toward parents and parent involvement in general. A positive attitude does not necessarily translate into utilization of innovative, effective communication techniques between parents and educators. For example, teachers in the Follow-Through program (the transition program from Head Start into the early grades) were surveyed to find out their attitudes and the practices they used to communicate with parents.

Although teachers' attitudes towards parental involvement and family strengths were positive, averaging 3.22 on a 4 point scale, the Follow-Through teachers relied on traditional approaches such as writing memos and relied less on direct approaches for communication, such as making home visits (Jones, White, Benson & Aeby, 1995). Educators need to be aware of ways to adapt traditional practices in order to have success in building positive relations with all families.

This chapter is intended to direct educator practices and behaviors in developing a positive relationship with all families. My views have emerged as a synthesis of what I have read, written about, and experienced when working with parents and their children. This section begins with some fundamental belief statements which will guide my future efforts in building positive relations with all families. Next, I offer options to educators for adapting traditional home-school communication practices to meet the needs of all families.

#### Fundamental Beliefs about Home and School Relations

1. All parents care about their children's education and are the first real educators of their children, having a wealth of knowledge to contribute about their child.
2. Educators should work toward developing an on-going, positive relationship with all parents.
3. It is the educator's responsibility to make the first move in contacting all parents, realizing that all parents can be difficult to contact at any given time for a variety of reasons.

4. Traditional communication practices should be continued when they are effective with families; however, educators must develop adaptations of traditional practices and create new options for use with other families.

5. In order for parents to participate fully in their children's education, the school should provide an atmosphere which is welcoming and inviting to parents.

Adapting traditional practices: Strategies for communicating with all parents

This section describes traditional school practices used to communicate with parents and provides options to these practices. The options can be used in addition to the traditional practices, not necessarily replacing them, as there are effective traditional strategies that work for many parents.

Initiating and Familiarizing Techniques

Definition: Schools typically have methods for making contact with parents before school begins or at the beginning of the school year to inform parents about policies, procedures, and any other important information they want them to know about the school. Other practices and characteristics of the school facility may also be in place to familiarize parents with the school in general.

Schools traditionally use the open house, district newsletters and handbooks, and policies for parent visitation in the school for making these initial contacts with parents. Open houses are usually held within the first month of school

with the purpose of hosting an informal parent visitation of the child's school and classroom. This event is typically planned and run by the school staff. Newsletters and district handbooks traditionally include information about school policies, procedures, and expectations the schools have about parents and their children's behavior and come in the form of a booklet or multi-page newsletter.

### Adaptations of Traditional Practices:

#### 1. The Open House

Parents can participate in the open house event "on a more structured level" (Jenkins, 1981, p. 22). Schools can encourage parents to act as hosts during the open house and include these hosts in the planning of the event, rather than keeping them separate from the facilitation and planning of the open house.

Ribas (1992) gives teacher insight into other alternatives which match my fundamental belief that it is the educator's responsibility to make the first move in contacting all parents. Instead of waiting for the open house to meet parents, teachers and parents can become acquainted at the end of the current school year by inviting them in to discuss any concerns the parent may have about the upcoming year. They can also invite parents along with their children into their classrooms the last week in August while they get rooms ready. These invitations can help parents know what to expect the first few weeks of school the upcoming year as well as giving them the opportunity to express their own concerns and questions ahead of time. Teachers who have

experienced these options to the open house reported that trust was built as parents knew ahead of time what to expect.

Home visits are an option educators can use to work toward meeting the fundamental belief in developing an on-going, positive relationship with all parents. Home visits can help educators establish trust between themselves and parents in an atmosphere which is more comfortable for parents than at school (Nelson, 1994). In addition, home visits provide parents with the opportunity to ask questions and gain insight into what can be expected at school. Epstein (1982) provides variations of home visits:

1. Visits are arranged voluntarily by teachers and parents or formally by the school administration on weekends or before the beginning of the school year.

2. Teachers are given release time to make home visits while substitutes are hired to cover their classes, or half-days are scheduled for children so teachers can visit during the afternoons.

3. During the first week of school, half-days are scheduled for first graders and the afternoon is dedicated to teachers making a 20 minute visit to each household.

## 2. Newsletters/District Handbooks

Written materials sent home can be very effective for many parents, but can also provide a barrier to positive relations if parents are not literate in reading English. Kahn (1987) suggests using the Parent Teacher Organization as a "channel of communication...by planning special meetings for them in their own language so that they feel welcome in

the school and become aware of the standards for their children in the school" (p.11).

School districts can mail attractive wall calendars annually to every family or even every household in the community which includes information about school policies, personnel, important telephone numbers, and key events and holidays (Henderson, Marburger, & Ooms, 1987). Families and community members are more likely to notice this information when packaged in an attractive, useful format such as in a calendar rather than a handbook or school policy manual. An additional adaptation of this calendar is to publish it in the different languages of the community so that all people are informed and included. Finally, a sheet or section may be included in the calendar which can be removed and returned to the school with questions and comments families and community members may have (idea adapted from Henderson, Marburger, & Ooms, 1987).

Rather than telling parents what the school's goals and policies are, invite parents to contribute what they feel is important in their children's education. Try using surveys to find out what their goals are for their children (Kahn, 1987). In the National Education Association Teacher-to-Teacher series Building Parent Partnerships (1996, p. 54), a parent survey is provided which could be adapted to fit a school's needs and its parents' population.

### 3. Visitation Policies

In order for parents to participate fully in their children's education, the school should provide an atmosphere which is welcoming and inviting to parents. Principals can establish a parent room as a way of sending the message that parents are part of the school environment. The room may be operated by a paid staff of parents funded through Chapter 1 or other federal and state program funds. Telephones, coffee pots and hot water for tea, comfortable furniture and magazines would be provided. Purposes and potential activities of this parent room are numerous:

1. Welcoming other parents who visit the school and providing phones for those who do not have them.
2. The parent-hosts can guide tours and orientations for new families and others visiting the school for the first time.
3. A place to hold adult services: GED and ESL classes, support groups, breakfasts, referral services, lending libraries of educational toys, immunization services. (Heleen, 1992; Henderson, Marburger, & Ooms, 1987; Jenkins, 1981). Creating a place parents can call their own in schools can help them become familiar with the building, have a minimizing effect on parents' negative attitudes toward school, and help them notice that the school staff is accessible (Jenkins, 1981).

Signs posted at school entrances that say "Parents and Visitors are Welcome" sends a more positive message than the traditional "Visitors check-in at the main office" message.

The former communicates to parents that "every aspect of the school climate is open, helpful, and friendly" (Henderson, Marburger, & Ooms, 1987, p. 12). To assess whether or not a school provides a welcoming atmosphere, a survey of school staff and parents could be administered. A sample survey is provided in the National Education Association Teacher-to-Teacher book Building Parent Partnerships, (1996, p. 92).

#### At Home Learning Activities

##### Definition:

Educators typically have some sort of formalized program in which they encourage parents to work on specific learning activities at home. These activities are traditionally teacher-directed, from the school to the home. Teachers might encourage parents to read with their children on a regular basis, or they may have a collection of ready-made enrichment or skill-building packets or worksheets for parents to work with their children at home.

##### Adaptations of Traditional Practices:

###### 1. Reading with the child and teacher prepared enrichment activities sent home

Instead of forcing the school curricula on parents, which has proven to be a mismatch for many family practices and ways of learning (Heath, 1983) the home and school curricula can be interdependent so children can learn in two cooperative settings (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Moll & Gonzalez, 1994). This strategy is based on the fundamental belief that all parents care about their children's education and are the



first real educators of their children, having a wealth of knowledge to contribute about their child. Parents can be made to be coteachers by incorporating family history, foods, recreation and occupations into the curriculum. Languages, heritages, and cultural commonalities and differences are appreciated when children can see these things valued in the classroom (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Gallimore & Goldenberg, 1996).

Technology can be used to meet the goal of bringing home and school closer together. One teacher created a project using audio cassette recorders and audio tapes which could be used as a means for incorporating family attributes into the curricula (Epstein & Becker, 1982). This teacher stepped outside of the traditional "materials made in school are used at home" practice (p. 110) by developing a way in which materials made at home could be used at school in a "read along with the family" project. Books and a tape recorder were sent home for family members to tape record the child's favorite book or story. The tapes are sent back to school so the children can listen to them in class and do activities to go with the tape.

Television is another form of media which can enhance literacy learning and connect home and school experiences. Educators can adapt practices used in the Sesame Street Preschool Education Program (Sroka, Betancourt, & Ozaeta, 1995) to the classroom. This particular program was designed to help build better communication between child care providers and parents. The same goal could be applied to the

classroom. Some suggestions made by participants in the program include:

1. Select television and video programming content that reinforces and extends your program's educational goals.
2. Prerecord appropriate TV segments..that supplement the goals of your curriculum. This will allow you to review the content, design ways to engage children in viewing the segment, and select a children's book that will highlight the goal of the segment....Invite families to...participate in these activities so you can model for them appropriate use of educational TV, quality children's book reading, and related activities
3. Create a video library. Build a collection of educational videos that can be used by...families. Organize these around themes....Themed tapes can help you introduce more abstract concepts that may otherwise be difficult to explain, such as ethnic diversity.
4. Lend the tapes and books to families....Include suggestions for simple activities that take advantage of everyday teachable moments (for example, neighborhood walks, household activities, shopping).
5. Encourage reading in all languages. Inquire about the languages and dialects spoken in the children's homes. To the extent possible, provide books and reading experiences that reflect the languages with which your children are familiar (p. 203-203).

Additionally, educators could model a similar program that could be used with the child care providers the children visit after school. In my experiences, a large percentage of the children attending the rural school in which I worked attended the same child care after school. This program could be a method for helping children engage in literacy experiences with an adult and other children within the contexts of their families' busy lives.

#### Reporting Progress:

Definition: Educators typically have a system for keeping parents informed about their children's progress in schoolwork such as sending home report cards at each quarter which contain information as to whether or not the child is working at a satisfactory level in academic areas.

Schools also traditionally conduct two or three parent-teacher conferences during the school year in which teachers meet with parents individually to report progress. These conferences are traditionally teacher-directed as the teacher verbalizes to the parent in an individual meeting concerns about the child and his or her academic progress. Other teachers may also ask parents to sign a paper or folder after looking over daily or weekly work to report progress (Epstein & Becker, 1982).

## Adaptations of Traditional Practices:

### 1. Report Cards

Traditional report cards typically include a check-mark system of categories labeled excellent, satisfactory, and unsatisfactory or are composed of letter grades and a space for a comment. These grades are teacher-given, and comments come from the teacher. An adaptation which would give parents and children a chance to be included in evaluation and reflection is through portfolios.

Portfolios "can serve a variety of purposes, and, as a result, they can take many different forms" (Wolf & Siu-Runyan, 1996; p. 36). For the purposes of including parents and children in the process of evaluation and reflection, Wolf & Siu-Runyan offer a suitable definition: "A selective collection of student work and records of progress gathered across diverse contexts of time, framed by reflection and enriched through collaboration, that has as its aim the advancement of student learning" (p. 31).

A school in which I taught provides an example of how portfolios can be used in addition to the traditional report cards to include parents in the evaluation and reflection of children's learning. Pizza boxes were donated by a community pizza parlor as the container for the collection of student work; thus, the portfolios became a community investment. Portfolios were sent home with children biannually in addition to report cards. A form was included that was to be completed by the child's care giver. This form invited parents to write two positive comments to their child and

his/her teacher about the child's work, and provided an opportunity for the parent to communicate one area in which they desired improvement.

## 2. Parent-Teacher Conferences

"Conferences...should be more than verbal report cards" (Chrispeels, 1988, p. 84). Educators giving advice about successful conferences have suggested sending an agenda to parents at least two weeks ahead of time listing topics the teacher will cover as well as providing a list of questions the parents might like to ask (Chrispeels, 1988).

In light of the research that states teachers should not talk more than 50% of the time while meeting with parents (Berger, 1994), a tear-off portion could be included in which parents can write their own questions and topics they would like to cover at the conference. The teacher-provided list of suggestions would help those parents who may need help thinking about what to ask, and the blank tear-off portion gives parents who have something to ask the power to guide the conference.

Another option to the traditional parent-teacher conference is to hold a "planning conference" early in the year to ask parents to share what goals they have selected for their child. Prior to this meeting, teachers would assess the child's strengths and needs, collect work samples and anecdotal records, and organize them to help demonstrate to parents the goals they have in mind for the child.

At the planning conference, parents would be invited to share their goals for their children and teachers would use the data collected to relate anecdotes "which clarify, support, or alter the goals....This provides a transition into a discussion of the priority goals selected by the teacher and the determination of mutually agreed upon goals" (Bjorklund & Burger, 1987, p. 30). Discussion might lead to how these goals could best be met within school and home contexts, further enhancing the home-school learning connection.

When meeting with parents, avoid using educational jargon which they may not understand as this may give an impression that the teacher is "above their level" (Bjorklund & Burger, 1987). Chrispeels (1988) offers other important considerations for meeting the needs of all families:

1. If parents live separately, be sure both receive information and clarify who will be attending the conference.
2. As a school, arrange for babysitting so parents can attend the conference without distractions. Having a comfortable place where parents can wait adds a welcoming touch. While parents are waiting, ask them to fill out a questionnaire about their satisfaction with school programs.
3. Arrange for a translator and let parents know a translator will be available if needed.
4. Negotiate the best times for parents who have several children at the school or who have conflicting work

schedules (p. 85).

In addition to providing parents the opportunity to fill out a questionnaire about their satisfaction with school programs, parents should be invited to evaluate the conference as well.

### 3. Signing papers or folders of student work

A system which encourages more than just a parent signature is keeping an on-going dialogue through journal writing about student progress or literacy experiences. Parents and teachers engage in two-way communication through written conversation about children's behaviors and academic progress at school as well as at home (Epstein, 1982; Lazar & Weisberg, 1996; Paratore, 1995). The journal could be sent home daily or weekly with anecdotes about the learning process a child is going through at school. The parent would read the anecdotes, and respond with any comments or observations of learning occurring at home. The child could also be included by writing a reflection statement about their learning each week. To bridge the gap between home and school for those families whose literacy practices differ than those of school, parents could journal about any shared literacy experiences that occurred at home such as reading the Bible or telling a story (Paratore, 1995).

The form included in the portfolios discussed in the previous section could be applied to the journals. For example, a parent could respond to the journal each month by making two positive statements about the child's learning or

literacy experiences that month, and one wish for improvement in the future. This would empower parents to be a part of the child's learning as teachers and parents could check to see if their goals for children are similar to each other.

#### Parent Education Workshops:

Definition: Parent education workshops are traditionally based on ways of telling parents that their involvement is important and telling them what to do to be involved (Edwards, 1992; Epstein, 1988). For example, educators tell parents to take their children to the library, but are not shown how to share a book with a child. While we need to *focus on parent strengths*, research has illustrated that educators cannot take for granted that parents know how to share books with their children as "Twenty-seven million Americans can't read a bedtime story to a child" (Chall, Heron & Hilferty, 1987 cited in Edwards, 1992).

#### Adaptations of Traditional Practices:

Edwards (1992) argues for a fresh look at how we communicate with parents and encourages educators to make a shift from telling parents that their involvement is important to showing them how to do it. Epstein (1988) takes it a step further and states we should give specific guidance in how to do so. This is where it can get "tricky" as Auerbach (1989) cautions against transmitting school practices onto parents. Many traditional parent workshop formats follow a transmission model, which is based on the idea that parents are lacking in knowledge or there is something wrong with the family that needs to be fixed by the



information in the workshop. A strategy which can help schools avoid falling into false mind sets about families is to let parents select the topics of workshops depending on what they felt was important to them or wanted to discuss (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991).

Adaptations can also be made in the way parents are informed about the workshops. Educators should think of innovative yet practical ways of helping parents participate in their children's education. When recruitment is community based, participation can flourish (Paratore, 1995). Researchers who have been involved in parent workshops think of those community members that parents come in contact with outside of the school context and utilize these people. Clergy, health professionals, and community leaders are people educators should include in the recruitment of parents (Edwards, 1992; Paratore, 1995).

Both Paratore (1995) and Edwards (1992) utilized clergy to spread the word about parent workshops. The ministers preached about how important it was to attend the sessions and used the church bulletin to support their sermons. A bar owner ended up being a very strong advocate for parent participation by attending all of the sessions and "told mothers who patronized his establishment that they would no longer be welcome unless they put as much time into learning how to read to their children as they spent enjoying themselves at his bar" (Edwards, 1992, p.352-353). His support did not end there as he transported mothers to school to participate and back home again, and worked with the

social services department to secure child care.

The same philosophy applies here about creating a parent workshop as the statement made earlier in this chapter about creating a blueprint for the perfect parent participation program. The direction and format of a parent workshop depends on the individuals involved and their particular concerns and desires at that moment. Surveys, needs assessments and listening to what parents say are all methods for finding out what it is that parents want from schools.

#### Teacher Training:

Administrators, teachers, and parents all agree that there is a need for teacher training in working with parents (Chavkin & Williams, 1987). This is particularly important when considering that the teaching force is becoming more homogeneously white as the minority student population makes up the majority in 23 of 25 largest U.S. cities (Delpit, 1988). Research has suggested that white teachers in urban settings may set up barriers by not understanding or appreciating student cultures which differ from theirs (Jenkins, 1981). Edwards (1992) provides a solution to this concern as evidenced in a weekly literacy learning course geared to educate teachers about the multiple literacy environments and learning styles of African-American students. Teachers read core research and engaged in discussions that helped challenge and question their current beliefs about parents and their children.

Chavkin & Williams (1987) also developed a prototype for inservice training for preservice and practicing teachers after extensive interviews of parents, administrators, teachers, and teacher educators. Components included personal, practical, and conceptual frameworks:

*A personal framework* focuses on teachers' knowledge about their own beliefs and values, their understanding of the school, their comprehension of the diversity within the community, and the importance of individual differences among parents.

The *practical framework* contains information about various models of parent involvement, effective methods, interpersonal communication skills, and potential problems in developing parent involvement programs.

The *conceptual framework* highlights the theories, research, history, and developmental nature of parent involvement. (p. 88)

First, a needs assessment of practicing teachers could be used to determine what parent participation course work would have been desirable in their educational training. Depending on results, a required course in parent relations or offering it as an elective is one way the Chavkin & Williams framework could be utilized. If providing a separate course is not feasible, elements could be integrated into existing course work such as requiring preservice teachers to interview practicing teachers who are exemplary in maintaining positive relations with families, and requiring them to speak with parents who work with these teachers to

gain further insight.

Berger's Parents as Partners in Education (1994, p. 124-125) includes a teacher self-assessment tool which could be used as part of this inservice training or to help individual teachers. It assesses how educators see themselves compared with how they wished they were in terms of parent participation practices.

The adaptations made to the traditional practices in this chapter are intended to help educators communicate with all families which will result in better relationships with the parents of the children they teach. Most of the adaptations transform school-to-home communication practice into reciprocal communication opportunities between home and school. This may entail making a paradigm shift in an educator's basic philosophy of what the relationship should be between themselves and parents. Educators may have to evaluate their own fundamental beliefs about home and school relations before they can accept the adaptations suggested in this chapter. Regardless of what practices are used to communicate with parents, educators should strive to build a positive relationship with all families, and search for ways that this goal can be met.

## Chapter 5

### Conclusions

Research has established the benefits for all stakeholders when parents are invited to participate in their children's education. When parents are involved in their children's education, parents, teachers, and children profit. Children's test scores, attitudes, and behaviors improve, and parents increase their understanding of the functions of schools and recognize teachers as more effective (Christenson & Cleary, 1990; Henderson, 1988). Teachers experience increased professional satisfaction and receive higher teacher evaluation scores by principals (Christenson & Cleary, 1990; Dye, 1989).

Although the benefits of parent participation in schools have been identified, there are opposing perspectives as to what is the most appropriate relationship between educators and parents (Epstein, 1986). Educators and parents can ally themselves in a perspective which believes the two should remain separate or when communication does occur, it is the school which disseminates information to the parents. The contrasting perspective includes educators and parents who believe there should be two-way communication between home and school, as the two stakeholders share responsibility in the child's education.

The two opposing philosophies influence how educators communicate with parents. Traditional practices are used by educators who feel the same strategies are effective for all parents. Traditional practices follow a Transmission-of-School-Practices model (Auerbach, 1989) in which information is coming from the teacher to the parent, usually informing the parent what they should do differently or additionally. Nontraditional practices are used by educators who believe it is their duty to communicate with all parents, and that adaptations must be made to existing parent involvement strategies to meet this goal.

When existing strategies fail or sufficient efforts are not made to try to build positive relations with parents, barriers are created between parents and schools. Barriers exist between home and school as a result of such factors as lack of teacher training in parent involvement, time constraints, and poor school climate and administrative support (Chavkin, 1989; Fredericks & Rasinski, 1990). In addition, inaccurate assumptions based on a deficit view of families, set up barriers. The home is viewed as deficient in certain areas which can be fixed by school practices. (Auerbach, 1989).

An inability to communicate effectively with parents may be a result of lack of teacher training and knowledge as very few teacher education institutions (with the exception of Early Childhood and Special Education teacher education programs) or school districts include preparation for working with parents (Comer, 1986; Jennings, 1990a). Many educators

acknowledge the importance of being able to communicate effectively with parents and are frustrated by the lack of training opportunities provided to them (Chavkin, 1989; Ribas, 1992).

Barriers to positive parent and educator relationships need to be identified so schools can evaluate how they can better meet the needs of the families they work with. Once this is accomplished, educators can examine the practices that are already in place and adapt them into more innovative and effective communication techniques. Educators can use the suggestions in Chapter 4 which target the traditional parent communication practices typically used in schools. These suggestions provide adaptations of initiating and familiarizing techniques, at-home learning activities, reporting progress, parent education workshops, and teacher training.

#### Implications

Is it enough for educators to have explored their own beliefs and identified the barriers that can get in the way of building positive relations with all families? Identifying fundamental beliefs and barriers is a start; however, research indicates that educators must take action; they must make the first move to encourage parents to participate in schools (Epstein, 1988; Ribas, 1992). When educators are able to examine the effectiveness of a school's current practices for communicating with parents, then they can adapt the techniques to make them more effective. Traditional approaches work for many families; however, one cannot assume

that the practices are a match for all parents.

Time, funding, administrator support and a shift from false assumptions made about parents to positive and informed knowledge about parents are the elements needed in creating effective parent participation efforts. The goal is to use whatever techniques possible to communicate effectively with all families.

#### Ideas for future research

There appears to be much discussion as to what is wrong with traditional practices as well as emphasizing how these practices are mismatched with many ethnically and linguistically diverse populations.

A review of the literature reveals that there is a need for evidence of more innovative parent participation practices (with the exception of the current focus on family literacy) and the effects these nontraditional practices have on home and school relationships as well as student learning.

Teachers, whether preservice or practicing, need training in how to work with parents. Educators are faced with a challenge as administrators expect them to know how to communicate effectively with parents, even though they have not received preparation in teacher education programs in how to do so. In response to this challenge, it is imperative that time for training teachers and planning communication efforts must be scheduled. Regular teacher education programs could adapt the Early Childhood and Special Education models of training teachers in home and school relations. Effects of this training and how to incorporate course work in



undergraduate teacher education programs is an area that needs future study. Survey results of preservice teachers' views about parent involvement could be compared before and after student teaching or before and after they entered the education program at a college or university. Results may indicate what influenced them in their perspectives about parent involvement. This data could aid teacher education programs in creating undergraduate course work.

Having identified the mismatches and pointed out the problems with traditional practices, what do we do now? There should be more attention focused on how we can communicate and collaborate with all families. Educators making false assumptions about parent groups need to be informed so as to shift their attention to the realities of families. Educators should turn their emphasis on home strengths, asking how they can build positive relations with all families.

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