

ACTION RESEARCH ON MEANINGFUL FAMILY INVOLVEMENT BY PARENTS, TEACHERS, AND STUDENTS: USING THE TELLING STRATEGICALLY

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Kim, a single parent, who works two jobs, takes off work to pick up her daughter, Ashley, from elementary school in order to update her shots in an effort to comply with school immunization requirements. She hurriedly enters the front office of the school to find the front office worker, Gail, on the phone complaining about the irresponsibility of those "Spanish" parents. Gail ignores Kim who is anxious to make the appointment with the doctor. Kim eventually gets Gail's attention and is reprimanded for being negligent in updating the health records, especially since a flier was sent home notifying her of immunization opportunities and school deadlines... Kim explains that she did not receive the flier. Tensions mount as Gail calls Ashley's classroom on the intercom. Ashley's teacher rushes into the office dragging an upset Ashley by the hand and complains loudly that Ashley is in jeopardy of failing. The teacher is frustrated with Kim because she failed to make the last parent-teacher conference. Kim explains that she couldn't get off work to attend. The drama escalates ...

A snapshot from the Tellin' Stories Action Research Project data, presented as a skit at the 23rd Annual Ethnography in Education Research Forum.

Introduction

The Tellin' Stories (TSP), a project of Teaching for Change, has a seven year history of using the power of story to engage parents - primarily low-income parents from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in Washington, D.C. - as purposeful partners in the educational process. By telling their stories on quilts, in classrooms using felt boards with peers who speak English, Spanish or Vietnamese, or in books that become part of the curriculum, parents, like Kim, whose voices too often go unheard or are silenced, assume the meaningful roles of supporters and educators in the school community. As they find common ground through their stories and shared knowledge and skills, parents work together strategically as advocates and decision makers in an effort to transform their schools to represent the values and best interests of all children. By participating in an action research project with teachers and a student, parents use the process of inquiry to tell the story of meaningful roles families can play in their children's schools. This article tells the story of what we, members of the TSP Action Research Team, discovered about meaningful family involvement in our local context while conducting a 3 year investigation. It also conveys the importance of the processes involved in our ongoing inquiry.

Phase One: How we began

By 1999, TSP had offered workshop series and storytelling activities in over 30 D.C. public schools and had identified many strong parent leaders who were, unfortunately, working in isolation to bring about change in their schools. TSP brought these leaders together by conducting monthly dialogues in which the parents shared resources and learned new skills together. At one of these monthly meetings parents identified their primary concerns as the need to: 1) increase parent involvement in schools and 2) enhance collaboration and communication between parents and teachers. In response to this concern a group of twelve parents from the monthly dialogue groups, teachers and a student representing eleven schools in Washington, D.C. and one in Montgomery County, Maryland joined together to conduct a year long action research project to investigate the following question: What are meaningful roles for families to play in their children's schools?

We sought to not only use our findings to inform our work as parent and teacher activists and staff members of TSP but to also share our findings in useful ways with others in an effort to improve education for all children. Phase 1 of this effort consisted of question formulation, data collection and analysis. Parents, teachers and an 8th grade student collaborated as researchers on all aspects of this phase which was guided by teacher researcher and author, Marian Mohr. For over six months, data in the form of interviews, minutes of meetings, focus group discussions, field notes and documents were collected from key stakeholders citywide - parents, teachers, students, administrators, support staff - in an effort to address our question from multiple perspectives and to reflect the rich cultural diversity in Washington, D.C. The data were analyzed by the entire research team using the constant comparative method which entailed: 1) identification of assumptions; 2) categorizing, comparing, sorting and ordering data; 3) identifying themes; 4) interpreting information and themes in the context of a conceptual framework; and 5) checking for accuracy by presenting findings to key stakeholders.

Our research uncovered several characteristics of meaningful family involvement and generated eight findings that are relevant to our local community and have implications for other school communities. This information, which includes a format for others to investigate their own schools based on our research and suggested actions, has been published as: *Between Families and Schools: Creating Meaningful Relationships* (2000).

Emerging definition and findings

An indispensable component of our emerging definition of meaningful family involvement is the development of relationships between families and school staff that focus on the well-being of the child and the child's family. The notion of family is expanded to include anyone who shares responsibility for the well-being of the child, whether mother, father, sibling, grandparent, neighbor or friend. Relationships based on trust create an environment in which the diverse contributions of all family members are respected, valued and integrated into the school community. Family involvement is not confined to activities that take place within the school, but is viewed as everyone's responsibility and, ideally, is an ongoing undertaking.

The establishment of trusting relationships is at the heart of this finding which provides the groundwork on which all of the remaining findings rest. These relationships are achieved by listening to and sharing stories, identifying priorities and needs, and then, in purposeful partnership, designing programs and policies. This fundamental finding corroborates the research of others, including Henderson (1996), Epstein (1994) and Auerbach (1990) who have advocated for the formation and maintenance of strong partnerships between family, community and school staff in which all partners have an equal voice.

The remaining findings flesh out the concept of partnership by outlining some of the roles that teachers, school staff, and students play in fostering meaningful family involvement. Teachers, for example, are involved by keeping families informed, by helping them with problems related to their children's well-being, and by involving them as resources or educators in the classroom. As one teacher indicated:

I do home visits on my own. I have a joke. I say, "Have a cup of coffee ready to the parents. ... If it's not an emergency, I call to say hello, to remind them of field trips, to make a closer relationship. ... I translate letters, assist with immigration problems, call to cancel and reschedule appointments. They (the parents) aren't embarrassed to talk to me. I try to greet them with happiness. (Between Families and Schools, p.17)

School administrators and support staff shape families' commitment to schools through their attitudes, policies and actions. A security guard interviewed by the action research team had a distinctive idea about what security means in her school.

I understand we are going through changes; it's rough for all of us. But I know the goal is to give one another respect and try to make a team. Keep the team strong when one gets weak. Security plays a role in doing that. Keep the peace and unity with parents, staff members, even visitors that come in the building. When a problem arises, we (parents and school staff) talk with the children. It's not like I just make a report to them and that's it. We get together with the children and we talk about it together. ... I feel like everybody's a parent. (Between Families and Schools, p. 21)

Students often see beyond the boundaries that limit adults' perceptions of each other. They recognized the multiple roles family members play in their lives as supporters, monitors and advocates. A Latino parent described how she is viewed by students in her elementary school:

My daughter's teacher got sick. They asked me to help out in the classroom. One boy didn't understand math and I helped him. He remembered me after that day and every time he saw me he said 'You taught me math.' ... The children consider me a teacher too. The most important thing is the children's well-being. The communication in which we get to know each other and participate together is everything. (Between Families and Schools, p. 25).

Our research also identified the following elements that are essential to creating a school environment conducive to meaningful family involvement:

- valuing diversity as a strength;
- effectively involving parents in real classroom work;
- positively addressing family resources, schedules, language differences, literacy level and past experiences with schools when engaging families in school activities;
- including learning opportunities in the school for personal and professional growth for families.

The importance of a welcoming school environment is underscored in Kim's experiences in the opening scenario and in the following excerpt from an interview:

If parents have lost hope, they can't give their child hope. In this neighborhood where I live, the parents have lost hope. They have lost hope because of the different problems and issues they are facing every day. ... That's why this parent center (at the school) is so important. We get parents in here and we address whatever issue it is that faces them at that moment. We address literacy before we move to the GED. We help parents get ready to be employed. ... Until we address these issues we will not get anywhere with our families. (Between Families and Schools, p. 42)

In the "transmission of school practices" model of parent involvement (Auerbach, 1990) schools set the terms for parent involvement by granting school knowledge and practices authority over the knowledge and practices of others, such as parents. In this way, one group dominates the dialogue about school improvement. The TSP Action Research Project findings begin to address ways that purposeful partnerships can be formed in which the voices of all parents are heard and valued as equal contributors to the family school partnership.

The importance of process

Members of the TSP action research team were drawn together by a common question, their commitment to improving local schools and because of their involvement with *Tellin' Stories*. They had not previously worked together as a team. For some, it was the first time they had worked on an academically-oriented activity with a parent or a teacher. As the research began, participants felt it necessary to define the perspective they were assuming - the hat they were wearing - when making a statement. Initially, there was a sense of hierarchy as a few parents prefaced their remarks in such a way that they assumed that their statements were not as valid as those of the teachers in the group. Other team members who were both parents and teachers had another dilemma:

Trying to switch hats made me feel like I was in a pigeonhole. When wearing the 'teacher hat' I don't hear the parent voice. I got better at combining the two voices through the Action Research Project." (Interview with Action Research Team member)

As the research continued with parents, teachers and the student participating as equals on all aspects of the project, the initial boundaries began to blur and created "new ground" on which the team members stood in the shared roles of educators and researchers.

The power of trusting relationships was evident as the group struggled to acquire new skills of analysis and to collaboration on the production of our publication, *Between families and schools: Creating meaningful relationships* (2000). As this took place and the publication emerged as a "collective voice," the connections between the content of our findings and the process of conducting our action research project became evident. The value of building strong, trusting relationships enriched by diversity, the importance of an environment that allows for the assumption of multiple roles, and the power of collaboration were findings that were emerging from our data at the same time that they were a "way of life" in the TSP Action Research Project. This is consistent with Fullan's, (2002) observation,

If relationships improve, schools get better. If relationships remain the same or get worse, ground is lost. Thus, leaders build relationships with diverse people and groups -especially with people who think differently... Well-established relationships are the resource that keeps on giving. (p. 18)

Action research is a powerful tool for not only understanding the complex issues confronting urban educators but for developing processes that bring about sustainable change.

Why this matters

While current education reform efforts promise every child a high quality education, the promises for low-income, culturally and linguistically diverse populations are often broken or non-existent. Parents like Kim and community members and school staff like Gail do not have a voice in developing and monitoring reform efforts. These important stakeholders are too often left out of the dialogue about substantive, change and are rarely viewed as change agents. TSP's Action Research Project makes a valuable contribution involves parents in building the foundation for school reform, and facilitates a process by which a group of parents, teachers and a student enter the nationwide dialogue about one aspect of school improvement - meaningful family involvement - informed by research that is linked to action.

When our student researcher reflected on the finding about the value of diversity, she noted that when one values diversity it becomes a "bridge to unity." This resulted in reflections on how valuing all voices, cultures, and styles makes us whole. The survival of schools is not dependent on our ability to distinguish ourselves from others but on our ability to experience the whole and to know that it is more than just the sum of its parts. Schools are living systems. Local efforts at understanding these dynamic systems, through community-based action research, go a long way toward creating the schools all of our children deserve; schools in which Kim, Gail, Ashley, her teacher, and other members of the community work together so that our children are ready to embrace the complexities of the future fully.

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The Tellin' Stories Project is a project of Teaching for Change a non-profit organization dedicated to building social justice starting in the classroom. For more information on Teaching for Change and to obtain copies of *Between Families and Schools: Creating Meaningful Relationships* contact our website: www.teachingforchange.org or call 202-588-7207.

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