

Theme: Importance of On-Going Communication and Parental Engagement to Support Student Learning

In schools, increased parental engagement has been shown to improve student educational achievement, learning, and social skills and behaviour (Auerbach, 2007; Hill et al., 2004; Sheridan et al., 2011; Fenton et al., 2017). Parent involvement is believed to be associated with positive student outcomes through two potential mechanisms: (1) the student's perception of cognitive competence and (2) the quality of the student-teacher relationship. Engagement at schools commonly include attending parent-teacher meetings, helping with homework, and volunteering at school (Topor et al., 2010). Broadly, parental engagement is defined as (1) parenting practices and parent-child communication about academic achievement, (2) parent-teacher and parent-administrator communication, and/or (3) parental involvement in school activities (Finan et al., 2018). In sum, parental engagement is complex, dynamic, and an action-oriented practice that centres children's learning, and takes place across schools, at home, and in the community.

Given the importance of parental engagement to a variety of student academic outcomes and social development, it is critical to ensure parents have numerous opportunities to engage in schools and participate in the community widely. To a great extent, the more residents of a community can feel engaged and connected, the greater their chances to have an enhanced quality of life such as opportunities for health, wealth, and education (Wallace & Pichler, 2009). Community engagement promotes civic well-being and strengthens the capacity of schools, families, and the wider community to support youths' development. Despite the growing awareness of the importance of parental and community engagement, schools and community hubs that largely serve racialized and low-income students experience greater challenges maintaining engagement with service users (Cappella et al., 2013; Okello et al., 2013; Toronto

Foundation, 2021). Unfortunately, as a trend, strained parent-school relationships in racialized and low-income communities are influenced by teachers' "deficit" thinking, shaped by years of marginalization, ineffective policy, high poverty, limited funding, and other stresses that further strain teachers' relationships with families and communities (Flores, 2021; Gorski, 2012). Traditionally, the education system situated student difficulty by framing students and their families as lacking some of the academic and cultural resources necessary to succeed in society (Smit, 2012). This is deficit thinking, which focuses on student shortcomings and short-term solutions to address it. This perspective ignores the role of institutional racism and other systemic barriers impacting student learning in schools (Shizha, 2016). Viewing students and parents through a deficit lens perpetuates racist and/or classist stereotypes, and subsequently alienates students from high educational attainment, creating more barriers to achieving a high-quality life and becoming an active community member.

Both parents and teachers play a role in managing and improving parent-teacher communication and engagement. General studies have found that parents' motivation to participate in schools is shaped by three interrelated factors: (1) how they understand their role as parents, (2) their sense of efficacy in positively influencing their children's success, and (3) the invitations, opportunities, and demands for engagement they receive from school (Anderson & Minke, 2007; Deslandes, 2001; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Thus, strategies that build effective parent engagement must address each of these factors to address the disparity in parent-teacher communication and engagement. Other barriers that may inhibit parental engagement include lack of accessibility (i.e., school communications that are accessible only via computers or only in one language which may be overlooked by a significant number of parents) and limited family resources (i.e., lack of time or accessibility to transportation). These challenges

require conscientious effort to facilitate parental engagement. While comprehensive frameworks for measuring parent and family engagement have emerged in recent years such as the Adolescent Communities of Engagement [ACE], recommended best practices and processes have not yet been systematically and empirically evaluated for their effects on child and adolescent outcomes in varying contexts (Borup et al., 2020). Still, within the ACE framework, factors known to impact parent engagement are (1) their motivational beliefs, (2) if the student asks for help, and (3) parents' perceived ability and energy to help.

From an educator's perspective, it is critical to understand how micro and macro level factors influence communication behaviours in parents from racialized communities who have unique barriers to engagement such as lack of English proficiency, resource constraints, and differences in cultural understandings and expectations of teachers, schools, and communities. Research on some of the disparities in parent-involvement and teachers' communication with parents suggests that both students' race and immigrant status influence teacher-parent communication behaviour (Li & Fischer, 2017). Systemic racism is still prevalent throughout the public school system in Canada and minoritized students and their parents are often subjected to microaggressions throughout their day. Much like deficit thinking, many staff members are not aware that they carry inherent bias that favours the White dominant culture. Similarly, Cherng (2016) found that in a sample of about 10,000 predominantly second year public high-school students, their parents, and teachers from the 2002 Education Longitudinal Study in the United States, there were sharp contrasts in how math and English teachers communication with parents from different racial, ethnic, and immigrant backgrounds, reflecting many existing stereotypes about Black, Latino, and Asian American students. Other factors that influence teacher-parent communication and correlate with student achievement include parents' occupation and

migration background. Specifically, parents' occupation has a positive impact on achievement, while having a migration background has a negative impact on achievement (Thomas et al., 2020). In the study, these two demographic variables were used as proxies for social status (i.e., migration status) and socio-economic status (i.e., occupation). Regarding the socio-demographic variables, it can be deduced that parents' occupational status and the family's migration background have a larger explanatory power compared to the perceptions of parents and students regarding parental involvement. This high importance of socio-economic variables is also known as the SES achievement gap (e.g. Loeb 2007), referring to the general trend of white students having higher achievement scores compared to minority students. The same counts for low and high-income families, where students from low-income families score much lower on tests than students from higher-income families. When considering parent engagement as a process, important characteristics include the kind of support that certain students need. For example, first-generation students benefit from emotional support, not financial support, but continuing-generation students benefit from financial support (Roksa & Kinsley, 2018). As such, gaining a deeper understanding of parent–teacher–school dynamics and actions surrounding parental engagement has the potential to inform best practices for improving students' learning and development.

Within the community, and at the macro level, participation in extracurricular activities in supplementary programs is associated with positive academic outcomes and social behaviour (Darling et al., 2005; Onyeka et al., 2021; Toronto Foundation, 2021). In terms of parental engagement, there are four ways parents can influence their children's activities through community extracurricular activities and participation (see Kang et al., 2017); (1) initiate and arrange activities, (2) supervise peer relations, (3) act as advisers in regard to these relations, and

(4) monitor choice of social activities and with whom. Parental participation in general reflects parental attitudes and beliefs about youth programs. Many middle-class families view extracurricular activities as facilitating important traits among youth such as independence, social skills, and teamwork. As such, families with low-incomes may wish to use extracurricular activities as a way to mitigate neighbourhood risks such as gun violence and gang activity and poor outcomes such as school disengagement and drop-out. However, there are growing gaps in the wake of income inequality that is shaping access to participation in organized extracurricular activities and social mobility (Snellman et al., 2017). In the literature, this is referred to as an engagement gap, where children from low-income households do not have access to the same opportunities for extracurricular activities compared to children in high-income households (An & Western, 2019).

In sum, the benefits of parent engagement in classrooms, remote or in-person, are clear, yet there are several emerging challenges to building effective parent engagement and family–school partnerships within the context of COVID-19. First, COVID-19 has affected the way researchers study parental engagement (Novianti & Garzia, 2020). As such, it is difficult to accurately measure how engagement behaviours have been shaped by COVID-19. Second, the reality is that many parents experience COVID-19 challenges, particularly related to burnout and helping with homework (Anakwe et al., 2021). However, the variety of challenges identified that parents encountered were closely related to the perceptions they had about their roles in online learning, which goes back to general findings that parents must be clear on their role within the broader school-community ecosystem. This includes specifically knowing how to use certain technologies, effective timing or scheduling, and knowing how to accommodate their child's unique needs in an online setting. In addition, parent–teacher factors such as differences in

values, beliefs, and expectations about what should be done and what is helpful and lack of mutual trust and understanding have also been cited as barriers to successful family–school partnerships (Đurišić & Bunijevac, 2017). Other barriers that existed prior to COVID-19 that may be exacerbated now include constraints of time and resources, parents’ low self-efficacy or confidence in their ability to support their child’s learning, and fear of language or culture-related barriers (Morelli et al., 2020). One way to offset some of these challenges includes applying a culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogy and a student-centered approach to teaching that recognizes the importance of students’ cultural identities and lived experiences in all aspects of learning (Ladson-Billings, 1995). The approach is meant to promote engagement, enrichment, and achievement of all students by embracing diversity and cultural strengths. At a structural level, educational policies that commit to providing accessible and affordable support to parents, such as access to English courses or technology, may promote parental engagement by removing the barriers for parent-teacher relationships. Restructuring the school so that schools offer full service educational and health promoting programs including social mobility strengthens community members’ ability to support the students.

For educators, challenges exacerbated by COVID-19 relate to time constraints and a lack of training and skills for effectively working with parents to facilitate student learning. As a consequence, teachers who struggle to connect with parents face intense discouragement, demoralization, and burnout. Teacher burnout has long been understood to have significant negative effects on teaching efficacy. It has three distinctive symptoms: exhaustion that is characterized by a lack of emotional energy and a feeling of being strained and tired at work; cynicism consisting of detachment from work, in general, and particularly from colleagues, parents or even pupils, and a sense of professional inadequacy

consisting of a reduced sense of personal accomplishments (Pietarinen et al., 2021). Education policymakers should be aware that racial and immigrant disparities exist in teacher-parent interactions and encourage more training in teacher preparation programs and professional development coursework for teachers and school administrators. Perceptions based on deficit thinking by teachers affects important aspects of students' learning experience and achievement. Training should make educators and staff aware of these perceptions to avoid discriminatory racial stereotypes. By addressing certain barriers, such as lack of English proficiency, as obstacles to communicating with parents, combined with effective teacher training on parent-teacher engagement, students have better opportunities and learning conditions for academic success. As the disruptions created by COVID-19 are relatively new, more research is needed to identify and mitigate the challenges racialized and low-income communities experience as part of improving access to community programs in inner-city neighbourhoods as a means of mitigating systemic barriers to teaching and learning.

References

- An, W., & Western, B. (2019). Social capital in the creation of cultural capital: Family structure, neighborhood cohesion, and extracurricular participation. *Social Science Research, 81*, 192-208.
- Anakwe, A., Majee, W., Noel-London, K., Zachary, I., & BeLue, R. (2021). Sink or swim: Virtual life challenges among African American families during COVID-19 lockdown. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 18*(8), 4290.
- Anderson, K. J., & Minke, K. M. (2007). Parent involvement in education: Toward an understanding of parents' decision making. *The Journal of Educational Research, 100*(5), 311-323.
- Auerbach, S. (2007). Visioning parent engagement in urban schools. *Journal of School Leadership, 17*(6), 699-734.
- Borup, J., Jensen, M., Archambault, L., Short, C., & Graham, C. (2020). Supporting students during COVID-19: Developing and leveraging academic communities of engagement in a time of crisis. *Journal of Technology and Teacher Education, 28*(2), 161-169.
- Burdette, P. J., & Greer, D. L. (2014). Online learning and students with disabilities: Parent perspectives. *Journal of Interactive Online Learning, 13*(2), 67-88.
<https://www.ncolr.org/jiol/issues/pdf/13.2.4.pdf>
- Cappella, E., Kim, H. Y., Neal, J. W., & Jackson, D. R. (2013). Classroom peer relationships and behavioral engagement in elementary school: The role of social network equity. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 52*(3-4), 367-379.
- Cherng, H. Y. (2016). Is all classroom conduct equal? Teacher contact with parents of racial/ethnic minority and immigrant adolescents. *Teachers College Record, 118*(11), 1-32.
- Darling, N., Caldwell, L. L., & Smith, R. (2005). Participation in school-based extracurricular activities and adolescent adjustment. *Journal of Leisure Research, 37*(1), 51-76.
- Deslandes, R. (2001). A vision of home-school partnership: Three complementary conceptual frameworks. *A Bridge to the Future: Collaboration between Parents, Schools and Communities*, 11-23.
- Đurišić, M., & Bunijevac, M. (2017). Parental involvement as an important factor for successful education. *Center for Educational Policy Studies Journal, 7*(3), 137-153.
- Fenton, P., Ocasio-Stoutenburg, L., & Harry, B. (2017). The power of parent engagement: Sociocultural considerations in the quest for equity. *Theory Into Practice, 56*(3), 214-225.

- Finan, S. J., Swierzbiolek, B., Priest, N., Warren, N., & Yap, M. (2018). Parental engagement in preventive parenting programs for child mental health: A systematic review of predictors and strategies to increase engagement. *PeerJ*, 6, e4676.
- Flores, O. J., & Kyere, E. (2021). Advancing equity-based school leadership: The importance of family-school relationships. *The Urban Review*, 53(1), 127-144.
- Gorski, P. C. (2012). Perceiving the problem of poverty and schooling: Deconstructing the class stereotypes that mis-shape education practice and policy. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 45(2), 302-319.
- Hill, N. E., Castellino, D. R., Lansford, J. E., Nowlin, P., Dodge, K. A., Bates, J. E., & Pettit, G. S. (2004). Parent academic involvement as related to school behavior, achievement, and aspirations: Demographic variations across adolescence. *Child development*, 75(5), 1491-1509.
- Hoover-Dempsey, K. V., Walker, J. M., Sandler, H. M., Whetsel, D., Green, C. L., Wilkins, A. S., & Closson, K. (2005). Why do parents become involved? Research findings and implications. *The Elementary School Journal*, 106(2), 105-130.
- Kang, H., Raffaelli, M., Bowers, J., Munoz, L., & Simpkins, S. (2017). Parental participation in the process of youth joining a program: Perspectives from adolescents and parents. *Family Relations*, 66, 258-272, DOI:10.1111/fare.12247.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). Toward a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. *American Educational Research Journal*, 32(3), 465-491.
- Li, A., & Fischer, M. (2017). Advantaged/disadvantaged school neighborhoods, parental networks, and parental involvement at elementary school. *Sociology of Education*, 90(4), 355-377. DOI: 10.1177/0038040717732332
- Morelli, M., Cattelino, E., Baiocco, R., Trumello, C., Babore, A., Candelori, C., & Chirumbolo, A. (2020). Parents and children during the COVID-19 lockdown: The influence of parenting distress and parenting self-efficacy on children's emotional well-being. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11, 2584.
- Novianti, R., & Garzia, M. (2020). Parental engagement in children's online learning during covid-19 pandemic. *Journal of Teaching and Learning in Elementary Education*, 3(2), 117-131.
- Okello, G., Jones, C., Bonareri, M., Ndegwa, S. N., Mcharo, C., Kengo, J., ... & Brooker, S. J. (2013). Challenges for consent and community engagement in the conduct of cluster randomized trial among school children in low income settings: Experiences from Kenya. *Trials*, 14(1), 1-11.
- Onyeka, O., Richards, M., Tyson McCrea, K., Miller, K., Matthews, C., Donnelly, W., & Swint, K. (2021). The role of positive youth development on mental health for youth of color living in high-stress communities: A strengths-based approach. *Psychological Services*.

- Pietarinen, J., Pyhältö, K., Haverinen, K., Leskinen, E., & Soini, T. (2021). Is individual-and school-level teacher burnout reduced by proactive strategies? *International Journal of School & Educational Psychology*, 9(4), 340-355.
- Roksa, J., & Kinsley, P. (2018). The role of family support in facilitating academic success of low-income students. *Research in Higher Education*, 60, 415-436.
- Sheridan, S. M., Knoche, L. L., Kupzyk, K. A., Edwards, C. P., & Marvin, C. A. (2011). A randomized trial examining the effects of parent engagement on early language and literacy: The Getting Ready intervention. *Journal of School Psychology*, 49(3), 361-383.
- Shizha, E. (2016). Marginalization of African Canadian students in mainstream schools: Are Afrocentric schools the answer. *The Education of African Canadian Children: Critical Perspectives*, 187-206.
- Smit, R. (2012). Towards a clearer understanding of student disadvantage in higher education: Problematising deficit thinking. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 31(3), 369-380.
- Snellman, K., Silva, J. M., Frederick, C. B., & Putnam, R. D. (2017). The engagement gap: Social mobility and extracurricular participation among American youth In *In The Post-Urban World* (pp. 129-142). Routledge.
- Thomas, V., Muls, J., De Backer, F., & Lombaerts, K. (2020). Middle school student and parent perceptions of parental involvement: Unravelling the associations with school achievement and wellbeing. *Educational Studies*, 46(4), 404–421. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03055698.2019.1590182>
- Topor, D. R., Keane, S. P., Shelton, T. L., & Calkins, S. D. (2010). Parent involvement and student academic performance: A multiple mediational analysis. *Journal of Prevention & Intervention in the Community*, 38(3), 183-197.
- Toronto Foundation. (2021). *Toronto's vital signs: 2021 report*. <https://torontofoundation.ca/vitalsigns2021/>
- Wallace, C., & Pichler, F. (2009). More participation, happier society? A comparative study of civil society and the quality of life. *Social Indicators Research*, 93(2), 255-274.