

The Power of Parental Contact: A Strategy for Teaching in High Mobility Classrooms

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Abstract

The United States of America has one of the highest mobility rates of all developed countries. Every school year millions of school-aged children are uprooted and placed in new classrooms in new schools. Research documents that transient students who change schools frequently often have trouble assimilating into their new school environment and can suffer from low student achievement. This article investigates the practices of elementary classroom teachers in a highly transient area outside of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and documents how they are using the power of parental contact as a strategy to help connect their newcomers to the classroom and promote a strong home-school partnership. The benefits of strong parental contact are explained and multiple methods of contacting parents are presented in detail.

Introduction & Rationale

Over the past several decades research has firmly documented that parental involvement is significantly associated with student success and achievement (Buttery & Anderson, 1999; Coleman et al., 1966; Epstein, 1991a, 1991b; Henderson & Berla, 1994; Keith & Keith, 1993; Lontos, 1992). From early on in a child's life parent involvement had shown to increase students' language development, literacy skills, (Morrow, 1991) and desire to experience reading (Trelease, 1989). In the later years, parent participation has shown to improve students' academic performance in a multitude of areas, including increased student attendance (Berger, 1991) and enhanced student self concept and motivation (Haynes, Comer, & Hamilton-Lee, 1989; Henderson, 1987).

Students are not the only ones who benefit from this strong partnership. Parents and teachers reap the benefits of a close partnership as well (Harris & Associates, 1987; Rich, 1988; Williams, 1992). Parents perceive some of the benefits to be a better appreciation of their role in their child's education, enhanced communication with their children (Becher, 1994), as well as the perception of themselves as more capable parents (Davies, 1993; Kagan & Schraft, 1982). For teachers, the effects of parent participation include having parents and principals recognize them as stronger teachers thus increasing their own job satisfaction (Christenson, 1995).

Highly mobile students may be missing this important parent-teacher connection. Due to multiple reasons, achieving this parent-teacher collaboration can be extremely

challenging. Lack of time (Brown, 1989), parents' past experiences, (Brown, 1989; Karther & Lowden, 1997), low teacher expectations toward parents (Dodd & Konzal, 2000; Karther & Lowden, 1997) and high rates of transiency (Lash & Kirkpatrick, 1990) can all increase the barriers of communication between teachers and families.

Participants

In spring 2002 two hundred-fifty-one elementary school teachers working in a large school district in southeastern Pennsylvania were surveyed. Teachers were asked to provide strategies they have used (or are currently using) to help assimilate their highly transient students into their already functioning classrooms. A consistent theme emerged from the data. The majority of teachers focused on the importance of connecting with the transient students' family to help ease the students' transition. From the many teachers surveyed whose voices echo throughout this article, the importance of a strong parent-teacher connection is undeniable. All of the described methods have been used to help the classroom teachers connect with their new students and their families.

Benefits of Parental Contact

Teachers shared personal reasons as to why they believe parental contact is beneficial for the student, parents, and the teacher. They see the time and effort it takes in establishing a strong connection with the family unit as very beneficial throughout the school year. They recommend working at establishing a mutually respectable collaboration and maintaining open lines of communication for the success of the student.

Surrounding the student in a supportive and caring environment is viewed as a necessity. Teachers specifically try to make the transition easier for students by establishing parent contact immediately. "Parents are contacted for more input about the student. If the student knows I've touched based with their parents they usually feel more comfortable because they know I care." "I always check with parents to see if there are any anxieties expressed at home by the child that I am unaware of. Many times a child will be very quiet when then join a classroom that is already up and running. They may be more comfortable expressing fears and/or uncertainties at home to their parents. Making this connection is critical to me."

Likewise, teachers explained how making the parents comfortable is just as important as making the student comfortable. "I start by trying to make sure the parents get as much information as possible so they feel confident in the new school. I like them to get all of the information that was given at the orientation (curriculum, expectations, materials needed, importance of daily reading, homework, special schedule, etc.) as quickly as possible, especially if the student is starting in our room in the middle of the school year. I think it helps to make the parent and the child more comfortable and to have a feeling of fitting in." "Communicating with parents allows me to understand the background of the child and informs me of the child. I begin to understand his/her uniqueness and think about personal ways to connect and teach him/her. Distinct learning styles are then used to find which ones work best for the particular individual."

Overall, teachers expressed multiple reasons for making contact with the home. They view it as a necessity which can positively influence the student-parent-teacher relationship.

When to Contact Parents

The teachers believe the first two weeks are a critical time to contact parents. Many teachers strongly suggest that making immediate contact and providing consistent communication are both essential in making the newcomer and the new family feel welcomed, informed, and a part of the new school community. "I like to meet the student/parents in the office on the first day! I invite the family to walk to the classroom with us." Particularly at the primary level, students feel comforted when they physically see their parents in the classroom accompanying them and meeting the new teacher. This support helps to provide a cushioned transition as the newcomer adjusts to the new school environment.

"I like to contact the parents immediately to go over classroom procedures and expectations." When parents are informed of the school rules and routines from the very start students stand a greater chance of hearing consistent information from the parents and teacher, thus lessening the threat of confusion. "It's best when the triangle meets together. By the triangle I'm referring to the student, the parent, and me, the teacher. When the student sees the parent and I talking together about the materials we use, the routine of our day, and the rules we abide by in the classroom...well...it sends a strong message that we are all here to help the child grow and learn."

Some teachers see the benefits of immediate parental contact not just beneficial for the student, but beneficial for the parents as well. "I keep in constant communication with the parents to help them adjust as well as the student." This type of support helps both the student and the family during the adjustment period. Viewing the student holistically helps teachers concentrate on informing and mentoring the new family as well as the new student. Many times the teacher can be one of the only sources of connection a new family has to their new community. Looking at parental contact through this lens helps one understand how immediate communication can assist the entire family during their new adjustment period.

Methods Used for Contacting Parents

Multiple methods are provided that help parents and teachers connect. No one way is presumed to be "the best" way. Teachers should take into account several points before centering on one or a few best ways to make parental contact. First, decide what information you are trying to gather from the parents and what critical information you are trying to relay. Next, take into account that the methods of parental contact do not all take the same amount of time. Some are more labor intensive and time consuming than others. Keep that point in mind when deciding on the best way to connect with your new parents.

Parental Packets

Along with talking with parents early on when the new student arrives in the classroom, many teachers find providing parents with specially designed packets to be extremely valuable. These packets may consist of a broad range of information gathered specifically to help parents understand the many piece of life in the elementary classroom. Depending on the classroom and the grade level, the information in the packet can change.

Some teachers focus on providing data strictly regarding the curriculum that is taught, “I provide a packet of information about the school and the classroom curriculum.” While other teachers pull packets together detailing what materials are needed for the specific grade, a classroom handbook, and other papers outlining policy and procedures. “I keep a file of information handy for new students and their parents – a “welcome to the class” letter from me, home and school information, class schedules, a special pencil and bookmark, etc.” Providing this critical information to parents and special welcome treats to new students helps to set the tone for a strong home and school partnership, while simultaneously providing needed information quickly. Parents can then get a feel for the structure of the classroom and the school, purchase any needed supplies their children might need, and assimilate into the new classroom environment with as little difficulties as possible.

“I’m always on the lookout for new students who enter my classroom after the year has already started. If a child joins our class after the year has started I provide the parents with a packet of materials from the first day. We service an extraordinary transient population. It’s bound to happen. So I just keep extra packets near my desk in anticipation of the newcomer.”

Parent Surveys

Many teachers report sending home a type of survey or information sheet for parents to complete. These data gathering devices are used to provide information to the teacher so he/she can learn specific knowledge about the students quickly. There is no one form that is viewed as the “best one” to send home to parents. Different teachers at different grade levels search for different information pertaining to their students.

Typically, basic information such as name, address, contact numbers, parent work information, medical history, etc is asked for on the forms. Likewise, teachers usually ask some open-ended questions centering on the individual uniqueness of the student. Questions focusing on students’ special attributes such as, what students like to do when they are not in school or special or unique talents or interests the students’ possess are asked. Some teachers’ find their questions focus on the many different areas of a student’s life, not just in the academic arena. Questions such as what motivates your child, what upsets your child, and what social skills would you like to see develop all help the teacher to view their students holistically while learning about the parents perception of their child.

Phone Calls

When parents and teachers form partnerships and establish two-way communication there are greater chances for them to become aware of each other's attitudes and support one another in order to promote the child's learning (Reglin, 2002). Making contact via the telephone to introduce oneself and answer parent questions is highly looked upon and a strategy worthy of consideration for all students, especially those who are highly mobile. Welcome phone calls can serve a multitude of purposes. They can help alleviate anxieties held by the parents and students, help convey critical information that is necessary for a smooth transition, and set the tone for a positive home-school relationship.

Teacher's agree that communicating with parents in the beginning of the school year, or, as soon as a new student arrives, is crucial in setting up a positive, caring partnership. "As soon as I find out I'm getting a new student I make an introductory phone call home. This helps set the tone for the remainder of the school year. It gives me a chance to explain how the classroom is run and gives the parents the opportunity to ask me any questions. Sometimes I talk to the student too. This helps ease the student's mind and gets him/her excited to meet me and the rest of the class."

Research has documented that family involvement is mutually beneficial for students and for schools. Immediately opening the lines of communication between home and school helps to create a relationship where both parties feel comfortable verbally interacting with one another. Likewise, it provides the students with the reassurance that both sides are in contact with each other and that both are looking to help make the assimilation into the new learning environment as easy as possible for the newcomers, which can be especially soothing for youngsters who have experienced multiple moves.

Teachers also believe that parent contact is necessary not just on the first day, but throughout the transition period as well. "I usually wait about a week and call home to ask the parents how they feel the adjustment to the new class is going. It is always appreciated and I quickly find out if there are any problems." By letting some time pass the teacher can find out if the student is talking to their parents about any difficulties they are having academically, emotionally or socially.

Notes Home

Teachers like to use the strategy of sending notes home to parents. Notes can be either formal or informal, and can serve a variety of purposes. They can keep parents abreast of classroom happenings, be used to ask questions, thus requesting a parental response, or, they can simply tell about a moment that happened in the classroom.

One of the strengths of note writing is that it is not terribly time consuming. Written on a note pad, loose-leaf paper or in an assignment book, this informal form of communication is easily documented and quick to complete. "Notes inside the daily

assignment book help to keep us in contact. They are informal, quick, and have a good chance of getting home."

Perhaps one of the drawbacks to writing notes to parents is in the transportation system used for its delivery. Sometimes relying on elementary age students to transport the notes can have a negative outcome. Notes can get lost in the book bag, left on the bus, or mysteriously disappear. To circumvent this pitfall some teachers send home a weekly note in a folder. "I send home notes on a weekly basis for all my students. They go home in the Wednesday folder which every child in the school has. That is the day the office sends letters home and teachers know the materials have a good chance of getting into the hands of parents. The parents have been trained to look for these folders!"

Teachers believe that sending positive notes home can help new students feel good about themselves and comfortable with their new school and classmates. "I write a short note about something the student did to make up proud. I have the student share it with their parent or guardian." These types of notes help keep parents in contact with the school, promote positive self-concept, and hopefully help new students feel a part of their new school community.

Home Visits

Home visits have been viewed as an interesting and extremely worthwhile strategy that yields multiple benefits in helping to establish strong parental contact. This parent communication strategy is highly effective in bringing together the home and school in an attempt to quickly create a mutually respected and collaborative relationship.

Research documents that student's benefit by making higher grades, having better attendance, more homework completion, and more positive attitudes towards school (Kelly-Laine, 1998). A study by Reglin (2002) states that 91 % of high-risk parents who were surveyed perceived that home visits would help them better support their children's education and increase their involvement in the school. Since highly mobile students often come from high-risk families, home visits can be an excellent strategy in helping create and nurture a strong home-school partnership.

When students are forced to move time and time again relationships with teachers and other students can weaken. A high level of student mobility challenges efforts of educators to care for students and their families in several ways. It decreases opportunities for students, parents, and teachers to get to know each other well and to build long-term committed relationships (Beck, Kratzer, & Isken, 1997). Home visits are one strategy that can lead to increased communication between parents and teachers, thus benefiting the newcomer who is trying to fit into their new school community.

Teachers confessed that although the home visits yield a tremendous amount of information they are time consuming. "Allowing twenty minutes plus travel time to twenty-five homes can be a lofty goal. Yet, to fully connect with your students and their

families I feel that it is a great strategy and an excellent way to spend your time.” For the transient students who may join your classroom at any time of the school year, this is an excellent welcoming, as well as information gathering, strategy.

Conferencing

When parents and teachers work in concert, a caring community emerges and the chance for student success escalates (Epstein, 1995). One way parents and teachers can work together is by conferencing. Although many teachers talk about the importance of face to face meetings with parents, sometimes parents, and especially parents of transient students, as well as teachers, dread this type of interaction.

Scary for parents, but also for teachers, conferencing can be intimidating. Yet it is wise to remember that worthwhile relationships between home and school do not occur automatically. They demand hard work, determination, and a desire by both parties to help the child involved to succeed. Much can be accomplished by parents and teachers who are willing to invest in conferences.

Teachers of transient populations frequently have trouble getting parents to attend school based functions. Due to a variety of reasons, such as hectic work schedules, lack of desire to be part of the school environment, or fear of being judged, some parents do not realize that they are a critically important piece of the child’s academic success. Here teachers explain why and how they make contact with parents in an effort to create a strong home-school bond.

“I like to conference with the parents of the new students individually, prior to report card time, to determine goals and expectations to make the transition “seamless.” Students who move frequently are at a real disadvantage. Their parents are sometimes hesitant to talk with me. From the beginning I aim to establish a friendly, yet business-type relationship centering on the student. When they see that I truly care about the success of their child they seem to open up a bit.” Likewise another teacher wrote, “I like to speak to the parents to get a sense of the student, family and past experiences in school. Meeting with the parents face to face and focusing on the student helps me fill in some of the gaps and helps the parents feel more comfortable.”

Parent-teacher meetings are seen not only as important for the teacher as he or she gathers relevant and critical information on the students’ past, academic skills, social and emotional skills and family life. Conferences are also beneficial for the parents as well. “I conference with the parents to explain my expectations and to gather more information about the student and the family; I do this immediately. By putting the parent at ease, well, I think that filters down through the entire family and puts everyone at ease.”

Teachers also reported on the importance of parent, teacher and student conferences. The triad is of extreme importance whether you are meeting the student for the first time and trying to establish a rapport with the new family, or meeting throughout the year as the school year progresses. “I meet with the parents and the child before the

child starts. By including the student in the conversation they get to see me interacting in a positive way with their parents. My hope is that this translates into a team building exercise. I want the student to see us as a group of grown-ups who care about the child's learning.”

Summary

Parent involvement is viewed as one of the keys in helping to promote a strong home-school partnership, especially for students who have experienced an unstable school life. Teachers have a variety of choices when it comes to communicating with parents. From face to face encounters to written messages to telephone conversation, a wide array of communicative choices are available when contacting parents. Yet, the goal is simply not just to make contact in the beginning of the year or when a new child arrives. The goal of the educator, if they wish to begin creating a mutually respected relationship with the parents in order to benefit the student, is to make the initial contact with the parents and then sustain and nurture the relationship throughout the school year. For parent-teacher collaboration to be successful and for highly mobile students to begin to connect to a new school environment lines of communication must remain open and all parties involved must feel valued and appreciated.

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