Parental Involvement and Student Success

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By

Nicholas Riorden
# Table of contents

Table of Illustrations...........................................................................................................ii

Chapter I: Introduction ........................................................................................................1

Chapter II: Literature Review .............................................................................................8

  The Value of Parental Involvement ..................................................................................8

  Barriers to Parental Involvement ....................................................................................10

  Engaging parents in the Educational Process .................................................................15

  Developing Meaningful Parent-Teacher Relationships ....................................................23

Chapter III: Applications and Evaluation ........................................................................26

Chapter IV: Results ............................................................................................................33

Chapter V: Conclusions and Recommendations ..............................................................48

Chapter VI: Appendices .....................................................................................................59

  Appendix A.....................................................................................................................61

  Appendix B.....................................................................................................................62

  Appendix C.....................................................................................................................63

  Appendix D.....................................................................................................................64

  Appendix E.....................................................................................................................65
Table of Illustrations

Table 1: Home-School Communication ................................................ 35
Table 2: Current Level of Communication from School ......................... 36
Table 3: Preferred Level of Contact from School .................................. 37
Table 4: Preferred form of Contact ...................................................... 38
Table 5: Participation in Meetings ....................................................... 40
Table 6: Parents Becoming Involved ..................................................... 42
Table 7: Barriers to Parental Involvement ............................................. 43
Table 8: Current Home-School Communication ..................................... 46
Table 9: Current Level of Communication from School Post Survey ........... 47
Chapter 1: Introduction

Problem Statement

When I think about teaching it is hard to imagine trying to educate a child without having some sort of support from their parents. Unfortunately, my colleagues and I have had difficulty engaging parents in the classroom. That bond between teachers and parents is missing from many of our classrooms today. Parents and teachers cannot rely solely on a report card or progress reports to communicate how a child is doing. There should be more frequent feedback of some sort or some type of conversation between teachers and parents. Education does not begin and end in the classroom. Harris and Goodall agree that it is what parents do to support learning in the school and in the home that makes the difference in achievement in school (Harris & Goodall, 2007). It is clear that without some sort of parental support, children may suffer academic, social, and moral failure at a higher rate than children who have active parents in their education. Ultimately it is up to the teachers to establish and maintain positive relationships between home and school.

The main purpose of this action-research project was to discover what parents think about their overall relationship with their children’s school and then use this information to build stronger relationships with them. I wanted to find new and meaningful approaches that would get parents more involved in their children’s education. I was also determined to review successful literature that has already been completed in the field and decide how to implement that into my classroom. Some of my questions for this study included: What are parents’ initial perceptions of their
communication with their children’s school? How do I improve the parents’ perceptions of the school? How do I get the parents more involved in the education of their children and how do I maintain this involvement? These questions would hopefully give me a better idea as to how parents view their role between home and their child’s school. I also wanted to see what type of work and programs needed to be put into effect in order to increase the amount of involvement parents have with their children’s school. I hoped to gain essential knowledge needed to bridge the gap between parent-school communications and overall involvement in the education of their child. Past research has focused on this topic but I felt like this type of research should be done within each school district because each district has its own needs. Past and present research about the need for improved parent-school communication has given many recommendations but I believe few have been very successful and most have been subjective.

Background of the Problem

Communication between parents and teachers is known to be critical to the success of a child’s academic and social growth. Research has been completed on different aspects of parental involvement in children’s education and every conclusion points to the need for stronger parent-teacher relationships. However, research still shows both teachers and parents believe there is a lack of communication on many levels. Unfortunately this disconnection between schools and parents causes children to suffer in the long run. Teaching today’s youth is already very difficult with a strong backing from parents. But, without parents’ support, educators know their influence is even more limited (Lickona, 1998).
Theory and research have emphasized that positive relationships between students and parents generally increase school engagement, motivation, adjustment, achievement, and behavior (Chen, 2009). One can only question why this issue still exists when there such an abundance of research in front of parents and educators. Could all this be due to a lack of back and fourth conversation between the teachers and parents? Fingers generally point in opposite directions. With this said, countless questions can be posed when looking at this dilemma. First one must look at the causes of the problem in order to try develop find some sort of solution.

Barriers exist between schools and parents that are stopping parents from becoming engaged in the schools. It can be difficult for parents to remain involved in the lives of their early adolescent children given the complexity of modern life, the nature of early adolescent development, and the impersonal environments of many modern schools (Chen, 2009). Cultural differences also form a barricade in the communication between parents and schools. Despite the many known advantages to parental involvement, research indicates that weak connections exist between African American parents and the educational system. Brandon claimed that African-American parents have been known to isolate themselves from their child’s school for various cultural reasons. Many of these parents encounter personal, cultural, and structural barriers that cause them to be isolated or alienated from the school system (Brandon, 2007). The isolation or alienation can result in a lack of participation in the child’s education. Brandon also argues that because of this lack of connection, parents may be suspicious of the educational institution and confuse teaching with learning, grade advancement with education, and a diploma with competence (2007).
Other parents have had poor experiences with school when they were children, leaving them with an overall negative outlook on the whole thought of school in general. Raffaele and Knoff back up this idea by stating that some parents have experienced educational failure themselves and do not trust that teachers have their children’s best interests at heart (Raffaele & Knoff, 1999). Harris and Goodall noted that one of the most cited reasons for parents not being involved in schooling is work commitments. Lack of time and childcare difficulties seem to be significant factors, predominately for women and those working full-time (Harris and Goodall, 2009). Parents see the main limitations to engagement in education coming from the demands of their time in other areas of their lives and finding time to make it to parent nights at school just fails to be top priority when they have other concerns. There are many reasons that can be used to explain why this problem exists. Whatever the reasons may be, parents and teachers need to find a way to collaborate in order to meet the needs of the children.

There is a wealth of support that suggests parental engagement in a child’s education positively influences student achievement and attainment. The benefits of parental involvement extend beyond literacy and educational achievement. Studies show that children whose parents are involved show greater social and emotional development as well. This includes more resilience to stress, greater life satisfaction, greater self-direction and self-control, greater social adjustment, greater mental health, more supportive relationships, greater social competence, more positive peer relations, more tolerance, more successful marriages, and less delinquent behaviors (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003). Harris and Goodall back Desforges and
Abouchaar in a recent review of early childhood literature by stating that engaging parents in school at an early stage leads to more positive engagement in the learning processes. The importance of parents’ educational attitudes and behaviors on a child’s educational attainment has also been well documented (2009).

Teachers often assume or pass judgment as to why a parent is not participating in their children’s lives. Rafaele and Knoff describe how some educators view parents by saying when parents do not engage in cooperative problem-solving with school personnel, it is often presumed that they are unable to participate or uninterested in doing so. They state that some educators even draw the conclusion that these parents are simply not interested in their children’s education (Rafaele & Knoff, 1999). I took a look at the parents of an urban elementary school district in upstate New York and tried to uncover what the parents thought about their overall communication with their children’s school. I also tried to discover ways in which I could improve their overall connectedness with the school. Overall, there is a lot of speculation as to why parents are not more involved and it was my aim to try and find out a cause for my particular classroom parents and implement a plan to improve parental involvement. My aim was to capture the voices of parents and students in a serious and authentic way.

Significance of Problem

I teach in an urban elementary school. Parental engagement in the schooling of children has been a problem since I began teaching. I have been having trouble getting parents involved in all aspects of education. The most involved parents tend
to have the most well behaved children in my classroom. Their children are, for the most part, attentive in class, participate in discussions, complete homework and classroom assignments, and follow directions better than students who have parents less involved. Students with parents who are hard to reach and/or show a general lack of interest in the classroom tend to have the most difficult children for teachers to work with. The engagement of the children is known to be weak at best. They are often in trouble with the administration and disruptive to the educational process. Often times, these children have a very difficult time getting along with other students in the classroom. So it is obvious to me that I had to find a way to get parents more involved with their child’s education.

With this said, I wanted to find a way to make my classroom and perhaps my colleagues’ classrooms a better learning environment. Not only has this been a problem of mine but a problem of many other teachers in my building; however, my particular school has a school based planning team that has been trying to bring about change when it comes to parental involvement. Perhaps my study could lend support for some of this change. Overall, I felt that my school was not very successful in improving parental involvement. My school has had many parent involvement nights with incentives for coming; however, the overall turnout is rarely what is desired. It was my intention to increase the overall involvement of the parents in my classroom. I would have been especially gratified if some of my most disengaged parents became more involved in the classroom.
Rationale

Through an increased effort on my part and a revamped parental involvement program I believed that the participation of parents in my classroom would improve greatly. As stated before, teachers cannot be the only individuals trying to produce successful students. Parents, educators, administrators, and all other school personnel need to come together to ensure that a child is completely developed.

This research project was supposed to help me gain a better insight as to what works and what does not work when trying to engage more parents in my classroom. My plan was to share the results of this study with my colleagues, PTA, School Based Planning Team, and administration. Having most, if not, all parents in my classroom completely involved with their child’s education may not seem feasible, but increasing the involvement of some is more than possible.

Definition of Terms

Communication – is any type of contact between parents and schools. This can be through letters, notes, phone calls, parent-teacher conferences, or emails.

School engagement – the extent that parents and students are involved, connected, and committed to school.
Chapter II: Literature Review

The Value of Parental Engagement

Forming a link between a child’s home, school, and community is the answer to promoting academic success. Epstein and Jansom claim that “students who succeed in school are almost always supported by their families, while other students struggle without support from home” (Epstein & Jansom, 2004, p. 19). Over the past decade researchers have spent a large amount of time putting together studies analyzing the importance of parental involvement. The general consensus among researchers is that parental involvement plays a major factor when looking at most areas of student success. Engaging families in the education of their children at home and at school is increasingly viewed as an important means to support better learning outcomes for children (Epstein & Jansom, 2004). Research has documented the value of parent involvement in early childhood education and its relationship to positive outcomes for children (Fantuzzo, Perry, & Childs 2006).

Students of all ages and economic backgrounds are likely to benefit from parents engaged in their children’s education in both their academic skills and their social-behavioral profile (Antonopoulou, Koutrouba, Tsitsas, & Zenakou, 2009). Anne T. Henderson, a senior consultant with the Community Involvement Program at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, and Karen L. Mapp, a lecturer on education at Harvard and former Deputy Superintendent for Family and Community Engagement in Boston have spent countless hours of research explaining why school-
family relationships improve children’s education. They indicated that strong bonds between families and schools will improve these areas:

- Student achievement will increase
- Students will have higher ambitions
- Attendance rates will increase
- Students will display positive attitudes and behavior
- Children will also show a readiness to do homework
- An increase in student time spent with parents
- The length of time students stay in school increases
- Teachers feel more effective
- Parental ratings of schools increase
- Students strive to increase their independence
- Teachers generally have better perceptions of parent effectiveness (Henderson & Mapp, 2002, p. 13).

This list is in no way comprehensive but it implies that there is a strong urgency to increase parental involvement.

Parental involvement does not just impact student growth it also impacts a teacher’s well being. Family-school collaboration benefits teachers given the fact that teachers and parents are considered to be mutual partners from an educational point of view. For instance, Cooper and Ryan explained that home-school collaboration helps teachers to be confident, feel accepted and rewarded, hold high levels of job satisfaction, and show a positive attitude to community initiatives (as cited in Antonopoulou et al., 2009). When parents and teachers are communicating positively on a regular basis teachers are generally more capable of forming a better understanding of the needs of all the children in their class and are more likely to meet the children’s needs (Antonopoulou et al., 2009).
Schools that promote parental involvement tend to receive positive reviews from the community, implement a variety of flexible involvement programs, and show their commitment towards strengthening parent and community collaboration (Koutrouba et al., 2009). Joyce L. Epstein, the director of the Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships of the National Network of Partnership Schools at John Hopkins University, is a major researcher on creating effective family, school, and community bonds (Epstein, 2004). As quoted by Epstein (2004):

The way schools care about children is reflected in the way schools care about the children’s families. If the educators view children simply as students, they are likely to see the family as separate from the school. That is, the family is expected to do its job and leave the education of children to the schools. If educators view the students as children, they are likely to see both the family and the community as partners with the school in children’s education and development. Partners recognize their shared interests in and responsibilities for children, and they work together to create better programs and opportunities for students (p. 701).

The value of parental engagement is multifaceted. Not only does it impact student achievement and social-behavior but it also positively impacts teachers, schools, and parents as well. Unfortunately, it is not always easy to form that positive link between parents and teachers. The barriers to parental engagement are abundant.

**Barriers to Parental Engagement**

With so much research pointing to the positives of parental involvement in school it is a wonder why progress has been so limited. Why do educators still cite a lack of parental support? Barriers of parental engagement have been studied repeatedly in educational research. Findings generally repeat themselves on various
levels. Trying to understand the accumulation of variables entangling the whole of family-school relationships and their impact on learning is a difficult and complex mission (Harris & Goodall, 2008).

Harris and Goodall make a compelling argument in stating that the levels of engagement vary greatly depending on the parents and the situation in which they find themselves (2008). A major factor influencing parental engagement is socio-economic status, whether classified by occupational class or parental level of education. Study after study has shown that socio-economic status arbitrates both parental engagement and pupil achievement. Parents with lower socio-economic status and lower educational achievement while they were in school generally leads to a lack of engagement in their own child’s educational setting (Harris & Goodall, 2008).

Socio-economic status plays a role in the lives of all individuals regardless of economic class. It tends to impact the lower class more so than the higher class. Children of parents in the lower socio-economic status generally perform much lower than children of parents with higher socio-economic status (Harris & Goodall, 2008). Parents of lower class status deal with the problems that come with being of a lower class. They are cornered into lower paying jobs that involve working overtime just to meet the daily bills.

Lower socio-economic status is often coupled with lower levels of education. Many parents cannot help their children with their homework because they themselves had a very difficult time when they were in school. They cannot do the
same homework that their children are asked to complete at home. Coincidently, educators who encounter situations where parents cannot help their children with their homework often perceive the unhelpful parent as an uncaring parent (Kao & Turney, 2009). Unfortunately, the barriers of parental engagement are much larger than just socio-economic status and levels of parental education.

According to Harris and Goodall (2008) one of the most cited reasons for parents not being involved in schooling is work commitments. Lack of time and childcare difficulties seem to be significant factors predominantly for women and those working full-time. They are limited in their ability to make it to events such as parent meetings and other school events. Single parents are often the most restricted and tend to be the least responsive to invitations and requests from school.

Harris and Goodall (2008) also found evidence to demonstrate that certain parents face considerable difficulties in their exchanges with teachers, schools and administration. The time spent in school for parents can be degrading and unwelcoming. Cedric Cullingford and Mary Morrison, both professors of Education and Professional Development at the University of Huddersfield in the United Kingdom, observed that “parents are both shy and reluctant to make contact with school or to put themselves in a position which seems to them a gesture of assertion, however modest, against the professionalism of schools” (1999, p. 253).

In a study by Williams, Williams, and Ullman (2002) they found that 16% of parents were wary of overstepping some unwritten mark in their relations with teachers. One major cause of this notion is the idea of responsibility for education.
Parents’ views on education greatly determine their role in their child’s schooling. Parents may have the misconception that it is not their “job” to support and encourage their child’s school achievement. Parents must feel that they have the power to contribute and it is important that they feel it is necessary or even acceptable for them to do so (Harris & Goodall, 2008).

The nation is becoming more culturally diverse daily. Cultural diversity, though widely accepted, is having a strong effect on schools’ abilities to communicate with parents of these culturally diverse families. Unfortunately, it has become one more barrier to parental engagement. The experiences of teachers in some school districts with high cultural diversity have been that of low parental engagement. Parents that have just arrived from countries around the world and their families speak limited to no English. This often creates a major communication barrier. Districts that have very culturally diverse populations have parents that feel like outsiders in their children’s schools (Cowhey, 2009). The issue of cultural diversity is not just limited to language only. Cultural diversity can show itself in multiple forms.

Parents of various cultures have different opinions on their roles in their children’s education. Their cultural differences, whatever they may be, generally leave them on the outside of education. All too often teachers deem these parents as ‘hard to reach.’ ‘Hard to reach’ is a term used to describe parents that are very hard to get in touch with. They often appear to avoid contact with any teachers, staff, or administration. These parents, apparently, need to be re-engaged in their children’s educational lives (Crozier & Davies, 2007). Gill Crozier and Jane Davies, professors
at the University of Sutherland in the United Kingdom, compiled research looking at Bangladeshi and Pakistani parents within United Kingdom schools. Crozier and Davies stated Bangladeshi and Pakistani parents knew that they were not very involved in their children’s schools and knew very little about the education system or what their children were doing in school. However, Crozier and Davies found that these parents were in no way ‘hard to reach’. Instead, they stated that the parents felt it was not their place to interfere with a teacher’s instruction. They also stated that many teachers blamed their lack of involvement on cultural differences. Crozier and Davies reiterated that the idea ‘hard to reach’ parents due to cultural indifference is a fallacy. It only serves schools as an excuse for not being more proactive. However, culture still remains a barrier to family involvement in education (Crozier & Davies, 2007).

Unfortunately the hurdles to engagement do not end there. Parents are not the only ones who make engagement difficult. Teachers play an important role in the level of success in a parent-teacher relationship. According to Cullingford and Morrison (1999) many teachers actually avoid contact with parents and believe that it is not necessary to communicate with parents of older children. Teachers must first value parents and what they have to offer before they decide that they are necessary for the progress of each student. All too often teachers will dictate to the parent what they should or should not do with little regard for the parent’s opinion on any matter. This is a one-sided relationship and often leads to the parent shying away from further contact.
Communication is also hindered by repeated negative phone calls from teachers about a specific problem or problems that their child is displaying. Without some sort of positive feedback about their child it is not unusual for a parent to become defensive or noncompliant. A teacher may even lose contact with that parent altogether. Teachers should be sensitive to the fact that this is a parent and their child. Many educators are quick to assume that because a parent is “hard to reach” they do not care about their child. Teachers should enter the career believing that all parents care about their children (Cullingford & Morrison, 1999).

**Engaging Parents in the Educational Process**

Engaging parents in a child’s education has not been an easy task for schools. There is an ongoing struggle to determine what is the most effective way to gain the involvement of parents in the education of their children. There have been many efforts to discover the best ways to get parents involved, however the successes of each program vary greatly. As stated by Harris and Goodall (2008) the positive findings behind most engagement programs are patchy, unreliable, and often based on self-report. Epstein and Jansorn (2004) claim:

For a school to develop a partnership program involving all parents in ways that increase student success requires new ways of thinking about family and community involvement. All schools need a purposeful, planned partnership program creating a welcoming environment and engaging families in activities that contribute to students' readiness for school, academic success, and positive attitudes and behaviors (Epstein & Janson, 2004, p. 19).

Epstein and Salinas (2004) indicated that it is important to first look at the school and the community as a whole. The statement “it takes a village to raise a
child” applies to here. A school learning community includes educators, students, parents, and community partners who work together to improve the school and enhance students’ learning opportunities. Beginning with the school, a school climate that conveys to parents that they are welcome in the school is essential. Schools need to create a caring environment that enables community members rather than just servicing them (Epstein & Salinas, 2004). Parents should be kept well informed about their children’s learning. Besides the teacher, other school staff should also show respect for parental concerns and suggestions. Parents have often reported that they have been dismissed by office staff without them hearing what they have to say. With this said, having a positive school climate sets a strong foundation for parent involvement (Berthelsen & Walker, 2008). Research shows that the partnerships between families, schools, and communities require teamwork. All stakeholders have active roles in developing productive partnerships, and in improving and sustaining their work over time (Epstein & Jansorn, 2004).

Teachers play a vital role in parental involvement. Research states that educators must foster a climate of enablement (Berthelsen & Walker, 2008). Enablement makes parents feel that they can make a difference in their child’s life, the community, and the school. Parents also need to feel a general trust between themselves and teachers and it is the job of the teachers to build on that trust. The teacher’s beliefs about a parent’s role in the classroom and their responsibility to provide involvement opportunities to parents are also critical factors to forming positive parent-teacher relationships (Berthelsen & Walker, 2008).
Teachers have to first value the parents in their classroom and make an effort to offer chances for parents to get involved. They must find a way to make themselves available to parents. Teacher-parent meetings are often scheduled at a time that is convenient for just teachers, without taking into account the parents’ availability (Antonopoulou et al., 2009). It is good practice to find out a particular parent’s schedule; then schedule a conference at a time that is good for both parties. If a parent cannot make it to school then a phone conference can be the next best option. Parents should also feel that teachers have the same common beliefs that they do. For instance, parents and teachers should have a similar system for rewarding or disciplining children for positive or negative behaviors. This trust and common belief system should facilitate positive social interaction between the two groups (Friedlaender, 1999).

Regardless of the school’s ability to foster positive engagement programs most of the responsibility comes down to the parent’s ability to keep involved. As stated in the School Psychology International Journal, parents who are involved in their children’s education demonstrate specific qualities. They have good communication and parental skills, a keen interest in school matters, and a good understanding of their children’s needs. They also have a positive attitude towards school and tend to be supportive with homework on a regular basis (Epstein, 1996; Antonopoulou et al., 2009).

Unfortunately, as stated before, many parents do not display these traits. Schools can help parents improve these qualities through various methods. Parents should not be left to figure it out on their own. Recent discoveries of the
effectiveness of well-developed programs of school, family, and community partnerships for student’s success show that educators cannot afford to let parents figure out how they can be involved in their children’s education (Epstein & Jansorn, 2004). All three parties involved, parents, teachers, and communities, must work together to develop a program of involvement to create a welcoming school environment and help students succeed (Epstein & Jansorn, 2004). In a 2004 study, Epstein and Salinas described the structure of successful involvement programs. They stated that studies have produced a framework consisting of six types of involvement that can help establish and strengthen a comprehensive program of school, family, and community partnerships. The six different areas are: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community (Epstein & Salinas, 2004).

In order to improve parenting schools must first assist parents with parenting skills, family support, understanding child and adolescent development, and setting up conditions to support learning at every age and grade level (Epstein & Salinas, 2004). The district should also provide teachers with professional development in order to help them understand families’ backgrounds and cultures and also help teachers set goals for children. To help gain quality communication schools should communicate with families about school programs and student progress (Epstein & Salinas, 2004). Common examples are daily communication logs or weekly newsletters. They should create an easy two-way communication channel between schools and home that parents feel comfortable using. Schools should also make a strong attempt to try and improve recruitment, training, activities, and schedules to
involve families as volunteers and as audiences at the school or in other locations. Teachers should also be given opportunities to work with these volunteers who would like to provide support for students within the schools (Epstein & Salinas, 2004).

Learning in the home is another important facet of involvement that can be increased by schools. Schools need to involve families with their children in academic learning at home, including homework, goal setting, and other curriculum-related activities (Epstein & Salinas, 2004). The district needs to encourage teachers to design homework that enables students to share and discuss interesting tasks. This may help foster a positive home environment that engages parents in their child’s work. Parents also need to feel like they help schools make important decisions. Families should be included as participants in school decisions, governance, and advocacy activities through school councils or improvement teams, committees, and parent organizations (Epstein & Salinas, 2004). Finally, schools must find a way to collaborate with the community and help parents do the same. The district can coordinate resources and services for families, students, and the school with community groups, including businesses, agencies, cultural and civic organizations, and colleges or universities (Epstein & Salinas, 2004). All should be enabled to contribute service to the community. No one should feel denied.

Similar to Epstein and Salinas, Henderson and Mapp adapted their own list of recommendations that they believe will help schools develop an effective parent involvement program. They recommend that schools need to recognize that all parents, regardless of income, education level, or cultural background, are involved in their children’s learning and want their children to do well in school. Educators
must understand that forms of involvement vary based on culture and ethnicity (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Henderson and Mapp also indicated that every study that assessed programs to engage low-income families found that almost all parents were willing and able, with training, to implement practices linked to improve their child’s achievement (2002). They continue to explain that educators should also adopt some sort of no fault policy. Teachers should not under any circumstances blame the family for a student’s low achievement. Never assume that a family does not care about their children because as research has proven, all parents care about their children’s education (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

Henderson and Mapp also went on to state that schools must create programs that will support families to guide their children’s learning, from preschool through high school. Some effective practices schools could use with parents are:

• Home visits from trained parent educators with cultural backgrounds similar to their own or with knowledge of their culture.

• Lending libraries that offer games and learning materials to build skills at home.

• Discussion groups with other families about children’s learning.

• Classes on how to stimulate their children’s mental, physical, and emotional development.

• Interactive homework that involves parents with their children’s learning.

• Workshops on topics that parents suggest, like building their children’s vocabulary, developing positive discipline strategies, and supporting children through crisis.

• Regular calls from teachers, not just when there are problems, about how their children are doing in class. Lead with something positive.
• Learning packets in reading, science, and math, as well as training in how to use them.

• Meetings with teachers to talk about their children’s progress and what they’re learning (Henderson & Mapp, 2002, p. 63).

These strategies stated by Henderson and Mapp are taken from schools that have been successful in implementing them into their involvement programs.

Along with supporting families with educating their children at home, schools must also nurture a climate of enablement (Friedlaender, 1999). Schools need to work with families to build their social and political connections. For example, when parents feel they have the power to change and control their circumstances, children tend to do better in school. Their parents are also better equipped to help them. The development of trust between parents and schools can lead to expanded social networks (Friedlaender, 1999). A few strategies that schools can use to build parents confidence and communications between themselves and educators are:

• Engage families in planning how they would like to be involved at school.

• Invite families to attend staff development sessions and faculty meetings.

• Facilitate families’ connections with programs for young people and youth groups.

• Work with families to help them monitor their children’s activities. Create a school directory, so they can contact other parents, especially those of their children’s friends.

• Offer workshops on communicating with their children with topics parents suggest, such as talking with children about drugs, dating, problems with friends or family, and values.

• Open the school to community meetings.
• Make home visits to ask parents their ideas about the school.

• Work with families to develop action research skills to document problems in the neighborhood.

• Give families information about how the education system works. Make field trips to district offices and school board meetings (Henderson & Mapp, 2002, p. 70).

By implementing these strategies educators can give the parents much needed confidence to help their children and feel like they can make a difference in their children’s school or even community.

Furthermore, districts should work to develop the ability of school staff to work with families and community members. An increase in opportunities for professional development on how to connect with families and community members would positively impact this area. Teacher education workshops which provide teachers with new ways to design programs and understand the importance of relationships between school staff and families can be key in developing effective connections (Shirley, 1997). The professional development provided to school staff should also help all staff recognize the advantages of school, family, and community connections. It ought to explore how trusting and respectful relationships with families and community members are achieved. In addition, it must enhance school staff’s ability to work with diverse families and allow staff to make connections with community resources. Finally, it must explore the benefits of sharing power with families and community members (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).
Finally, schools must find practical ways to involve families in planning, establishing policies, and making decisions. This means that parents will share control within the schools and classrooms. Banda, Matuszny, and Coleman state that building foundations for developing collaborative relationships with families involves allowing parents to provide input about classroom rules, behavioral procedures, and the classroom setup as they relate to the individual student (2007). During this time a teacher can find out the parents personal preferences and needs through surveys or interviews. Letting parents help establish polices and make important decisions will give the parents a sense of control over the classroom and their children’s education. This will also build a foundation for a strong relationship between teachers and families.

Developing Meaningful Parent/Teacher Relationships

Getting parents more involved is one main aspect of the educational process, however, the prospect of sustaining quality involvement weighs heavily on the parent’s relationship with the child’s teacher, school, and community. Forming positive long lasting parent-teacher relationships can be a difficult and painstaking process. Earning the trust of a wary parent takes time and effort on the teacher’s and school’s part and it would be unfortunate to see the effort go wasted when the child leaves your classroom and the next teacher or school has to start the engagement process all over again. Meaningful relationships should last throughout the child’s entire educational career. After collaborative relationships have been created and established, schools
and teachers must maintain, support, and continue to strengthen the relationship. Banda et al., state that the relationships between teachers and parents need to be maintained and strengthened and this can be done through continued trust-building and communication (2007). It is the role of the teacher to continue to follow specific timelines that are put in place and agreed upon. Communication between both parties should also continue to be positive rather than negative. Problems should be discussed as a natural part of learning. Rather than only communicating with parents about problems dealing with discipline, teachers should discuss every area of progress that a student displays. Parents are more apt to remain in contact if the teacher communicates more positively than negatively (Banda et al, 2007).

The involvement plan should not stop here. It should continue and recycle each year until the child graduates (Banda et al, 2007). Educators should work with families to prepare children for the next level and help them plan for the future. Teachers and parents should reflect on what worked and what did not work at the end of each year. This information should then be passed on to the next teacher the following year. Teachers will be aloud to build, support, maintain, and improve collaborative relationships with families from year to year (Banda et al, 2007).

Henderson and Mapp completed an extensive study in 2002 looking at effective strategies to connect schools, families, and communities. They concluded that programs and initiatives that focus on building respectful and trusting relationships among school staff, families, and community members, are often the most effective in creating and sustaining family and community connections with schools (2002).
The research shows conclusive evidence that parent-teacher relationships are a necessity for providing children with quality educations. It is also noted in multiple studies that teachers and parents share the same goal: to provide a support system for students to develop, learn, and grow. The data shows that it is essentially the school’s job to create programs that will enrich families and help them become advocates for their children. Furthermore, educational research will continue to focus on learning new and improved ways to strengthen these relationships.
Chapter III - Applications and Evaluations

Introduction

The main goal of this project was to discover a way to make my classroom and perhaps my colleagues’ classrooms more responsive and welcoming environments for parents. I also wanted to find new ways to create a strong sense of communication with parents. The lack of parental involvement is not only a problem of mine but a problem of many other educators in my building. Overall, I feel that my school has not been very successful in improving parental involvement. There have been many parent nights with incentives for coming; however, the overall turnouts have not been what were expected. It was my intention to try and find meaningful ways to increase the overall involvement of the parents in my classroom. I would be especially gratified if some of my most disengaged parents became more involved in the classroom because it is my experience that their children are often the most difficult children to work with.

Participants

For this action research project I used the parents of the students in my 4th, 5th, and 6th grade classroom as my participants. These participants were selected because it would eliminate many obstacles that would come from trying to work with parents from outside of my classroom. The selection process was not random and no control group was used during this process. In all, 12 parents were selected to participate. All participants have children in a special education classroom from an urban elementary school in Rochester, New York. The participants in this study were
culturally diverse. There were eleven female participants and one male participant. Of the 12 parent participants two parents were Caucasian, five parents were African-American, and the remaining five were of Hispanic dissent. Four of the Hispanic parent participants were limited English speakers and all communication was translated into Spanish for them to participate.

**Procedures**

The major part of the research was based on qualitative methods because participants answered questions that involved stating opinions and perceptions on topics surrounding the education of their children. The questions, wide ranging, confidential and anonymous, were aimed to give the participants encouragement to express their views. The questions were at the heart of action research project. The responses to the questions were used to give me a picture of how parents felt about communication with their children's school. Then based on that data I was able to make an informed decision on what I could do as a teacher to increase and sustain parental involvement.

This study was conducted over an eight week timeframe. First, parents were given an eleven question survey that they were asked to complete. Parents had the option of: (a) completing the survey with me during a parent conference; (b) completing the survey at home; or (c) completing the survey over a telephone conference.

The survey consisted of a general list of questions gauging different areas of home-school connections. Questions had to be translated into Spanish for the
Spanish dominant group. The first four questions looked at the overall satisfaction with home-school communications. The questions asked were:

- How often do you communicate with personnel at your child’s school? (Phone calls, notes, letters, conferences, etc.)
- Who do you communicate with? (Teachers, administrators, office staff)
- What are some of the common reasons for this communication?
- How satisfied are you with the level of communication with your child’s school?

For these questions parents were given blank spaces where they could list their concerns and responses.

The next three questions asked the parents how they would like to communicate with the school and how they would like the school to communicate with them. The questions used the format of single-select, select all that apply, and rating scales in order to determine the parent’s point of view on home-school communication. The four questions asked were:

- Currently, I receive information about my child (please check one):
  Daily____ twice a week____ weekly____ monthly____ as needed____

- I would like to receive information about my child (please check one):
  Daily____ twice a week____ weekly____ monthly____ as needed____

- I would like to receive the following information (please check all that apply):
___ How to work with my child at home
___ Materials that I can borrow for working with my child at home
___ Information about parent/family support groups
___ Other: ____________________________________________

- How would you prefer to receive information from the school about your child? Please rank order your top three choices using the numbers 1, 2, and 3; (1 = the most preferred method; 2 = the 2\textsuperscript{nd} most preferred method; and 3 = the 3\textsuperscript{rd} most preferred method)

___ Telephone call (Best days and times to reach you?) _____________
___ By email (provide your email address): ________________________
___ Written note/letter (circle one: sent in the mail, sent home with child; either)

___ Home-School journal (small notebook that is passed on daily, from home to school and school to home)
___ Other: ____________________________________________

The remaining two questions were used to determine the parents’ interest in attending school activities with or without their child. They also aimed to understand what had been preventing parents from attending school functions and activities. The questions used the same form as the previous four questions, single-select and multiple-select options. The following questions were asked:

- Please check one of the following statements about attending and participating in meetings about your child:
I will always attend meetings as long as I receive enough notice.

I am not comfortable attending meetings at school, but would attend if they were held closer to my home (e.g. nearby coffee shop, in my home).

I can always be a part of the meeting if a phone conference call is held.

I am unable to attend most/all weekday daytime meetings due to my work schedule, but could attend during the following days and times:

Would you be willing to participate in any of the following events at your child’s school? If you have any suggestions for events/activities that you would like to see please list them under “other” (Check all that apply):

- Classroom Celebrations
- Potluck/picnic at a local park
- Field Trips
- Talent Show
- Committee Member
- Sharing information with students (e.g. about your culture, your job, your birthplace)

Other (please list): ____________________________

Sometimes parents do not like to go to their child’s school. What are some of the barriers to participating in your child’s school more often? (Please check all that apply):

- The teacher is difficult to reach or not available when needed.
- The office staff members are difficult to reach.
I've had poor experiences with teachers.

I do not have transportation to get to the school.

My job makes it difficult to attend school functions/activities.

I feel uncomfortable in a school because ____________________________

Other: (Please list other reasons why you cannot participate in your child’s school): ____________________________

The parents were given approximately four weeks to complete and return the questions and only two parents did not complete the survey. These parents chose not to participate for unknown reasons. I was not able to speak with either parent during the four week time span used to complete this study.

After the parents completed the survey the data was collected and evaluated to discover the parents’ perceptions and needs in terms of home-school communication. This data was then used to construct a parental involvement plan in order to meet the specific desires of each parent. After implementing the home-school communication plan, which involved increased parental contact on my part, I then gauged the parents overall satisfaction towards our contact as I did at the start of this action-research project. The plan was put in place for approximately three weeks. After this three week time frame, I gave the parents a post survey which used the first five questions from the initial survey. This was used to measure their new overall satisfaction towards home-school communication. The post data was then compared to the initial findings. This gave me insight as to what my successes were and what needed to be changed with the new involvement plan.
Collection of Data

At the end of the first four week duration, all completed surveys were turned in and gathered for evaluation purposes. As previously stated, the data was collected in three different ways: students hand delivered their parent’s surveys; parents answered the survey questions during a parent-teacher conference; and one survey was completed over telephone conference.

Parents who participated in parent-teacher conferences met with me during IEP meetings giving me an opportunity to ask them the survey questions after the meetings were over. One parent participant completed the survey via telephone conference with a paraprofessional in the classroom. She was used to translate the questions into Spanish for the participant who was a limited English speaker. As stated before, two participants did not complete the survey for unknown circumstances. Both parents have a history of being very difficult to maintain contact with.

The data gathered from the surveys were used to create a revamped home-school communication and involvement plan that was implemented for three consecutive weeks. Children were sent home with daily communication logs that needed to be read and signed when asked. These logs were also used for parents to communicate with me on a daily basis. The logs were not always written in and were used as necessary.

I also wrote in weekly journals that gave parents updates as to how their child was doing in school, what important information needed to be known, and
information on any upcoming events. This was intended to create a weekly dialogue between parents and myself. Furthermore, I also made attempts every Friday at the end of the school day to contact parents regarding any questions they may have on how the week went for their child.

Following the implementation of my new home-school communication and involvement plan, I aimed to reevaluate the parents’ perceptions’ of school. The way I gathered my post data was by modifying the initial parent survey. I selected only the questions in which measure the overall satisfaction of home-school communication. These questions gave me an insight as to how well the parents responded to my updated involvement plan. Responses were compared with initial survey responses which was evaluated and displayed in the following chapter. All responses were recorded through telephone conference. No surveys were sent home. This decision was made because of time restrictions.

The following chapter will discuss the results of the pre and post surveys completed by the parents.
Chapter IV – Results

This chapter will be used to display the results from the initial parent survey and the post parent survey. Each question is broken down into sections so the data can be easily analyzed.

I will begin by first displaying the data received from the initial parent survey. The first three questions asked parents how often they communicated with their children’s school, who they communicated with, and why they communicated with these staff members. Answers varied greatly when asked how often they communicated with their school. Two participants indicated that they received communication on a daily basis. Six participants stated that they communicated with school on a weekly to monthly basis. The remaining two participants wrote that communication was very limited. This information appears consistent with my experience with the parents. Consistent contact has come from selected parents while some parents have been almost non-existent.

When asked whom the participants communicated with, 80% of the participants explained that they only communicated with teachers. The remaining 20% stated that they communicated with many different school staff. For example, one participant stated that they communicated not only with the teacher but with office staff, the health office, the speech pathologist, and administrators while the other participant stated that they did not communicate with the teacher or administration but instead communicated with the health office, the social worker,
and office staff. Again, this data is consistent with my observations. It is rare within my school for parents to communicate with any staff besides the teacher.

When asked for the reasons of most of their communication with school the responses were once again very assorted. Six respondents stated that the only reason for communication was for the teacher to explain how their child was doing. They stated that contact came through report cards, five week reports, IEP progress reports, and phone calls (positive or negative). These results were expected because the only type of communication parents received was occasional phone calls, progress reports, and report cards. Three parent-participants stated that they communicated with their child’s school to explain any health issues their child is having, to ask questions about their child’s progress, or any other matter. Only one respondent left this question blank for unknown reasons.

The fifth question, which concluded the current overall satisfaction of home-school communication section of the survey, is displayed in Table 1.

Table 1:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Home-School Communication</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How satisfied are you with the level of communication with your child’s school?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent Responses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent Responses</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Overall, the perceived satisfaction of home-school communication with their children’s school is that of approval from the ten parent respondents who completed the survey. Only two of the ten parents described a poor level of communication with their child’s school. This data is startling to me. I thought that I would receive unsatisfactory responses based on the level of communication that I had been giving them. I did not believe that I was communicating with the parents enough. Nor did I believe that the type of communication was acceptable either.

The next three questions asked the parents how they preferred to communicate with the school and how the school should communicate with them. Table 2, found below, presents data displaying how often they currently receive communication from school.

**Table 2**

**Current Level of Communication from School**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Currently, I receive information about my child:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Daily</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twice a week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weekly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monthly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As needed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
According to Table 2, parents primarily receive communication about their child on a need to know basis. Only one parent stated that they receive communication daily. Communicating with parents on a need to know basis is what I have been doing up until the completion of this action research project. Therefore, the results displayed in Table 2 were predictable.

Table 3, found below, presents data displaying how often parents would like to receive information about their children.

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preferred Level of Contact from School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I would like to receive information about my child:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daily</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twice a week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weekly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monthly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As needed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on the table above, data shows that most parents would like to receive information about their child on a weekly basis. While three parents would like to continue receiving information as needed only one parent would like to receive
information on a daily basis. Based on the data from Table 3 and Table 2, I observed that parents wanted to receive more communication on a regular basis. This was the turning point of my action research project and helped me to understand what parents really wanted. Communication on a daily to weekly basis became the forefront from my home-school communication and involvement plan.

When the participants were asked if they would like to receive information on how to work with their child at home, what materials they can borrow for working with their children at home, and what information they can receive on parent/family support groups all parents stated that they would like to receive information on at least one of the three areas. Specifically, 9 out of 10 said they would like information on how to work with their child at home, 8 out of 10 said they like to know what materials they can borrow for working with their child at home, and 9 out of 10 said they would like information about parent/family support groups. No participants indicated that they are looking for any other information at this time. This data helped drive the daily-weekly communication with parents. Through weekly journal entries and phone calls, I began to probe parents’ needs and desires on how to help their children at home. Parents also began requesting materials to use with their children.

Participants were then asked how they would prefer to receive information from their child’s school. Specifically, they were asked to rank their choices 1, 2, and 3. A rank of 1 meant this was the most preferred method and a rank of 3 meant this was the 3rd most preferred method. The results displayed in Table 4, found on the next page, show this:
Table 4:

Preferred form of Contact

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How would you prefer to receive information from school about your child?</th>
<th>1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt; choice</th>
<th>2&lt;sup&gt;nd&lt;/sup&gt; choice</th>
<th>3&lt;sup&gt;rd&lt;/sup&gt; choice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Telephone Call</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By Email</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Written note/letter</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home-School Journal</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The data displayed in Table 4 shows what method parents prefer schools deliver information. The most preferred method of contact that parents would like to receive based on Table 4 is a telephone call. Based on the results from the second and third choices of preferred contact, 80% of the participants stated that they would prefer to be contacted through a written note or a home-school journal.

This data shows that written communication appears to be the form of communication parents would like to receive if a telephone call cannot be made. This data was a great source when developing the home-school communication plan.
Knowing that parents wanted to be contacted more often through phone calls, written notes, and through home-school journals, I began doing just that. I began making weekly phone calls, writing daily notes in a communication log which can be viewed in the appendix, and using home-school communication journals. Parents appeared to respond very well to the updated level of contact.

In addition, parents were asked to indicate their ability to attend and participate in meetings about their child. The data in Table 5 displays the responses below:

**Table 5**

**Participation in Meetings**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Check one of the following statements about attending and participating in meetings about your child.</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I will always attend meetings as long as I receive enough notice.</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am not comfortable attending meetings at school, but would attend if they were held closer to my home. (e.g. nearby coffee shop, in your home)</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I can always be a part of the meeting if a phone conference call is held.</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am unable to attend most/all weekday daytime meetings due to my work schedule.</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The data in Table 5 varies greatly. Just about half of the participants stated if they were given enough notice they would definitely attend their children’s meetings, whereas 30% stated that they could always be a part of the meetings if a phone conference was held. One participant stated that they are not comfortable in the school and would like to participate in an area closer to their home. The remaining 20% of the participants indicated that they cannot attend because of their work schedule. This information is not consistent with my observations. It has been my experience that parents cannot make it to school even if they are given enough notice. However, this leads to question, what constitutes as ‘enough notice’?

The next question on the survey gauged the parents’ interests in becoming more involved with their child’s school. The following table, which is found on the next page, displays their responses:
Table 6

Parents Becoming Involved

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Would you be willing to participate in any of the following events at your child’s school?</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Classroom celebrations.</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potluck/picnic at a local park.</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field trips.</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talent show.</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Committee member.</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharing information with students.</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This data in Table 6 indicates that 100% of the parents are willing to participate in school activities in some way; however, each parent has their own preferences.

Given this information I began asking parents if they would like to go on field tips and joining in on our celebrations. Unfortunately, no parents were able to participate. This is not alarming because there have only been two chances for parents to participate. I hope that, given more chances, parents will be able to participate in future activities.
Finally, the last question on the survey aimed to discover what barriers were causing parents to be limited in their engagement in school activities with their child.

Table 7

**Barriers to Parental Involvement**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What are some of the barriers to participating in your child’s school more often?</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher is difficult to reach or not available when needed</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office staff members are difficult to reach.</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’ve had poor experiences with teachers.</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No transportation to get to the school.</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job makes it difficult to attend school functions/activities.</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel uncomfortable in a school because…</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The data in table 7 signifies that a majority of the participants do not participate in school functions because of transportation difficulties. It also shows that 30% of the parent participants cannot make it to their child’s school because they have work obligations that need to be met. Only one specified that they could not make it in because of other unknown reasons. The data from Table 7 was expected. Many
parents have mentioned that they have no transportation to and from school. This has been difficult to address year after year.

I was pleased to see the results from the post parent involvement survey. As noted in chapter III, the first five questions were taken from the initial survey in order to measure the overall satisfaction of home-school communication after the implementation of my revamped parent-involvement plan. Supplementing report cards, progress reports, and unstructured phone calls I began sending home daily communication logs, weekly home-school communication journals, and structured Friday phone calls. After approximately one month, parents were then asked five questions regarding their new overall satisfaction with home-school communication.

When parents were asked once again how often parents communicated with their child’s school 8 of the 10 parents notified me that they received some sort of communication on a weekly basis in the form of weekly journals and/or phone calls. The remaining two parents stated that they received communication on a daily basis. I am pleased that all of the parents were receiving communication within a weekly time frame. Unfortunately, I am disappointed that more parents did not state that they received communication on a daily basis because all parents should be receiving the daily communication log. This just means that some students were not bringing home their logs.

As with the previous question, parents were asked again to state whom they communicated with. I am once more pleased with my results because 100% of the parents indicated that they communicated with their child’s teacher. This differs from
the initial survey because some parents previously indicated that they did not have any contact with me. This is a step in the right direction; however, an increase in contact between staff other than the teacher was missing. I am inclined to discover a way to increase other staff involvement in my home-school communication plan.

The post survey also asked parents to reevaluate the reasons for communication with their child’s school. The initial survey showed that the only form of communication was progress reports, report cards, and random positive/negative phone calls. The post survey displayed much different data. On the post survey parents indicated a wide range of reasons for communication such as weekly updates, what the class is learning this week, upcoming test dates, recommendations on how to help their child with reading, behavioral concerns, rewards they received, and so forth.

Overall, parent satisfaction appears to have increased significantly. Table 8, which can be found on the next page, compares the initial parent satisfaction to the current parent satisfaction with home-school communication.
Table 8

Current Home-School Communication

| How satisfied are you with the level of communication with your child’s school? |
|-------------------------|------------------|------------------|
|                         | Very Satisfied   | Satisfied        | Not Satisfied   |
| Initial Survey          | 20%              | 60%              | 20%             |
| Post Survey             | 80%              | 20%              | 0%              |

This data shows me that my new parent involvement plan better met the needs of the parents in my classroom than that of my previous involvement plan.

Finally, I compared the parent responses from the initial survey question to the post survey question regarding how often parents currently receive information about their child. Table 9, which is displayed on the next page, shows this data below:
Table 9

Current Level of Communication from School Post Survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Currently, I receive information about my child:</th>
<th>Initial Survey</th>
<th>Post Survey</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Daily</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twice a week</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weekly</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monthly</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As needed</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Again, I would like to note that there was a significant change in the responses following the implementation of my new parental involvement plan. Parents indicated that they received information about their child on a daily to weekly basis. This was one of the goals to my action research project.

Parents have indicated to me that they are pleased with the level of contact that the school is making with them and they are receiving information on an acceptable basis.
Chapter V – Conclusions and Recommendations

The goal of this action research project was to discover what parents think about their overall relationship with their children’s school and then use this information to build stronger relationships with them. Specifically, I wanted to evaluate their feelings towards the home-school communications that they were currently receiving from me and other school staff. I had hoped that I would be able to discover what the parents of the students in my classroom wanted in terms of contact from school. I wanted to know how often they received contact from their child’s school and the reason for this communication. I also wanted to know how often they actually wanted to communicate with school. Finding what parents want and need in order to strengthen their bond with school is of great importance to a teacher’s success. As noted in the review of literature, improving these relationships will increase a teacher’s ability to meet a child’s needs.

There is an overwhelming amount of empirical evidence and research indicating that a student’s achievement and success are linked to stronger family-school relationships. Unfortunately, building these relationships is not an easy task. Socio-economic status, class, ethnic, and racial differences are just a number of barriers that inhibit these relationships from progressing to a satisfactory level.

Through my review of literature I discovered that it is ultimately the school’s duty to establish an effective program that will gain the parent’s participation. Parents cannot be left to figure things out on their own. Therefore, creating an atmosphere of collaboration between teachers, parents, and the community is of
extreme importance. As supported by my research, establishing these relationships gives teachers an advantage when it comes to supporting student learning and it provides parents with the tools necessary to effectively help their children and family outside of school. In the end, parents, teachers, children, and communities all benefit from improved home-school communication.

As a special education teacher in an urban setting, it has been my experience that parents do not appear to be very involved in their children’s education. I had a strong ambition to discover a process in which I could improve this lack of parent engagement. For my thesis, I decided to take a close look at how I communicated with my students’ parents’. Instead of placing blame on the parents or myself, I wanted to take a more proactive approach which involved questioning parents as to what would be an optimal home-school communication plan and then put their request into action. When I engaged parents about their interest in helping me improve our home-school communication they appeared to be very eager to participate in the study.

After analyzing and evaluating ten surveys that were distributed to the parents, I discovered that each parent thought differently about how the school communicated with them. Mixed reactions and responses from sections of the survey made it difficult to truly evaluate how parents felt about school. I initially wanted to try and understand what parents thought about their current levels of communication with their child’s school. I was surprised to notice that the responses were mostly positive about how parents perceive communication with me. Much of my surprise comes from the fact that I have had such limited contact with so many parents throughout
the year. I assumed that parents would have responded with negative reactions because I am actually disappointed in the level of contact I have had so far.

Regardless of the positive response towards home-school communication I did notice that most parents stated that they only spoke with teachers about how their child is doing. Based on research, parents should be contacted by more than just classroom teachers. Communication should also be seen between other staff members in the building, especially in a special education setting such as mine. Many of my students receive multiple services from various service providers such as speech-language pathology, counseling, and special subject teachers. With this said, I appealed to other service providers to increase their level of contact between parents and family members. With other input besides my own, parents will gain more perspective on their child’s overall performance in school.

After discovering what parents thought about their current levels of communication with school I then looked at the two questions that focused mainly on the frequency that parents receive information about their child. The results from this section indicated that I needed to change the rate at which I deliver information to the parents. A majority stated that they wanted to receive information weekly; however, at the time they were only receiving information as needed. I found this to be a problem that had be addressed immediately.

Based on the responses to the eighth question in the survey, which asked how they prefer to be contacted, parents signified that they wanted to be contacted by phone, written note, or some sort of home-school journal. With this said, I began
contacting parents on a weekly basis through phone calls, which was the 1st choice of contact by a majority. I also began using home-school communication logs to keep in touch with parents. Taking multiple approaches at contacting parents on a weekly basis was more effective at keeping them informed about what is taking place in school.

It was interesting to discover that parents wanted to receive information on topics outside of their child’s education. Many parents selected all three choices for receiving information on how to work with their children at home, what materials they can borrow for working with their child at home, and information about parent/family support groups. This told me that the families were in need of some guidance as to how to help their child outside of school. This also alerted me that some of the families I work with need support in other areas of their life as well. Knowing that my school had some quality resources for each of those three categories, I shared information with families that I believed would best suit their needs. However, I did feel that my school’s selection of workshops offered to parents in need is limited. It does not offer classes that teach parents how to educate their child at home. I plan to appeal to my school’s “Parent Involvement” committee to increase the amount of workshops that help parents with the education of their children. Whenever I discover opportunities for upcoming parent workshops I will notify parents in a timely manner.

The final three questions from the initial survey looked at getting the parents engaged in the school. What I discovered in this section is that every parent in my classroom wanted to participate in some sort of school activity with their child in
some way, shape, or form. An overwhelming number said that they would really enjoy participating in field trips with the school. Unfortunately, when I offered parents the opportunity to come on a field trip, many said they could not come. I can only hope that with more opportunities to participate in field trips, involvement will increase. Regardless, it is promising to notice that so many of the parents want to be a part of their child’s school.

Based on the results of the initial survey and my findings in the review of literature, I began trying to meet the needs of each parent through research approved methods. As stated earlier in this chapter, I increased the amount of times I tried to communicate with parents throughout each week. Rather than imploring parents to make more contact with me I decided to make more contact with them. Through the implementation of daily communication logs, weekly scheduled phone calls, and home school communication journals, parent involvement began to increase immediately. I found myself having positive conversations with parents on a weekly basis. Out of these conversations, some barriers seemed to drop. The initial defensiveness of some parents that had been noted from the beginning of the year vanished in favor of a more welcoming embrace when contact was made. One parent used to greet me with, “What did he do now?” That greeting has been replaced with a much better greeting such as, “Oh! Hi Mr. Riorden!”

Parents began to take note that we both share the same goal: to help their child succeed. Additionally, improved attitudes and increased involvement were evident by the parents. These improvements were reflected when I finished observing the data after delivering the post survey. The results of the post survey displayed
significant improvements when compared to the initial survey. Parents indicated that they were much more satisfied with the level of communication then they were initially. This suggests that the focused home-school communication plan was effective in strengthening relationships. One disappointment I would like to note is that, although parents were more readily to communicate, they did not come into the classroom like the said they would. I tried to make sure that they knew they were welcome at any time; however, no parent came in to observe their child in the classroom.

I was relieved to discover that all hope is not lost when trying to strengthen my bonds with parents. With my support, the support of my school, and the support of the community whenever available, I should be able to increase the involvement of every parent in my classroom. I hope to share each discovery with my colleagues so that they, too, can improve their home-school connections as well.

Even though I was able to develop some conclusions in this study I would like to mention some of the limitations with in my research. The first limitation would be that the sample size was extremely small to be used for any generalizations. It does help me in my current situation but it is only limited to just that. This study was also limited to an urban setting in Western New York. The study should be extended to a suburban setting and a rural setting because their needs and requests may be different from that of an urban setting.

I would also like to note that the interviews could have been given in a different way. I asked the participants personal questions that may have been difficult
to answer. Unfortunately, I could have received some answers that were not entirely truthful. Even though parents were ensured confidentiality they may have been apprehensive to give full disclosure to each question.

I recommend that the research on this current topic be studied further. I may have made some breakthroughs for myself but each school has their own needs that need to be addressed. What works for one school may not work for another. I recommend that all schools adopt a policy recommended by Henderson, Mapp, Epstein, and other educational researchers. They researched schools that already had a high rate of success when dealing with parental involvement. The programs were implemented in their school improvement plan which made parent involvement top priority. The success of these schools should not be kept with them alone. The success should be spread to other districts yearning and needing something more.

This action research has supported me in many ways. It has helped me realize that I need to take initiative when contacting parents. I cannot wait for parents to contact me about the status of their child. I have to take a more proactive approach in home-school communication. I also discovered that report cards and progress reports are just a small portion of what parents want to receive. They want teachers to assist them with the education of their child at home and provide them with information regarding family support groups.

I now understand the importance of home-school communication. Not only has this action research project improved my relationships with the parents in my class but it has also made me a better teacher. I feel like I am more capable of
meeting the needs of each child in my classroom. I will continue to participate in professional development workshops that are directed towards improving home-school connections. Hopefully I will continue to learn improved ways to strengthen the relationships between families and schools.
Chapter VI: References


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Chapter VI:

Appendices
Appendix A:

Initial Parent Survey in English
Parent Interview Survey Responses

As stated in the “Statement of Informed Consent” your child’s grade or class standing will not be affected in any way based on your decision to participate. Your input is greatly valued.

1) How often do you communicate with personnel at your child’s school? (Phone calls, notes, letters, conferences, etc.)

2) Who do you communicate with? (Teachers, administrators, office staff)

3) What are some of the common reasons for this communication?

4) How satisfied are you with the level of communication with your child’s school?

5) Currently, I receive information about my child (please check one):
   - Daily
   - twice a week
   - weekly
   - monthly
   - as needed

6) I would like to receive information about my child (please check one):
   - Daily
   - twice a week
   - weekly
   - monthly
   - as needed
7) I would like to receive the following information (please check all that apply):

___ How to work with my child at home

___ Materials that I can borrow for working with my child at home

___ Information about parent/family support groups

___ Other: _______________________________________________________

8) How would you prefer to receive information from the school about your child? Please rank order your top three choices using the numbers 1, 2, and 3; (1 = the most preferred method; 2 = the 2nd most preferred method; and 3 = the 3rd most preferred method)

___ Telephone call (Best days and times to reach you? ________________

___ By email (provide your email address): ____________________________

___ Written note/letter (circle one: sent in the mail, sent home with child; either)

___ Home-School journal (small notebook that is passed on daily, from home to school and school to home)

___ Other: _______________________________________________________

9) Please check one of the following statements about attending and participating in meetings about your child:

___ I will always attend meetings as long as I receive enough notice.

___ I am not comfortable attending meetings at school, but would attend if they were held closer to my home (e.g. nearby coffee shop, in your home).

___ I can always be a part of the meeting if a phone conference call is held.
I am unable to attend most/all weekday daytime meetings due to my work schedule, but could attend during the following days and times:

10) Would you be willing to participate in any of the following events at your child’s school? If you have any suggestions for events/activities that you would like to see please list them under “other” (Check all that apply):

___ Classroom Celebrations
___ Potluck/picnic at a local park
___ Field Trips
___ Talent Show
___ Committee Member
___ Sharing information with students (e.g. about your culture, your job, your birthplace)
___ Other (please list):

11) Sometimes parents do not like to go to their child’s school. What are some of the barriers to participating in your child’s school more often? (Please check all that apply):

___ The teacher is difficult to reach or not available when needed.
___ The office staff members are difficult to reach.
___ I’ve had poor experiences with teachers.
___ I do not have transportation to get to the school.
___ My job makes it difficult to attend school functions/activities.
___ I feel uncomfortable in a school because _______________________
___ Other: (Please list other reasons why you cannot participate in your child’s school): ________________________________
Appendix B:

Initial Parent Survey in Spanish
Entrevista de Padres Encuesta de Respuestas

Como les había informado en el “Testamento de Consentimiento informado” El grado o estado actual de su hijo/a no será afectado de ninguna forma basado en su decisión y participación es grandemente valiosa y apreciada.

1) ¿Con cuanta frecuencia se comunica usted con el personal de la escuela de su hijo/a? (Ya sea con llamadas telefónicas, notas, cartas o conferencias etc.)

2) ¿Con quien se comunica usted? (Maestros, administradores, o empleados de la oficina)

3) ¿Cuáles son las razones comunes de su comunicación?

4) ¿Cuán satisfecho/a esta usted con el nivel de comunicación con la escuela de su hijo/a?

5) ¿Con que frecuencia recibe información acerca de su hijo/a? (Por favor escoja una):
   - Diariamente____
   - 2 veces por semana____
   - Semanal____
   - Mensual____
   - Cuando sea necesario____
6) Me gustaría recibir información de mi hijo/a. (Por favor escoja una):

Diariamente

2 veces por semana

Semanal

Mensual

Cuando sea necesario

7) Me gustaría recibir la siguiente información. (Por favor escoja todas las que le convenga):

____ como trabajar con me hijo/a en casa.

____ Materiales que pueda coger prestados para trabajar en casa con mi hijo/a.

____ Información acerca de grupos de apoyo para padres y familias.

8) ¿Cómo le gustaría a usted recibir información de la escuela, acerca, de su hijo/a? Por favor seleccione 3 de su preferencia, usando los números del una al tres; (1 – iguala el método preferido, 2 – iguala al segundo método preferido, y 3 – iguala al tercer método preferido)

____ Llamadas de teléfono (mejor hora y día para localizarla?)

____ Por correo electrónico (Por favor provea su dirección de correo electrónico):

____ Con una nota o carta escrita (escoja una; enviada por correo, carta enviada a casa con su hijo/a, cualquiera de estos)

____ Con un diario de la escuela a casa (Una pequeña libreta que es cargada diariamente, de la escuela a la casa y de la casa a la escuela)

____ Otra:
9) Por favor marque uno de los siguientes testamento acerca de asistencia y participación en reuniones acerca de su hijo/a:

_____ Yo siempre asistiré a reuniones siempre y cuando reciba aviso de anticipación.

_____ Yo no estoy cómoda asistiendo a reuniones de la escuela, pero asistiría si fueran cerca de mi hogar (Por ejemplo, en un puesto de café o en mi casa).

_____ Yo siempre puedo ser parte de la reunión, si la conferencia se hace por teléfono.

_____ Yo no estoy dispuesta a asistir en la mayoría o todos los días de semana a reuniones por mi horario de trabajo, pero si puedo asistir los días y hora siguiente _______________________________________________________________________

10) Estaria dispuesto/a participar en algunos de los siguientes eventos en la escuela de su hijo/a? Si tiene alguna sugerencia de eventos o actividades que le gustarían, por favor escribalo en “otro” (Marque todos los que desee):

_____ Celebraciones en clase

_____ Comida/Pasadía en parque local

_____ Excursiones/Gira

_____ Espectáculo de talento

_____ Miembro de comité

_____ Compartiendo información con los estudiantes (por ejemplo acerca de su cultura, trabajo o país de nación).

_____ Otro (Por favor escriba) __________________________________________
11) Algunas veces los padres no les gusta asistir a la escuela de sus hijos/as.

Cuales son algunos de los obstáculos que le impiden participar en la escuela de su hijo/a mas a menudo? (Por favor marque todas las que le apliquen):

_____ El maestro es difícil de encontrar o no esta disponible cuando lo necesito.

_____ La facultad de la oficina son difícil de encontrar.

_____ Yo he tenido experiencias pobre con los maestros

_____ Yo no tengo transporte para llegar a la escuela

_____ Por mi trabajo se me hace difícil asistir a funciones/actividades de la escuela.

_____ Yo me siento incomoda en la escuela por que

___________________________________________________________

_____ Orto: (Por favor escriba otras razones del por que no puede participar en la escuela de su hijo/a) ____________________________________________
Appendix C:

Post Parent Survey in English
1) How often do you communicate with personnel at your child’s school? (Phone calls, notes, letters, conferences, etc.)

2) Who do you communicate with? (Teachers, administrators, office staff)

3) What are some of the common reasons for this communication?

4) How satisfied are you with the level of communication with your child’s school?

5) Currently, I receive information about my child (please check one):
   
   Daily____  twice a week____  weekly____  monthly____  as needed____
Appendix D:

Post Parent Survey in Spanish
1) ¿Con cuanta frecuencia se comunica usted con el personal de la escuela de su hijo/a? (Ya sea con llamadas telefónicas, notas, cartas o conferencias etc.)

2) ¿Con quien se comunica usted? (Maestros, administradores, o empleados de la oficina)

3) ¿Cuales son las razones comunes de su comunicación?

4) ¿Cuán satisfecho/a esta usted con el nivel de comunicación con la escuela de su hijo/a?

5) ¿Con que frecuencia recibe información acerca de su hijo/a? (Por favor escoja una):
   Diariamente_______
   2 veces por semana_______
   Semanal_______
   Mensual_______
   Cuando sea necesario _______
Appendix E:

Communication Log
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