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“Everyone Should Feel so Connected and Safe”: Using Parent Action Teams to Reach all Families

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This article discusses efforts underway through a university-community partnership to engage parents in the educational experiences of their children at a rural elementary school in the Pacific Northwest. There is a well-established literature base on the power of engaging parents in the school experience of their children (Chavkin & Williams, 1993; Dunsmore & Fisher, 2010; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Hong, 2012; Warren, Hong, Leung Rubin & Sychitkokhong Uy, 2009). However, within this literature is rather unsettling insights into the lack of doing so. Study after study points to the relative ease of incorporating middle-class and affluent parents and caregivers into the school setting through such vehicles as Parent-Teacher Associations, Booster Clubs, and other volunteer opportunities that are more accessible to those who are privileged enough to have the necessary time, transportation, language fluency and social capital to invest into the school. There is a significantly higher degree of difficulty however, in developing practices of engagement for parents of lesser means, or who are encumbered by a disproportionate number of challenges to being involved (e.g., lack of flexibility in scheduling, inconsistent transportation, and history of oppression or subjugation by large systems, such as the schooling system).

Insinuations abound that parents of lower socio-economic status, those with lower educational attainment and positions of prominence, and those with migrant or minority status are less interested in being engaged in their children's schooling. The authors of this piece beg to differ. Comprised of an elementary school teacher and staff member, the school principal, a staff member from the district office, a professor of Human Services, and five parents of children from the school, this group has chosen to build upon the premise that a family's seeming disengagement in schooling does not negate their love, care, and hopes for their children. This general sense of optimism should not be mistaken as minimizing the realities of struggle and hardship. There is no suggestion by the group that challenges should not be taken into account, or that there are indeed some parents who will never be able to be involved in their children's schooling. After all, among the group, a score of first-person accounts of hardship and struggle have been shared. Challenges associated with poverty, immigration status, language barriers, job status, food and housing insecurity, and other struggles have been, and continue to be, experienced by various members of the group. They could choose to focus on such trials and hardships, but instead, the group is focusing its energy and attention on the positive. Through a participatory action-research process of inquiry and action, this group is developing personal and professional relationships throughout the school community, learning more about the assets and aspirations of each of the school's families in the process.

The group, referred to as the *Parent Action Team*, set out to address the goal of increasing parental involvement in the school. The school serves slightly over 400 students in kindergarten through fifth grades. It is situated in a community that includes the busy life of a small city on the I-5 corridor while surrounded by rural farmland. About 65 percent of the students are Hispanic/Latino and about 30 percent are White (in a state that is 81 percent White). Approximately 80 percent of the students are eligible for free/reduced price lunch and 35 percent are designated as English Language Learners. Mobility and migrant status are also factors at the school, with a significant proportion of families employed in the agricultural industry. Staff at the school are highly committed to working with this student demographic population and well trained in effective instructional strategies designed to meet the learning needs present in the school. However, despite a committed and well-educated supportive staff, the school has not been satisfied with the degree to which students' family members and care givers have been engaged in the learning community.

Process

The Parent Action Team is utilizing a community-navigator approach, whereby the parents within the group are seen as community insiders who have greater access and connection to other families within the school community. This approach has been developed in large part based on previous successful research in the same geographic region, which engaged community members in better understanding issues faced by those who were experiencing poverty (Winter, et. al., 2007). Participants of those earlier efforts to address poverty consistently called for increased supports in navigating the large and daunting systems of education and human services. An underlying and critical theme from participant requests was for those serving in the role of navigators to be lay persons, who were from the local community and experiencing poverty themselves, and otherwise whom the community members and school families could relate to.

As one participant put it,

Here is what I hope will happen: That we will have a network of people from our neighborhoods who will support [us] as we are struggling to get the negative ties broken, and to pull ahead... It's all the emotional stuff that comes along with it, too, as well as intimidation and fear from professionals and outsiders. I don't think it's a program. I don't think it's money. It's attitude and relationships, and education... We need to somehow make it so everyone feels emotionally safe and tied to the people here, and so people feel like they can access what they need. (Winter, et. al., 2007, p. 7)

Comments of being intimidated, uncomfortable, fearful, and generally put off by school personnel have been common in lower socio-economic-status communities. A power discrepancy and history of negative engagement with school systems often fuels the tensions and barriers to parent-school connectivity. To counter this relational barrier, the Parent Action Team is utilizing a participatory action research (PAR) process, which includes parent members as equally valued partners in the research. This shared power and workload is a common element of PAR. Participatory action research provides opportunity for participants to drive the efforts for change. Great value is placed on insider knowledge, and in reality, only insiders have access to this knowledge – thus it is critically important to have them as an element of the research team from the outset. As such, all participants are equally valued.

This form of qualitative inquiry can generally be understood as a series of planning how to address issues of concern (such as how better to connect families and the school); acting on those plans; reflecting on and evaluating the effectiveness of the action; making adjustments to the planned actions; and repeating the cycle (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; Lewin, 1946; Newman & Fitzgerald, 2001). PAR is increasingly looked upon as a valid method of generating valuable knowledge, particularly when accessing insider knowledge, which is precisely what this effort is seeking. It involves participants as both subjects and researchers and frequently includes “. . . (1) full client-consultant partnership, (2) collaborative learning throughout the action research process, (3) the importance of local tacit knowledge, (4) a willingness to examine assumptions in the system, and (5) emergent process” (Newman & Fitzgerald, 2001, p. 40).

In general, PAR begins with the idea that an improvement or change in the participant’s area of work, community, school, or family is desirable (e.g., a change in how the school engages and works with families). A group then forms to clarify the mutual concern that has been identified (i.e., the Parent Action Team). The group makes the decision to work together and focus improvement strategies on their concern, developing a plan of action to improve current practice by using the community-navigator approach to engaging more families. The group members then act to implement the plan, which by design must be deliberate and controlled by implementing the action-research in a thoughtful and intentional manner. This action is observed and reflected on, and is aided by discussion among the group members (Carson & Sumara, 1997; Greenwood & Levin, 2007; Kuhne & Quigley, 1997). Group reflection can lead to a reconstruction of the meaning of the social situation, and provides a basis for further planning, thereby continuing the cycle. These steps are carried out in a more careful, systematic and rigorous way than those which usually occur in daily practice or social interactions (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). The intent of this systematic exploration is to lead to new ways of thinking, new individual behavior and practice, new organizational behavior, and beneficial outcomes in the real world.

This type of research calls on its participants to play an insider-outsider role, on the one hand being fully engaged in the immediacy of the setting, and on the other, taking a reflective and inquisitive view from afar. Alternating between these two perspectives gives the insider critical distance, allowing them to be more critical of the findings within the group. Since participants are personally connected to the environment being studied, and may connect emotionally to, or otherwise struggle personally with perceived problems they are seeing in the school setting, they have an explicit interest in successful change. Because this may positively or negatively affect their children or their students, they literally have to live with the consequences of the research. This level of immediacy provides PAR a concrete reality check and a heightened sense of need for credibility, authenticity and validity. Thus, PAR maintains a high degree of personal relativity for its participants due to the personal nature of the issues (Kemmis & McTaggart 2000). Furthermore, participant change is the heart of social change, which in turn is at the core of the reason the group desires to learn of the strengths and aspirations of the school’s families. By better understanding and connecting with families, Parent Action Team believes that traditionally marginalized families within the school will increasingly engage alongside all others within the school community.

As pulled from Kemmis and McTaggart (2000), Watkins & Brooks (1994), and Susman (1993), at its base, PAR efforts share five characteristics, which have held true for this current work:

1. Participants are brought together from within a target environment to engage themselves in the effort as co-researchers, with the intent to bring about change.
2. The criterion of success is not whether participants follow prescribed steps, but rather if they have a strong and authentic sense of development and evolution in their level of awareness of the topic at hand – in this case, the education needs among underserved families in the school community.
3. PAR is a collaborative effort.
4. PAR is a social and educational process in and of itself.
5. The impact of the work will directly be connected to the participants.

Results

An element of this methodology that is rarely discussed in the literature is that it has potential to be thoroughly fun and enjoyable for its participants. This sense of personal fulfillment is present for and among the Parent Action Team. The development of positive and trusting relationships over a relatively short period of time (roughly nine months) has been a profound direct result of this effort to date. The title of this article captures a quotation from one participant parent who previously had little direct connection with other parents, staff and administrators at the school: “This is what we want. Everyone should feel so connected and safe!” (Camerena, M., personal communication, October 14, 2014).

Similar comments are made nearly each time the group gets together, discussed both informally, in general discussion, and in times of intentional debriefing and assessing value of time together. One parent with limited English proficiency stated (in Spanish , then translated into English),

Before knowing you, people are too embarrassed to talk with you because they don’t speak English so well. Now, since we have started to develop this relationship, we know it’s OK. We can try to speak English, even if it’s not good, or even if we only know a few words. And to not be embarrassed! (Qiroz, B., personal communication, August 20, 2014).

Two months later, the same participant reiterated her sentiment about the importance of trust in working through language barriers by stating:

When I first started my kids here, in Kindergarten, I couldn’t talk with anyone. My kids knew it. I couldn’t say to them, ‘I am going to check in with your teacher to see how you are behaving and doing in school’, they knew I couldn’t, or wouldn’t do it. But now I feel comfortable, even with just a few words of English that I know, and mostly I feel connected enough to be comfortable speaking with anyone (Qiroz, B., personal communication, October 28, 2014).

She went on to explain how empowering this is, in that she feels she has a much more significant role in her children’s educational experience. She feels connected enough with the school to work together with teachers and administrators to support and be engaged in her children’s schooling.

The results of the participants being more connected to one another builds social capital for each individual (Barratt, 2012; Kwon & Adler, 2014). Perhaps more salient than that, however, is the contagion of connectivity, and a growing trust and sense of community that is felt throughout the greater school community. Christakis and Fowler (2009) write eloquently about the power of contagious emotions and ways of being that essentially spread throughout social networks. A significant outcome thus far in the Parent Action Team's time together is the degree to which all individuals is able to spread a sense of trust in school personnel and diverse sectors of families within the school community throughout their own personal networks. Similarly, school personnel are now able to speak more from personal experience when engaging with their colleagues and discussing families' strengths and aspirations. The members of the group can, in a sense, vouch for each other, with parents speaking to other parents about their positive experiences working with school personnel, and *vice versa*, with school personnel able to speak first-hand with their colleagues about the strengths and assets of the families, thus stretching their various circles of influence (Vandercook, 1999).

As noted by a school administrator during a conversation with the group related to their perspectives of parents' interests in various types of school engagement,

I have a very different sense now than I did before about why you get so excited about those movie nights. You have a value about family gatherings and traditions of spending time together...knowing that value set, and keeping that in mind gives a deeper meaning and purpose for a simple event like that. (Nutting, B., personal communication, October 14, 2014).

This statement was made after an activity the group engaged in where participants brought family artifacts: photos and other items symbolizing what is important to their families, and family origins, cultures, and traditions. This was a powerful and touching process, whereby each member was able to share about personal motivations, aspirations and past experience. Through this, the group developed a much richer awareness of each other's family cultures and ways of being.

This insight then led to increased communication with school personnel and school families alike, related to intentionally working to build tighter community bonds within the school. Since its initial meeting to develop the parent-action-team process, the school has seen a marked increase in the number of parents attending school events and a general sense of connectedness. Numbers of parents attending social events and parent leadership (previously PTA) group meetings have increased significantly, with recent events bringing in roughly 150 participants. As levels of trust among participants has increased, so too has the depth of sharing of ideas, perspectives and critically-conscious questioning of the historical ways of practice and engagement within the school. For instance, the group identified a range of specific actions to take in order to tap into the underlying strengths of its members and the greater school community. It did so by casting aside negative aspersions and deficit-based considerations of parents who are not as engaged in the education experience as school personnel may wish them to be. The group identified barriers to connections with families, such as language and fluency barriers (with 35 percent of the student body designated as English Language Learners, the reality is that a higher percentage of their parents and older family members have less English

fluency than their children), lack of trust, and an intimidating structure for traditional parent–teacher conferences. Simultaneously, the group identified opportunities to enhance relationships through such steps as enhancing family visits and family engagement nights in the school. This was done through each member’s growing trust and ability to be open, candid, and vulnerable, as can be seen in this statement by a school administrator: “We are improving our ability to hear everyone’s voice. Schools put barriers up on being able to hear everyone’s voice... a million institutional barriers that block us from engaging and hearing voices” (Nutting, B., personal communication, June 23, 2014).

In addition to the important outcomes relating to bridging and bonding of relationships between and among parents and school personnel, there has been a noticeable change in the overall school atmosphere, in the level of family engagement in events, and even in student and teacher behavior and success. For instance, there has been a noticeable decrease in the number of behavior intervention referrals, commonly referred to as detentions. Students who receive referrals spend at least one recess with an instructional assistant in an intervention room, which has a make-it-right component to it. The referral forms also go home for parent signatures. During the 2013-14 academic year, prior to the formation of the Parent Action Team, data show there were a total of 420 referrals, with 140 in October, 110 in November, 80 in December, and 100 in January. During the current academic year, while the Parent Action Team has been operating, those numbers have declined by more than 60 percent overall, to 67 in October (54 percent reduction), 50 in November (45 percent reduction), 28 in December (65 percent reduction), and 19 in January (81 percent reduction).

It is believed that these significant reductions in intervention referrals of students is due to a combination of factors, including both an increased sense of positive community within the school, and among students and their families, and an increased likelihood that teachers and staff will consider working with students in alternative, more relational means than sending them to a referral. In other words, it is believed that there is a shift from deficit-leaning, corrective measures to an asset- and relational-oriented practice of engagement. This reduction in intervention referrals transfers directly over to a reduction in negative interaction between families and school personnel, as well as time students spend removed from their learning and social, community-building environment.

Goals and Challenges

The combination of beneficial outcomes the school has experienced throughout the period of time the Parent Action Team has been operating is inspiring to the group. To see, feel, and experience the immediacy of outcomes that are possible with the PAR method has been motivating for participants. There are inherent challenges to engaging in this process, however, from the complicated task of coordinating multiple schedules, to language barriers, and the risks members take to be vulnerable with their honest opinions, to the sundry competing commitments for time. The language barriers, for instance, slow down the communication process, in that as participants honor each individual’s language of origin, there is a need for translation in real-time. Therefore, communication flows in a start-and-stop fashion as all that is told is translated and reconsidered for clarification. Meetings are generally in the evenings, during time when participants would otherwise be home with their families, perhaps having a meal together. It is,

therefore, not uncommon to have members bring their children with them, which has been welcomed; however, this brings with it the obvious challenges associated with simultaneously tending to children and being fully engaged in the meetings.

At this stage of the group's development, there is a sense of camaraderie and friendship, with a genuine sense of appreciation for each other. Tending to each other's children, sharing of miscellaneous pot-luck food, and extending patience and grace in navigating communication and language barriers is all common. While there is at least one bi-lingual member present at each meeting to support with interpreting and translation, everyone has shown an attempt to communicate in their non-native language, which has been identified as an asset of the group. While language barriers admittedly slow the process of communicating, in no way is it seen as a deficit, but rather an opportunity to further learn from and about one another. Additionally this intermittent struggle with language has highlighted the assets brought to the school community by the school's bilingual children, many of whom naturally serve as translator and interpreter of information between the school and the home.

The Parent Action Team intends to continue its work, with hopes of expanding its reach, bringing in additional parents and school personnel, or perhaps launching separate Action Teams that could meet on their own accord, with periodic comings together of each group, thus growing the network of connection. At the core of this effort has been the principal goal of keeping children in the center. To create the best possible learning environment that captures and embraces the strengths of all of the school's children. As mentioned by one parent-participant, "This is such a good idea... and it makes kids and families feel good in school" (Eco, A. personal communication, January 13, 2015). The building of connections across social divides is powerful and supports a deeper understanding and appreciation of differences. The relationships students have with school personnel, with each other, and with their classmate's families are predictors of whether or not they will remain engaged in their educational journeys (Korsmo, 2014). It is this group's goal to provide enriching and positive engagement for each and every family within the school, and to enrich the sense of community even beyond the school's walls. As one member put it,

I want everyone to be able to share the fun times, to get to know each other and see that everyone here loves their kid and wants the best for their kid. To not feel so different or alone. To be able to walk down the street and see another parent who they didn't know before, and say, 'Hey, I know you!' It just makes it better. It Makes us better. Better. Safer. Everything. (Youngquist, S., personal communication, October 14, 2014).

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