

Strengthening School-Home Connections

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As we come to the end of another school term, students are getting ready to go home for the holidays. For the most part, they are happy to do so. But what of their parents and teachers? I have heard parents complain about holidays as times when their children are “left on their hands” I have heard teachers bemoan the fact that in the holidays, students “forget everything they’ve learned and fall back into their bad habits.” While we may understand the concerns expressed, it is time that we examine the assumptions that inform such concerns, and try to reconceptualise the relationship between school and home.

The reality is that many educators believe that parents are simply not equipped to play a significant role in their children’s education. Someone even suggested to me recently that, given the realities of dysfunctional family relationships and of parents who are either unable or unwilling to be involved in their children’s education, schools should deliberately assume the responsibilities that the home has not fulfilled.

The notion is not new. “*In loco parentis*”—teachers taking the place of parents—is a principle that has often informed the practice of schools and of teachers who take their pastoral responsibilities seriously. Furthermore, there are undoubtedly times when schools and teachers need to assume that role, to tide over students who may be in crisis because their parents or guardians have either abandoned or abused their responsibilities. What is alarming, however, is the suggestion that schools should be expected, as a general state of affairs, to become surrogate homes for students.

A moment’s thought will reveal the difficulties that must attend any such proposal. In the first place, children’s relationship with their families will always be, and should always be, by definition, unique. The family can provide the child with individualised care and understanding that schools can never hope to replicate. If children do not receive nurturing and have their most basic physiological and psychological needs met at home, almost any attempt to create substitutes will, in effect, be placing a plaster on a wound that will not heal.

Family life is also important because, in the second place, participation in their home cultures enables children to know and understand their group’s shared ideas about values, beliefs, and behaviours. This gives the child the power to influence his or her environment, and to have an impact on the world. It certainly helps to shape how children respond to life in school.

Finally, home practices and understandings influence a child’s academic performance. Research indicates, for instance, that such practices and understandings contribute significantly to students’ literacy development. Researchers have also found that active parental involvement in educational programmes is associated with children’s mastery of basic school skills. They achieve greater gains in the cognitive, language, and socio-emotional domains.

We need to be clear, therefore, that parents and the home cannot be left out of the educational equation. Nor can parents be treated as second-class partners. Educators must therefore reflect on how we can involve them more deeply, and in ways that will have a positive effect. Perhaps our first task as educators is to stop seeing parents as the enemy, or as being so inept at all things educational that they will inevitably sabotage our best efforts.

It is true that parents may sometimes seem to be undermining what theory suggests is good educational practice. The parent who flogs a child in whom we are trying to inculcate a love for learning, because that child didn't get his homework "correct" may make us tear our hair in frustration. Parents who seem to take no interest in supervising children's homework, or who make no attempts to come to Parents' Days or to attend school events, may cause us to question the possible effectiveness of what we are doing.

Nevertheless, we must keep in mind that parents usually do want what is best for their children as much as, or even more than, we do. If their understanding of what is "best" and ours is far apart, the challenge facing us is to initiate communication, and to structure relationships that will facilitate the development of a greater, more mutual understanding between two sets of people, both of whom should already have a shared interest in children's welfare.

In attempting to develop closer relationships, schools will do well to examine possible reasons for parents' refusal to participate in school life. Sometimes the problem is not that they are unwilling to do so, but that they fear they may not have the necessary skills or knowledge. Teachers know the importance of self-efficacy in their own practice—how often do we, or our colleagues, avoid certain innovations because we are not sure that we can carry out the tasks associated with those innovations effectively? If teachers, who are often trained to teach, approach some educational tasks with trepidation, how much more might parents question their own ability to supervise their children's work, especially when curriculum content grows ever more specialised and divorced from the content and methods parents may have encountered in their own school days?

Yet, parents do need to be involved in the process and, in fact, they may often possess knowledge and expertise in areas that would help to enrich the school's formal, co-curricular and extra-curricular programmes. Schools must therefore initiate programmes that will inform parents about what their children are learning, and how they can become involved. Moreover, just as teachers do not master new methods and content after attending one short workshop, it is unfair to expect parents to feel confident in their ability to play a positive role based on one or two letters or newsletters from school. They should be provided with ongoing opportunities to collaborate with the school in the development and delivery of curricula that students will perceive as relevant to their needs and interests.

For some schools and teachers, this is still not normal procedure; furthermore, it will always take considerable care and effort to ensure that such productive partnerships are

established and maintained. On the other hand, once this is done, schools will not have to waste time acting as surrogate parents—a task at which they will never be entirely successful. They can instead provide structures for parents that will help them to help their children more effectively.

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