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A STUDY OF SELECTED TEACHERS' METHODS TO IMPROVE PARENTAL
INVOLVEMENT IN EDUCATION

by
Michael Sandberg

A Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
Master of Arts in Special Education Degree
of
The Graduate School
at
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Approved by _____
Advisor

Date Approved 5/4/09

ABSTRACT

Michael Sandberg
A STUDY OF SELECTED TEACHERS' METHODS TO IMPROVE PARENTAL
INVOLVEMENT IN EDUCATION

2009

Professor Jay Kuder
Master of Arts in Special Education

The primary purpose of this study was to explore teaching methods of selected teachers that help to improve parental involvement in education at a middle school in South Jersey. The study also investigated demographic factors such as gender, subject taught, subject or discipline taught, and years of teaching experience. Data on the attitudes were collected by means of a survey using 14 Likert-type items using a 4 point scale and 4 open-ended questions. Research and this study show that a variety of teacher's methods could improve the communication and involvement of parents in the educational process.

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CHAPTER ONE

I. INTRODUCTION

There are many factors that influence the learning experience. One such factor is the involvement of parents in their children's educational journey. Research in this area shows that a child stands a much better chance of succeeding in school and graduating if parents are actively involved in their education. For example, Dauber and Epstein (1993) found that school and teacher practices were the strongest predictors of parental involvement. Specific practices that have been shown to predict parental involvement include: assigning homework designed to increase student-parent interactions, holding workshops for families, and communicating to parents about their children's education.

Teachers are expected to form a communication bond with parents that should help keep parents informed and involved in their child's education. This thesis seeks to investigate the effects of parent education programs on children's academic achievement and the characteristics of effective parent education programs. We will explore methods that teachers can use in the classrooms to invite greater parent involvement in their child's education.

This study will examine program models and/or methods aimed at promoting parental involvement in early child development and education. Included will be discussions of issues, research evidence and possible solutions pertaining to parental involvement based on two approaches- those that attempt to (1) improve the parent-child

relationship in the context of the family; (2) integrate parents into school programs.

As a teacher of a middle school in South Jersey, I am interested in the success of the students that I teach. I am particularly interested in the involvement of the parents of the students getting involved in their child's schoolwork. I know that if I am able to help the parents become more interested in getting involved, then my students will have a greater chance to succeed, in and outside the classroom.

II. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Research has shown that an increase in parent involvement correlates with an increase in student achievement (Ballen & Moles, 1994; Benject, 1995; Center on Families, Communities, Schools, and Children's Learning, 1995; Epstein, 1991). Research also shows that many parents do not get involved enough to positively affect their children's attitudes towards school. The result can be devastating to a child's future success. This failure can last beyond the school years and well into adulthood.

The purpose of this study was to assess selected teacher methods in a southern New Jersey middle school and to examine the impact of those methods on parent participation and student learning. It will include research base facts and a sampling of teachers at the middle school by means of surveys and interviews. It is hypothesized that certain teaching practices and methods can be used to help bring parents into the educational process, so that students will become more successful in school.

The findings of this study may provide insight for curriculum planners, school administrators, and teachers who are interested in improving parental involvement in

education.

III. OPERATIONAL DEFINITIONS

1. Closed-ended Survey: Refers to multiple choice, list of alternative items that must be selected.
2. Cognitive/Intellectual Involvement: Refers to behaviors that promote children's skill development and knowledge, such as reading books and going to museums.
3. Convenience Sampling: A sample of any group of individuals that is conveniently available to be studied
4. Cross-sectional Survey: One time surveys such as political surveys, polls, product or service satisfaction
5. Family Support Systems: Building appropriate and adequate systems of support for healthy family development that encompasses health, childcare, education, and other essential components of strong families is critical to build the infrastructure in which family success is possible.
6. Likert Scale: A self-reporting instrument in which an individual responds to a series of statements by indicating the extent of agreement. Each choice is given a numerical value and the total score is presumed to indicate the attitude or belief question.
7. Parental Involvement: Includes a wide range of behaviors but generally refers to parents' and family members' use and investment of resources in their children's schooling.

IV. SUMMARY

Chapter two provides a review of scholarly literature pertinent to the study. This section includes research on the impact of parental involvement, teacher and school responsibilities in the role of getting parents and family members involved in students' education.

Chapter three describes the study methodology and procedures. The following details are included in this description: the context of the study, the population and sample selection and demographics, the data collection instruments, the data collection process, and an analysis of the data.

Chapter four presents the findings or results of this study. The focus of this chapter is to address the research questions posed in the introduction of this study.

Narrative and statistical analysis are used to summarize the data in this section

Chapter five summarizes and discusses the major findings of the study, with conclusions and recommendations for further practice and study.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Research Effects of Parents and Education

Individuals who are actively engaged in the life of the student play a crucial role in many aspects of their development. These individuals include the student's biological parents, extended family, legal guardians or older siblings. Research has generally shown that an increase in parent involvement correlates, at least to a moderate degree, with an increase in student achievement (Ballen & Moles, 1994; Benject, 1995; Center on Families, Communities, Schools, & Children's Learning, 1995; Epstein, 1991). Other studies show that a parent's attitude toward academics matters to a larger degree, in terms of affecting a child's academic success.

Parental involvement has been defined in practice as representing many different parental behaviors and parenting practices, such as parental aspirations for their children's academic achievement and their conveyance of such aspirations to their children (e.g., Bloom, 1980), parents' communication with children about school (e.g., Christenson *et al.*, 1992; Walberg, 1986), parents' participation in school activities (e.g., Stevenson and Baker, 1987), parents' communication with teachers about their children (e.g., Epstein, 1991), and parental rules imposed at home that are considered to be

education-related (e.g., Keith *et al.*, 1993; Keith *et al.*, 1986; Marjoribanks, 1983).

Epstein (1995) expands upon the traditional kinds of involvement by identifying six types of parent involvement in schools: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community (Appalachia Educational Laboratory, 2008). Each type of involvement is valuable, and each has an impact on students, teachers, and the parents themselves.

Research on the effects of parental involvement has shown a generally consistent, positive relationship between parents' engagement in children's education and student outcomes. Studies have also shown that parental involvement is associated with student outcomes such as lower dropout and truancy rates.

Researchers have been focusing on how parental involvement affects students, why parents do and do not get involved in their children's education, and what role schools and teachers can play in facilitating parental involvement. Wendy S. Grolnick and her colleagues, in articles published in 1994 and 1997, argue that parental involvement is a function of a parents beliefs about parental roles and responsibilities, a parent's sense that she can help her children succeed in school, and the opportunities for involvement provided by the school or teacher. In this theory, when parents get involved, children's schooling is enhanced through the gaining of knowledge, skills, and an increased sense of confidence that they can succeed in school (Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994).

In 1987, Epstein identified four types of parental involvement in schools: (1) basic obligations, (2) school-to-home communications, (3) parent involvement at school,

and (4) parent involvement in learning activities at home. Later in 1992, Epstein had expanded and defined six types of school-related opportunities for parental involvement: (1) assisting parents in child-rearing skills, (2) school-parent communications, (3) involving parents in school volunteer opportunities, (4) involving parents in home-based learning, (5) involving parents in school decision-making, and (6) involving parents in school-community collaborations (Chen & Fan, 2001). These views were coming from the perspectives of the schools in regards to what teachers can do to generate more activity of parents in the classrooms.

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995) have a different view of parental involvement based on theory. Their theoretical viewpoint about parental involvement focuses on three issues: (1) why parents become involved in their children's education, (2) how parents choose specific types of involvement, and (3) why parental involvement has positive influence on students' education outcomes (Chen & Fan, 2001). This viewpoint explains why parents would choose to get involved with school work, and by which type of method would a positive influence be found.

Communication Between Teachers and Parents

It has been found that communication is the key to successful parent involvement (Burbules, 1993; Center on Families, 1995). Both teachers and parents agree that communication is pivotal, to foster and maintain a positive school-home partnership, but the reality is that each feels that the other party is responsible for initiating

communication (Ramirez, 1999).

This “blaming the next person concept” is typical of human nature, and quite frankly to be an expected response with both parties involved. It ultimately gets no one anywhere. Both parents and teachers generally agree though, that the partnership between the two is important. However it seems that teachers don’t always follow this school of thought. Blaming each other creates a communication barrier between school and home and creates a less than amiable atmosphere.

Teachers will usually open lines of communication for negative reasons such as behavioral problems. Even then, teachers contact only 50% of families (Lee, 1994; Ramirez, 1999).

Dauber and Epstein (1993) found that school and teacher practices were the strongest predictors of parental involvement. Specific practices that have shown to predict parental involvement include: assigning homework designed to increase student-parent interactions, holding workshops for families, and communicating to parents about their children’s education.

Some parents will readily give of their time to the schools. Other parents are less likely to participate. Although getting parents involved in their children’s schools is a great challenge for educators, research has shown that educators can do a lot to induce greater parent involvement.

The Center on Families, Communities, Schools, and Children’s Learning (1994) indicates that parents who receive frequent and positive messages from teachers tend to

become more involved in their children's education than do other parents.

Dauber and Epstein (1993) found that many parents respond to encouragement from educators. They found in their study of 2,317 inner city elementary and middle school students, that the best predictor of parent involvement was what the school did to promote it. School attitudes and actions were found to be the most important indicator in predicting parental involvement, rather than the parents' income, educational level, race, or previous school-volunteering experience.

Leadership is critical, which means that administrators and teachers may need special training to help them develop the skills needed to promote family-school partnerships. Training could influence the school's attitudes and actions toward better methods to involve parents. Don Davies, former U.S. Commissioner of Education and former president of the Institute for Responsive Education, states, "In any school... leadership is essential if a school staff is to choose the partnership approach to school reform... In most cases, the leadership to reach out to the community will have to come from the principal" (Davies, 1991).

The schools do play a significant role in getting parents and family members involved in a student's education. In order to initiate the communication, both parents and teachers must hold each other in high regard. This should include a respect for the cultural and environmental differences in the homes of their students as well as the parent respecting the good faith of the teacher.

There are specific programs that show how involvement can be developed through such channels as home visitation, parent group meetings, group care

arrangements, community resources, television programming, and school-based programs that train low-income parents to work with their children. Effects include significantly improved language skills, test performance, and school behavior, as well as important effects on the general educational process (Appalachia Educational Laboratory, 2008).

Action Options for Educators, Parents and Employers

Parents have many suggestions for teachers and administrators about ways to promote active involvement. Their views, however, do not always match the role envisioned by educators. Possessing fewer economic resources and educational skills to participate in traditional ways (Laureau, 1987), these parents operate at a disadvantage until they understand how schools are organized and how they can promote systemic change (Delgado-Gaitian, 1991).

Here are some suggestions from parents:

1. Clarify how parents can help: Parents need to know exactly how they can help. Some are active in church and other community groups, but lack information about how to become more involved in their children's schooling.
2. Encourage parents to be assertive: Parents who do see themselves as needed participants feel strongly that they must provide their children with a positive view of their history and culture not usually presented at school. Some emphasize the importance of speaking up for their children. Several, for instance, have argued for or against special

education placement or retention for their children.

3. Develop trust: Parents affirm the importance of establishing trust. One mother attributes a particular teacher's good turnout for parent/teacher conferences to her ability to establish a "personal relationship" with parents. Another comments on her need to be reassured that the school is open, that it's ok to drop by "anytime you can."
4. Build on home experiences: Our assumptions about the home environment of our students can either build or sever links between home and school.
5. Use parent expertise: Moll (1992) underscores the importance of empowering parents to contribute "intellectually to the development of lessons." He recommends assessing the funds of knowledge" in the community, citing a teacher who discovered that many parents in the Latino community where she taught had expertise in the field of construction. Consequently, the class developed a unit on construction, which included reading, writing, speaking, and building, all with the help of responsive community experts – the children's parents (Finders & Lewis, 1994).

Parents also suggested extending literacy by writing pen pal letters with students and involving their older children in tutoring and letter writing with younger students. To help break down the barriers that language differences create, one parent suggested that bilingual and monolingual parents form partnerships to participate in school functions

together (Finders & Lewis, 1994).

There are some additional options for educators as well as parents and employers of parents that could help aid in the involvement of parents in education. The following is only a partial list of options:

Educators:

- Seek out opportunities for professional development and training in parent involvement.
- Make parents feel welcome in the School.
- Provide a parent center for parents to use while at school.
- Reach out to parents whose first language is not English.
- Learn about the various ethnic, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds of the students and know how to communicate with diverse families.
- Accommodate parents' work schedules when creating parent-involvement opportunities.
- Assign homework projects that engage each child's parents and family and make learning more meaningful for the student, such as a family history, interviews with grandparents, or descriptions of parents' daily work.
- Keep parents informed of their children's performance and school activities by means of notes, telephone calls, newsletters, conferences, and meetings.
- Provide clear, practical information on home-teaching techniques for parents of children who need extra help at home.

- Provide opportunities for parents to visit the school, observe classes, and provide feedback.
- Start the school year with an opening conference.
- Develop a plan to promote teacher-parent partnerships at school.
- Invite parents to serve on school or district committees.

Parents:

- Identify some ways to answer the question “How can I be involved in my child’s education?” and select from among 50 ways parents can help schools, especially those that help promote meaningful, engaged learning.
- Read to younger children.
- Provide a variety of reading materials in the home and frequently take children to the library.
- Promote school attendance and discourage absenteeism.
- Monitor children’s television viewing.
- Provide a quiet place for children to do homework; help with or check homework every night.
- Encourage children to participate in learning activities when school is not in session. (Activities that include parents are found in Summer Home Learning Recipes.)
- Encourage children’s efforts in school.
- Help children choose appropriate preparatory courses in middle, junior high, and high school.

- Remain aware of the importance of parent involvement at the secondary school level and continue to stay involved.
- Keep in touch with children's teachers.
- Volunteer to participate in school activities.
- Participate in school-improvement efforts and join advisory or decision-making committees.
- Look for innovative ways to improve schools, such as helping to organize public schools called charter schools.

Employers of Working Parents:

- Encourage and support employee and family involvement in education.
- Allow employees occasional time during the work day to attend school conferences or volunteer at their children's schools.
- Develop work strategies that enable parents to become involved in schools (Appalachia Educational Laboratory, 2008).

Building a bridge is important: "Educators need to be willing to recognize the extent of this disconnection as a precondition for involving families in their children's education (Starr, 2008)." Here are some suggestions recommended by Starr:

- Be sure the first contact with parents is a positive one.
- Communicate with parents straightforwardly and simply, avoiding educational "jargon."
- Ensure that all parents have regular access to clear, concise, and easily readable information about their children's school and classroom.

- Ask parents to share their concerns and opinions about school, and then address those concerns.
- Accommodate parents' work schedules.
- Accommodate language and cultural differences.
- Establish regular, meaningful communication between home and school.
- Promote and support parenting skills.
- Encourage active parent participation in student learning.
- Welcome parents as volunteer partners in schools.
- Invite parents to act as full partners in making school decisions that affect children and families.
- Reach out to the community for resources to strengthen schools (Starr, 2008).

There are 12 additional activities that Starr (2008) suggests to help promote parent involvement:

1. Create a school climate and structures that support family involvement.
2. Provide families with a list of required mastery skills for each subject taught at your grade level.
3. Invite families to share hopes for and concerns about children and then work together to set student goals.
4. Print and send home:
 - In September: As a Parent, I Promise...

- In October: Coping With High-Stakes Tests
 - In November: How to Make Parent-Teacher Conferences Work for Your Child
 - In December: Help Your Student Get the Most Out of Homework
 - In January: A Grade By Grade Guide to What Your Child Should Be Learning in School.
 - In February: Parent Involvement = Student Success
 - In March: Education World's Tips for Involved Parents
 - In April: 10 Tips for a Successful Parent- Teacher Conference
 - In May: 8 Ways Parents Can Promote Reading at Home
5. Initiate a classroom volunteer program.
 6. Create a parent resource center. Provide materials on issues of concern to parents, such as child development, health and safety, drug education, special education, and so on. Include information about local parenting and social services agencies. If possible, provide sample textbooks, extension activities, software, and audio and videotapes.
 7. Create a classroom Web site and include a parent page.
 8. Set up a homework hot line students or parents can call to get forgotten or missed assignments.
 9. Invite parents to present talks and /or demonstrations about their

specialized knowledge or skills.

10. Following conference or report card time, offer workshops on improving grades and study skills.

11. Maintain regular communication by sending home

- Weekly folders of student work
- Monthly calendars of special events to be celebrated or taught.
- A regular class newsletter.
- Weekly work sheets containing activities students and families can do together.

12. Compile a wish list that includes both goods- from craft sticks to carpet squares to software – and services – from stapling newsletters to chaperoning field trips to coordinating special events – that parents might provide. Be sure the list includes many free or inexpensive items and activities that do not demand a great deal of time or a long-term commitment.

The Challenge Problem: Other Contributing Factors/Implementation Pitfalls

While a majority of parents indicate a desire to become more involved, the competing demands of work, transportation and childcare create challenges and hamper efforts for substantial involvement. Employers must be encouraged to allow employees paid time off to visit and volunteer at school. For parents to take on leadership roles, a

social infrastructure must be created to build and sustain programs in which parents are encouraged to participate in the governance, planning, implementing, and evaluation of programs (Family Support America, 2004).

For working parents, time constraints often prevent school involvement. Sixty-six percent of working parents indicate that they do not have enough time for their children (Families and Work Institute, 1994). Educators should make every attempt to plan school meetings, activities, and conferences at times when parents are available to attend. Employers need to be flexible with the work schedules of working parents and supportive of their efforts to be involved in their children's schools. (Appalachia Educational Laboratory, 2008).

Often, parents work at physically demanding jobs, with mothers expected to take care of child-care responsibilities as well as school-related issues. Still others work at night, which makes it impossible to attend evening programs and also difficult to appear at daytime meetings that interfere with family obligations and sleep (Finders & Lewis, 1994).

Some parents may have other reasons for not being involved with their children's schools: such as limited knowledge of the English language, cultural differences in regards to expectations, a limited understanding of how to get involved, lacking a thorough educational background, having had bad experiences of their own with school, and/or they may lack the social skills needed to communicate with teachers and staff. (Aronson, 1996).

The language barrier may be a problem for parents who do not speak English.

One solution is to have a resource person (either a teacher or another parent) who can communicate with the parents in their primary language (Ballen & Moles, 1994). The children can also interpret for their parents at meetings or conferences, when it is needed.

Some parents lack the ability to read or are embarrassed about their lack of schooling. Educators should realize that not all parents are able to read newsletters, field trip forms, or homework assignments. They must not depend on the written work as the only form of communication with the home. Home visits, phone calls, one-on-one meetings, and other personalized contacts with parents are important (Appalachia Educational Laboratory, 2008).

For many parents, their own personal school experiences create obstacles to involvement. Parents who have dropped out of school do not feel confident in school settings. These are the parents that are needed to help to support their families and their limited school experiences make it exceedingly challenging for them to get involved beyond the elementary years of schooling, as they don't possess the knowledge base to explain or help with their child's schoolwork.

Some parents lack written literacy skills and the language barriers add to the frustrations of the problem. One mother who attended school through 6th grade in Mexico, and whose first language is Spanish, comments about homework, that: "sometimes we can't help because it's too hard." Yet the norm in most schools is to send home schoolwork with little information for parents about how it should be completed (Finders & Lewis 1994).

Teachers who feel overburdened with their teaching load may not have the time to

reach out to parents. They need to be given the necessary time to contact and meet with parents. To coordinate parent-teacher meetings and develop parent-involvement programs, the school may designate a parent liaison or home-school coordinator (Ballen & Moles, 1994).

Sometimes parents are frustrated because schools do not seem to know much about their children. Boyer (1995) notes, "The harsh truth is... that car mechanics often know more about the automobiles entering their shops than educators know about children who enroll in school."

Teachers should feel that each child is unique, unlike an automobile. Comparing a unique child to an automobile that is mass-produced isn't only perverse and strange, but very inaccurate as well. It takes a bit of time to get to know a particular student's likes, dislikes, strengths and weaknesses.

An institutional-based view (one which is held by the schools), the "deficit model" states: "Those who need to come, don't come." This is true for many parents that assume that one of the main reasons for their involvement is for their remediation. It is also assumed that involved parents bring a body of knowledge about the purposes of schooling to match institutional knowledge. Unless they bring such knowledge to the school, they themselves are thought to need education in becoming legitimate participants (Finders & Lewis, 1994).

If the parent brings forth information about their child early on in the year, the teachers and administrators would have a better time getting to understand and know the child. Certain methods that were aforementioned could help the schools to become more

familiar with students who are new to the district.

The institutional perspective holds that children who do not succeed in school have parents who do not get involved in school activities or support school goals at home. Recent research emphasizes the importance of parent involvement in promoting school success (Comer, 1984; Lareau, 1987). At the same time, lack of participation among parents of socially and culturally diverse students is also well documented (Clark, 1983; Delgado-Gaitan, 1991).

The model for family involvement, despite enormous changes in the reality of family structures, is that of a two-parent, economically self-sufficient nuclear family, with a working father and homemaker mother (David, 1989).

It is important for schools to offer different forms of parent involvement; no one form of involvement is necessarily right for every family. Educators and parents should aim to increase the percentage of parents involved in at least some ways. Every school has at least some parents who are deeply involved; the key is to steadily increase this number (Appalachia Educational Laboratory, 2008).

Various studies show that parents want to be more involved, and in a broader variety of ways (Williams & Stallworth, 1984; Elam 1990). Educators sometimes are reluctant to have parents involved in decision-making roles with the school. A Gallup poll (Elam, 1990) asked parents if they were satisfied with the amount of participation they had in their school.

Some universities appear to believe that training teachers and administrators how to work with parents is not especially important. Most states do not require prospective

teachers or administrators or most teachers to take coursework or training in working with parents (Radcliffe & Nathan, 1994).

Dauber and Epstein (1993) found that, compared to middle school teachers, elementary school teachers more strongly believed that parental involvement is important for students and provide more opportunities and help for parents to be involved in their children's education. They felt that the lower levels of parental involvement might be a result of the teachers' perception of the importance of the parents' involvement or even the parents themselves.

A Metropolitan Life/Louis Harris Survey of the American Teacher resulted in newspaper headlines reading, "Teachers see parents as their top problem" and "Parent support lacking" (Chira, 1993). Actually, the top policy priority, given by 54% of the 1,000 teachers surveyed, was for greater parental involvement in their children's education.

Many teachers feel that the parent support can be successful at the primary or preschool levels but don't put a lot of stock in the prospect of involving parents on the high school level (Chira, 1993). It is important to see how the attitudes and behaviors of teachers, youth and parents affect the building partnerships.

Another problem with getting the parents involved sometimes has a lot to do with the students themselves. As adolescents get older they tend to want more independence to find their own identity while spending more time with peers and less time with their parents (Steinberg, 2002; Zill & Nord, 1994). This is a problem that is understandably frustrating for parents and would be a major reason for the difficulties and struggles of

getting parents involved in their teens' studies. This is well documented in a study done by Zill & Nord (1994), where in a nationwide study, it was found that involvement in schools falls to 50% of parents when children are 16 or older, as compared to 73% when children are eight to eleven years old (Zill & Nord, 1994).

Dornbusch, Mont-Reynaud, & Ritter (1993), in a study of high school students, parents and teachers, found that fewer than 20% of all high school parents surveyed believed that it was no longer appropriate for them to be involved in their children's education. They concluded that a reservoir of parental energy and commitment exists that has not been tapped by American high schools. Similarly, Epstein and Conners, whose 1994 survey of 420 ninth graders, their families and teachers parallels the one reported here, found that 80% of the parents want to be more involved, and over half the students want their parents involved as knowledgeable partners with schools. Chavkin and Williams (1993) asked over 3,000 parents why involvement drops off at the high school level. Anglos, Africa-Americans and Hispanics agreed that the main reasons are that parents may not understand some of the high school course content and the teachers are less apt to involve parents in the curriculum.

A study was done in five mid-western school districts in which data was collected from teams of school personnel that had undergone training to increase parent involvement on behalf of high-risk youths. A total of 516 ninth-grade students, 305 parents and 38 teachers responded to questionnaires and/or participated in focus groups and telephone interviews. Existing relationships between families and schools were studied, as well as desired changes. It was found that not only did teachers want more

parent involvement, particularly in academic areas, but the parents also wanted the same thing. Teachers felt more administrative support for parent involvement efforts was needed, and parents wanted to be involved in meaningful ways, not just called in when their child was in trouble. Students were more reluctant to have their parents get involved, but they did admit that there were benefits to having their parents involved it was important to them as well (Zill & Nord, 1994).

Summary of the Literature Review

Parental involvement in education is an important topic that seems to concern most of the population. Parents, teachers, students, and administration all play a part in getting more parents involved in their child's education. Communication between the school districts and the parents is key to better parental involvement, thus, the success rates of students. It also was found in some studies that the parents expectations of school and academics stemmed from their parents expectations and of school success. That in fact, parents could have an effect on their children in regard to their overall outlook towards the value of a good education.

From the schools' perspective, there are also a number of challenges in engaging families in the school environment. Schools may view the parents as external to the learning environment, resulting in resistance to parent involvement by some educators. Some schools struggle to create a welcoming environment for parents and fail to accommodate the schedules of working parents. Finally, many schools must work hard to overcome the particular challenges associated with engaging parents of non-English

speaking children by finding new ways to accommodate varying backgrounds and cultures.

Many challenges may be overcome by effective outreach practices such as meeting face-to-face, providing multilingual materials, sending learning materials home, and keeping in touch about progress (Family Support America, 2004).

Chen & Fan (2001) found a correlation between parental involvement and academic achievement when GPA was looked at rather than a single academic subject alone. This was because there were too many possible variables that could affect an outcome that would make the results less accurate. It was also found that parental supervision in the home has a very low relationship with students' academic achievement, and parents' aspirations and expectations for their children's educational achievement is in fact the strongest relationship indicator with regards to students' academic achievement (Chen & Fan, 2001).

A variety of studies (Henderson & Berla, 1994) confirm that parent involvement makes an impact on students' attitude, attendance, and academic achievement. Although some working and single parents may be unable to contribute to schools because of work commitments and time constraints, educators are discovering many additional ways that parents can help students and their schools.

Some of these ways are dependent upon the school's desire to involve parents. To effect change, parents must find time to participate in their children's education while schools must provide the supports necessary for them to be involved. The partnerships between parents and teachers will increase student achievement and promote better

cooperation between home and school.

In short- parents, teachers, and school administrators must try to work together, and communicate often, if the students are going to be afforded the best opportunity for success in the educational process.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Context of the Study

The study was conducted at a middle school in South Jersey. The school is a group III school district with slightly over 600 seventh and eighth grade students in total for the 2008-09 academic school year at the time of the study.

Population and Sample Selection

The target population for this study was all teachers of grades 7 and 8 in New Jersey. The available population was all teachers of grades 7 and 8 at this particular middle school. Subjects completed an anonymous attitudinal survey, and some interviews were done in person.

The convenience sample was selected of staff members having instructional responsibilities, namely regular education teachers (including related arts or special subject teachers) and special education teachers at the middle school. Related arts and special subjects are computers, foreign language, physical education, music, art, health, and study skills. There were a total of 56 subjects surveyed and 3 were interviewed based on their responsibilities as team leaders.

Instrumentation

The instrument to assess teachers' attitudes is a survey with two sections: background information, and attitudinal items. Since the primary purpose of this report is to investigate selected teachers' methods to involve parents in the educational process, the survey used in this study focused on methods and perspectives in regard to parental involvement. The items were created exclusively for this study.

The first section collected demographic information consisting of questions about age, gender, years of service, level of certification, current job responsibility, subject areas taught, and grade levels taught. There were seven demographic questions and fourteen methods questions (Likert-style format). The Likert-style questions had four choices for answers: Agree, Sometimes, Disagree, or N/A. These questions asked subjects to rank 14 items by evaluating their methods and perspectives towards involving parents in education. Finally, there were 4 write-in questions for subjects to explain their answers. Subjects were asked about such issues as: parental usefulness, rapport with parents, teacher's responsibilities to help involve parents, and parental responsibilities for lack of productivity by the student. The questions were tools for further insight into what might prove to be motivating factors for teachers, while exploring certain methods that might gain participation involving schoolwork on the part of the parent.

In addition, three teachers were selected to interview based on their responsibilities as team leaders in charge of as many as seven other teachers in their departments. The interviewed teachers were asked what methods were effective for their teams for involving/engaging parents to help promote parental involvement.

Data Collection

After permission was obtained from the School District and the Rowan University IRB, the surveys were administered with informational cover letters. They were distributed to each teacher's mailbox in January of 2009. The 56 teachers selected to receive the survey were all staff having instructional responsibilities, in both regular and special education. Of the 56 surveys distributed, 48 teachers completed the surveys (86% return rate) and returned them to the researcher's mailbox. No identifying information was collected on the survey itself. Teachers were given approximately a week to return the surveys.

Data Analysis

The subjects for this study were selected from regular and special education teachers at the middle school studied. Of the 56 surveys distributed, 48 completed surveys were returned, yielding a return rate of 86%. There were 33 regular education teachers, 11 special education teachers, and 4 teachers whom taught both regular and special education. There were 32 females (67%) and 16 males (33%). The subjects were between the ages of 22 and 71, with the majority (72%) being 40 years old or less years of age (see table 3.1). Nineteen subjects (40%) hold a Master's degree, while 29 (60%) subjects hold a Bachelor's degree. 11 subjects taught just 7th grade classes, 11 subjects taught just 8th grade classes, and 26 (54%) subjects taught both 7th and 8th grade classes.

Table 3.1
Age of Subjects

Age	Frequency	%
20-30	16	33
31-40	19	39
41-50	6	13
51+	7	15

Table 3.2 contains demographic data on the years of teaching experience, as measured during the 2008-2009 academic year. About three quarters of the subjects (71%) had 10 or less years of teaching experience.

Table 3.2
Years of Teaching Experience

Number of Years	Frequency	%
1-10	34	71
11-20	10	21
21-30	2	4
31+	2	4

Findings also showed that 71% (34) of the subjects were regular education teachers, 23% (11) were special education teachers, and 6% (3) had duties that caused them to teach both regular and special education classes. The further break down of teaching responsibilities revealed that 2 subjects were art teachers, 13 taught language arts, 9 taught math, 7 taught science, 6 taught social studies, 4 taught physical ed/health, 3 taught a foreign language, 2 taught music, and final 2 taught computers. Eleven (23%) teachers taught seventh grade, 11 (23%) taught eighth, and 26 (54%) taught both grades.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

Profile of the Sample

The target population for this study was all teachers of grades 7 and 8 in New Jersey. The available population was all teachers of grades 7 and 8 at this particular middle school. Subjects completed an anonymous attitudinal survey, and some interviews were done in person.

Analysis of Data

In table 4.1, questions 1, 4, 5, and 6 all (100%) of the subjects responded in agreement, at least sometimes, that parents are an important resource in their child's education, that they generally have a good rapport with parents, they find that the level of success with the student directly correlates with the level of involvement of the parent, and that they feel it is important to get the parents involved in their child's education. For question number 14: "I feel that parent education programs are a beneficial and worthwhile pursuit," all of the subjects were in agreement with the exception of two. Those two thought that the question wasn't applicable to their classroom situations or duties.

Table 4.1

Likert-Scale Survey

Question	Frequency (n=48)			
	(Agree=1	Sometimes=2	Disagree=3	N/A=4)
	1	2	3	4
1. Parents are an important resource in their child's education.....	49	4	0	0
2. I get anxious when I have to contact parents.....	7	26	13	2
3. When trying to contact parents for support at home, I usually get a negative response/or no response.....	2	23	20	3
4. I generally have a good rapport with parents.....	43	5	0	0
5. I find that the level of success with the student directly correlates with the level of involvement of the parent...	29	19	0	0
6. I feel it is important to get the parents involved in their child's education.....	43	5	0	0
7. I feel that most parents are highly involved.....	3	32	11	2
8. I administer assignments/activities that help the parent to become more involved.....	7	22	14	5
9. Teachers are just as responsible as parents for the child's behavior.....	12	19	16	1
10. Parents should be held responsible for their child's repeated academic and social (discipline) problems.....	27	15	4	2
11. Children that have parents that are highly involved in their education tend to have higher grades.....	34	23	1	0
12. I believe, or have witnessed, that a parents view/attitude towards school is the most important indicator of how the child will view school.....	28	19	1	0
13. It is important for teachers to communicate frequently with parents.....	32	12	2	0
14. I feel that parent education programs are a beneficial and worthwhile pursuit.....	27	17	0	2

In response to question number eight in the survey, that is directly related to this research question, it was found that not all of the teachers surveyed did in fact reach out to the parents in any significant way in regards to assignments that necessitated parental involvement (see Table 4.2). 29 (60%- just over half) teachers indicated that they either agreed or sometimes agreed, that they had administered assignments that involved the parents to some degree in the educational process. 19 teachers answered that they did not, in fact, administer assignments to involve parents.

Table 4.2

Administering Assignments that involve the parents of students
Agree = 1, Sometimes Agree = 2, Disagree = 3, N/A = 4

<u>Statement</u>	
Question #8- I administer assignments/activities that help the parent to become more involved.	
<u>Choices</u>	<u>Responses</u>
Agree	7
Sometimes Agree	22
Disagree	14
N/A	5

Research Question: What are some selected teacher methods that are used to gain parental involvement in education?

One way to involve parental involvement is in the way of communication. 46 (96%) of subjects stated that they use telephone calls and or emails to communicate with parents. Other popular methods of communication included: news letters, parent letters requiring signatures, socials such as “Back to School Night” or concerts, invites to

volunteer help in class or with a school trip, team meetings, parent conferences, school website postings, assignments sent home, notes in agenda/homework notebooks, voicemail messages, award assemblies, dances, grand parent lunches, and progress report comments.

Responses to the interviews and in the open-ended questions (1. How do you communicate with the parents in your class? 2. What have you done to increase parent participation in your classes? 3. Have you seen an (increase/decrease/no change) in parent participation as a result of the parent communication methods you have used?) of the survey, in regards to teacher methods are as follows:

1. "Million Words or Less"- which is an assignment in the beginning of the school year, specifically the first week, that asks the parents to write anything about their child that they feel that the teachers ought to know, in a million words or less.
2. A team created a "Team" website that invites the viewer (students and parents) to liken themselves to what is going on in the school. It includes informational items such as: teachers on the team, student achievements (such as Student of the Month, Distinguished Reader/Writer awards, science awards, etc.), strategies for success, narratives on specific course study for the year, pictures of events through the year, homework policies, answers to frequently asked questions, school-wide events and important dates.
3. Another team divides all of their students among the number of teachers on that team and makes a phone call home to each of the parents during the first week of school to welcome them and invite them in at any time to observe the classes.

4. Projects are sometimes sent home that require parental involvement, by way of construction, or informational inquiries (parent interviews).
5. There is also a school-wide “Career Day” where parents are invited in to speak all about their careers and answer questions from students in regard to the same.
6. The physical education teachers organize a gymnastics event in which the parents are invited to watch, and in some cases, are asked to be judges for the individual events that the kids participate in.
7. Another team invites parents in for a “Parent Social,” where the parents come in to view projects and work of their kids, and to play games with them.
8. Still another team sends a survey home with the students to be filled out by the parents addressing any parental concern or suggestion.

Of the 48 subjects surveyed, 26 (54%) stated that using any of the aforementioned communication methods/techniques to reach out to parents has improved the parental involvement in school (as indicated in responses to the interviews and in the open-ended questions paragraph, question #2).

The subjects who have employed the “Million Words or Less” essay, stated that they have seen a dramatic increase in parental involvement (approximately a 95% participation/return rate).

Subjects who have employed the phone calls home, within the first week or school to introduce themselves, said that they were able to reach every parent or guardian in that first week, with few exceptions (parents in hospital, illness).

It was also shown by the results, in question #11, that all but one subject (98%) felt that children that have parents that are highly involved in their education tend to have higher grades.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary of the Study

This study investigated methods that were shown to have improved parental involvement in education. The target population for this study was all teachers of grades 7 and 8 in a New Jersey middle school. The convenience sample was selected of staff members having instructional responsibilities, namely regular education teachers (including related arts or special subject teachers) and special education teachers. Subjects completed an anonymous attitudinal survey, and some interviews were done in person. There were a total of 56 subjects surveyed and 3 were interviewed based on their responsibilities as team leaders. Of the 56 surveys distributed, 48 teachers completed the surveys (86% return rate) and returned them to the researcher's mailbox. Results were used to align with researched methods that have been proven to be successful.

Discussion of the Findings

The majority of the subjects were in overall agreement with the importance of parental involvement in education. It was also shown by the results, in question #11, that all but one subject (98%) felt that children that have parents that are highly involved in their education tend to have higher grades. This finding supports previous studies

conducted by Epstein (1991) in which the research had generally shown that an increase in parental involvement correlates, at least to a moderate degree, with an increase in student achievement. Subjects reported a general positive attitude towards parents being a useful resource, aligning with earlier studies by Benject (1995), in that the research has shown that an increase in parent involvement correlates with an increase in student achievement.

In a study by Dauber and Epstein (1993), it was found that school and teacher practices were the strongest predictors of parental involvement. In this study (question number eight), 29 teachers (60%) indicated that they administered assignments that helped parents to become more involved in the learning process at home to some degree. 19 teachers stated that they did not, in fact, administer assignments to involve parents. The research indicates that more teachers need to administer assignments that gain parental involvement if it is to be more successful with getting parents to get involved in their child's education.

In this study, it was found that the usage of the following techniques by teachers to gain parental involvement, proved to be very successful; telephone calls (100% success rate), newsletters requiring signatures, "Back to School Night" socials, concerts, volunteer/chaperone invites, parent conferences, school website postings, notes from the teacher (The Center on Families, Communities, Schools, and Children's Learning 1994, indicates that parents who receive frequent and positive messages from teachers tend to become more involved in their children's education than do other parents.), voicemail messages, award assemblies, dances, grand parent lunches, and progress report

comments.

Other methods that were used by teachers in this study, were the “Million Words or Less” assignment (approximately a 95% participation/return rate), “Career Day,” parent observation invitations, parent interview assignments, parental judge panels, parent socials, and parent suggestion surveys.

Of the 48 subjects surveyed, 26 (54%) stated that using any of the aforementioned communication methods/techniques to reach out to parents has improved the parental involvement in school (as indicated in responses to the interviews and in the open-ended questions paragraph, question #2). This indicates that if more teachers would employ these techniques, more parents would get involved in their child’s education.

Conclusions

The results of this study generally confirmed the findings of the previous related studies. The selected teachers were in overall agreement with the importance of parental involvement in education. Teacher attitudes and willingness to employ assignments to involve parents are crucial factors for success (Dauber and Epstein, 1993). There still appears to be a need for more communication between the teachers and parents as reiterated by Burbules (1993). It would be helpful if schools would require teachers to employ proven techniques as part of their curriculum.

If the study were to be redone, I would make sure to interview each teacher surveyed with additional questions and take a longer period of time, perhaps a year, to research more methods found to work. The study was limited because of variables such

as time restraints, population of subjects to interview/survey, and of course restriction of the geographic area to a middle school in South Jersey. The study was also narrowed down to just one school's population of teachers. Another variable that wasn't within the scope of control were the attitudes of the teachers who participated in the study.

Recommendations for Further Practice and Research

Based upon the findings and conclusions of the researcher, the following suggestions are presented:

1. Further studies should be conducted with larger populations to confirm the findings in this study.
2. A follow-up analysis could be done using the same subjects to compare the findings of the different studies.
3. A study could be done comparing the practices of subjects when they are pre-service teachers and then practicing educators.
4. An additional study should be conducted to replicate this study, but expand the scope to include information concerning pre-service training, staff development related to parent involvement, and teacher perspectives of what parental integration should entail in school assignments.
5. Administrators should involve teachers in curriculum development involving parent integration into assignments to increase understanding and success for the students.
6. Districts should improve plans to include parental training and support.

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APPENDIX A

Survey Instrument

- | | | | | |
|--|---|---|---|---|
| 7. I feel that most parents are highly involved..... | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 8. I administer assignments/activities that help the parent to become more involved..... | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 9. Teachers are just as responsible as parents for the child's behavior..... | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 10. Parents should be held responsible for their child's repeated academic and social (discipline) problems..... | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 11. Children that have parents that are highly involved in their education tend to have higher grades..... | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 12. I believe, or have witnessed, that a parents view/attitude towards school is the most important indicator of how the child will view school..... | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 13. It is important for teachers to communicate frequently with parents..... | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 14. I feel that parent education programs are a beneficial and worthwhile pursuit..... | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |

1. How do you communicate with the parents in your class?

2. What (if anything) have you done to increase parent participation in your classes?

3. Have you seen an (increase/decrease/no change) in parent participation as a result of the parent communication methods you have used?

4. Any further comments or things to add?

****Please put this survey in Mike Sandberg's mailbox. Thanks again for your time and participation!**

APPENDIX B

Principal Permission



KINGSWAY REGIONAL MIDDLE SCHOOL

203 Kings Highway
Woolwich Township, NJ 08085-9653
(856) 467-3300 ext. 3006

Troy Walton
Principal

Andria Burton
Assistant Principal

February 12, 2009

To Whom It May Concern:

It is my pleasure to grant Michael Sandberg permission to use Kingsway Middle School as a research tool in completing his project for his senior thesis. During Mr. Sandberg's project, it will be required of him to conduct interviews/surveys with our staff members. I am aware of all of the project requirements, and without reservation will allow him the time and resources needed for successful completion. If further information is required, please feel free to contact me.

Sincerely,

Troy Walton
Principal

