

Improving Home-School Relations

By Arthur Joseph

Over the last few decades, research has provided overwhelming evidence of the complex and powerful influence of home and community on students' academic achievement. This has emphasised the need for parents and teachers to work together in the interest of desirable school outcomes. It is now widely recognised that educational strategies must take into account the social context within which students operate, and it is also acknowledged that establishing and maintaining home-school relations should be a key professional task of schools.

Traditionally, parental involvement in schools was limited to either attendance at meetings with an individual teacher, who would lecture the parent about the child's conduct or performance; or attendance at particular school events such as bazaars; or serving on a particular school committee such as the PTA. As a consequence of this limited view, it was mainly parents with higher levels of education and income, and whose children were doing well, who would generally be more directly involved in their children's school.

However, in more recent times the concept of parental involvement in school has been expanded to include the creation of opportunities for: (a) greater home-school and school-home communications, (b) greater volunteering by parents, (c) assisting parents in helping students to learn at home, (d) parents to participate strategically in school decisions and school governance, and (e) schools to collaborate more meaningfully with the community.

From my experience as an educator and from the many discussions I have had with other significant stakeholders in education, I am fully aware that our students' learning is firmly embedded in the network of their environmental, social, economic, and political experiences. Therefore, any one or a combination of the following factors may place children at great risk of underachieving in school:

- Growing up in poverty
- Inadequate learning opportunities
- Exposure to drugs or violence at home or at school
- Lack of after-school care
- Few role models
- Neighborhood distress
- Teen pregnancy
- Rundown school plant

Some or all of these factors affect a large percentage of our students. While parents cannot always change these factors, they can nevertheless exercise control over many of them.

It is generally acknowledged that the business of formal education or schooling is not the preserve of schools alone. The main stakeholders—the Ministry of Education (MOE),

parents, and the school—can contribute significantly, if they combine their efforts, in creating a nurturing environment in which children can grow and learn. The MOE is charged with the responsibility of providing policy guidelines, resources (human, physical, financial), an overall educational philosophy, and other curriculum matters. Principals and teachers are expected to provide instructional and administrative leadership, as well as pedagogical expertise. Parents are expected to provide informational, emotional, nutritional, and spiritual support for their children on a continuous basis. In recent times, the MOE has been making a great effort to have all schools involve parents in the educational process. Although most schools have heeded this call, a small minority has either resisted or complied under duress.

The evidence to date has revealed that when parents are involved in their children's schools a wide range of benefits accrue to those involved.

Students

- Better and improved academic performance
- Improved morale and attitude
- Improved school attendance
- More homework completed

Parents

- Better able to monitor school and classroom activities
- Better able to coordinate efforts with teachers

Teachers

- Able to give greater attention to at-risk students
- Able to identify problems that might inhibit student learning earlier
- Better able to share suggestions with parents on how to help students at home

Despite the obvious all-round benefits, many parents and teachers encounter obstacles to successful cooperation in children's education. For example, teachers sometimes resist tapping the potential of parents because they think that it involves too much time and energy. Also, some parents resist involvement because of work demands (particularly for single parents), time constraints, or their own negative experiences with schooling. More specifically, these barriers are often erected through fear, insecurity, or lack of information, which may originate from:

- Differing ideas among parents and teachers on what constitutes involvement
- A less than welcoming atmosphere towards visitors in schools and classrooms
- Inadequate and ineffective communication channels
- Insufficient training and experience on how to reach out to both mothers and fathers
- Lack of education and parenting skills
- Time pressure
- Job pressure

Although research has revealed the positive effects of parental involvement for students, there is not enough known about how to elicit productive participation, and which practices schools should use to optimise investment in the family and school connection. An American study has indicated that the strategies used by schools to encourage parental participation need to focus on other family attributes besides marital status, family size, level of parents' education, and social and economic status. The research indicates that parental involvement increases when the administration and teachers of a school communicate a genuine desire to involve parents by considering their needs. For example, when schools accommodate parents' work schedules by arranging meetings at times when parents can be available, parents' cooperation is more successful. Other activities schools can initiate to involve parents in their children's education include:

- Encouraging parents to view selected TV programmes with their children and the discuss their merits and weaknesses
- Asking children to write compositions/essays about stories told to them by their parents or grandparents
- Training teachers to work with parents and to view them as partners in the education of their children
- Arranging contacts in neutral settings or in a designated parents' room
- Offer informal classes in parenting or other topics of interest
- Arranging transportation for parents who do not own a vehicle
- Establishing a home/school coordinator to develop programmes and act as liaison between parents and school
- Encouraging both mothers and fathers to attend and speak out in steering committees and task forces
- Encouraging an active PTA

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