



Harvard Family
Research Project



FINE Forum

Renewing Teacher–Parent Relations

Family Involvement Network of Educators
Harvard Family Research Project

Issue 7, Fall 2003

For questions or comments about this paper,
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About the Family Involvement Network of Educators: Harvard Family Research Project's Family Involvement Network of Educators (FINE) is a strategic effort to strengthen family and community engagement to support children's learning and development. FINE brings together thousands of educators, practitioners, policymakers, and researchers dedicated to strengthening family–school–community partnerships. Members get the latest information about family involvement research, as well as the opportunity to connect with others in the field.

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From the Directors

Where are we on parent involvement? Based on a decade of opinion research and polls, Public Agenda reports that teachers consider lack of parent involvement to be a serious problem. This finding challenges us to discover how to transform a problem into an opportunity to revitalize the relationship between teachers and parents. In this issue of the FINE Forum we are fortunate to share the wisdom of educators who are committed to doing just that and more. They show how to develop more positive relationships by supporting teachers, exposing them to the exemplary practices of their peers and to hands-on projects with parents and community members.

In Questions & Answers Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot, Emily Hargroves Fisher Professor of Education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, tells us that “in terms of the socialization of children, there's no more important dialogue than that between parents and teachers.” Through her method of portraiture she seeks to make palpable the intricate dynamics of teacher-parent conversations. Teachers who build alliances with parents listen to them, empathize with their perspective, and provide specific information about their child. They develop the listening, observing, and documenting skills that should be part of teacher education.

Program Spotlight focuses on providing teachers in graduate school the opportunity to learn from and participate in the life of an urban school. Dennis Shirley, Chair of the Teacher Education Program at the Lynch School of Education at Boston College, conducts his courses on curriculum and instruction and the social context of education in a Boston high school. Influenced by his research on community organizing in education, he engages his students to observe, study, and participate in organizing efforts in the high school. One effort, improving attendance for Parents' Night, focused on transforming teacher negativism into a positive relationship-building experience for teachers and parents. Teacher Talk expands on this theme of transformation from the perspective of one teacher in the high school.

This issue points to the possibilities of enriching parent-teacher and broader school-community relationships. We hope that you take away ideas for your own practice.

We look forward to your comments and suggestions for future issues of the FINE Forum.

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Program Spotlight

Preparing Teachers for Urban Schools

Teacher education should be “one foot in the library, and the other in the schools.”

Teachers who work in urban environments must be prepared to deal with its complexities. Urban schools host a mixture of routine and chaos that teachers navigate daily. Simply exposing prospective teachers to learning and classroom management theories is not enough; they also benefit enormously from opportunities to integrate theoretical perspectives with experiential learning in urban school settings.



Teaching team for Social Contexts of Education graduate course. From left to right: Patrick Tutwiler, Maite Sanchez, Afra Hersi, Dennis Shirley, and Liz MacDonald.

Design

Dennis Shirley, Professor and Chair of the Teacher Education Program at the Lynch School of Education at Boston College, has designed graduate level courses to prepare teachers to work in urban schools. Foremost, the courses aim to develop critical thinking skills. Teachers need these skills to respond to the unpredictable situations common in many urban environments. According to Shirley, teachers must know how to “think critically quickly, creatively, and responsively.”

The courses are held in a local urban public school, affording students an opportunity to examine theories about family involvement against the real-life dilemmas teachers confront. Shirley explains, “One of the problems with teacher education is that it never really prepares the students for the challenges of being in the urban schools. That’s why I teach all of my classes in urban school sites. Beyond critical thinking skills, it’s important that beginning teachers have at least a rudimentary ability and understanding of how to interact with constituents and parents from different cultural, class, religious, and ethnic backgrounds. There needs to be facility and joy in cross-cultural encounters, and a lot of creative skills to go along with that.”

The courses involve collaborating with practicing teachers as co-instructors. This arrangement creates a stronger link between theory and practice. After many years of teaching in a university setting, professors become more distant from school contexts and approach their subject matter as researchers rather than practitioners. Having teachers as co-instructors exposes students to contemporary situations. Shirley explains, “Professors get acculturated into the university and get to think like a researcher—more abstractly,

more empirically. It's a different frame of mind than a classroom teacher who has to respond to a lot of different things. That's why I think it is so important to always team teach with classroom teachers because it's just not the same when you tell a story that happened 10 years ago versus one that happened that morning.”

The courses are embedded in a broader university-school partnership that applies the insights gained from Shirley's research on community organizing for school reform. For over a decade, Shirley explored how education organizing in various Texas communities improved parent-teacher partnerships. Mobilized with the help of the Texas Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), a broad-based organizing group, families and communities organized several schools into a network of “Alliance Schools” that enhance parent engagement in education. Unlike typical forms of parent involvement, community organizing builds parent power and uses collective action to transform poor performing schools. The IAF espouses three principles of community organizing that parents used as tools to leverage change.

- The iron rule states “never do anything for others what they can do for themselves”
- The focus on winnable issues involves a careful selection of a condition that needs to be changed. The real outcome lies not in the particular change but the confidence that a previously marginalized community can effect change.
- Active listening to community concerns and acting on those concerns serve as the basis of organizing efforts.

These principles are adapted to teacher education by using a current school issue such as the lack of textbooks or the poor attendance of parents in school activities as the focal point of course content and action research. The principles also apply to changes in the school site that involve the actions of the principal, teachers, parents, community-based groups, and the students enrolled in the course.

Implementation

Taking Political Action

Shirley's courses evolved in conjunction with a federal Title II Teacher Quality Enhancement Grant entitled the “Massachusetts Coalition for Teacher Quality and Student Achievement.” One of the goals of the Massachusetts Coalition, which he directs, was to expand the school and community-based nature of teacher education. As part of the grant Shirley began teaching courses at a public high school in Boston. In 2001, two Boston schoolteachers served as collaborating instructors with Shirley on a graduate-level course on instruction, curriculum, and assessment. In return, they received graduate credits for doing an independent study with Shirley. At the end of the course the teachers collaboratively wrote a paper and received a grade.

As part of the course, organizers from the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization (GBIO) spoke to the Boston College students about their efforts to strengthen school and

community partnerships. The GBIO had successfully campaigned to secure an additional two million dollars for school textbooks for the Boston Public Schools. Shirley's co-instructors found out from the organizers that district money from this campaign was still available, despite other reports to the contrary. The teacher then worked with the GBIO organizers to get additional textbooks for the school. Students gained firsthand learning about the culture of the school, its strengths and challenges, and the role of organizing to address the problems confronting urban schools.

Turning Frustration Into Relationship Building

In April 2002 the principal of the high school asked Shirley and other Lynch School colleagues to participate in a day of professional activities for the school. As he listened to teachers express frustration at the lack of parent engagement, Shirley wondered whether this presented an opportunity to transform negativism into a positive relationship-building experience for teachers and parents. Over the summer he worked with the principal, teachers, parents, and community groups to develop a plan to increase parent engagement. Part of the plan included a role for his graduate class on the Social Contexts of Education to promote parent engagement.

Classes for the Social Contexts of Education were held at the high school. Through the Title II partnership grant four high school teachers received tuition vouchers to take the class and shared their experiences of working in an urban school with the preservice teachers. Altogether 29 students enrolled in the class studied the research on community organizing and family involvement. They also interviewed parents, teachers, and students about the aspects of students' lives relevant to education.

The parent organizing component of the course focused on increasing attendance at Parents' Night. A Boston College-based team met with a small group of teachers, parents, and community-based organizations to plan Parents' Night, and also to plan a long-term parent engagement effort for the school. The teachers enrolled in the Social Contexts class led a group of high school teachers to develop relationships with parents through telephone calls. The Parents' Night planning group developed brochures advertising the Night and translated them into Spanish and Portuguese. The other students agreed to administer a survey during Parents Night to solicit parents' ideas to improve school and community relationships.

Attendance at Parents' Night increased by 59 percent from the prior year. The teachers experienced this as a big turning point in their school. Although Shirley facilitated dialogue and his class collected information for planning purposes, the high school teachers, staff, and parents actually contacted the parents. Their actions represented the working out of the "iron rule." Parents' Night became a "winnable issue" where parents, teachers, and community groups learned that they could work together to increase parent participation. Beyond the numbers, they realized that could make change happen. Active listening was integral to the process, beginning with understanding the concerns of teachers and continuing with input from parents, teachers, and community groups in the planning process.

Evaluation

Student evaluations of the Social Contexts course were positive. All students agreed that classes should continue to be held at the high school and nearly all felt that the class should continue to link school goals with the course. Students found it helpful to have both an academic researcher as a professor as well as a teacher. They wanted the knowledge of the professor for research issues and the teacher for teaching issues. Liz MacDonald, one of the co-instructors of the course in the fall of 2003, explains, “Students talk about how the theory doesn't always match the practice. They find it beneficial to hear the voices of teachers while they're reading articles, research, or theories. They then get the real picture.” Moreover, the co-instructors benefited as well. MacDonald adds, “Working with Dennis has made me more aware of my own practice with families. I find myself interacting with parents more and approaching them in a different way than I may have in the past.”

Some students, though, reported in their evaluations feeling daunted by their exposure to the unpredictability of working in a large urban school. However, others who once had no interest in urban education are considering teaching in an urban environment. Students also shared suggestions for improving Parent Night, which were submitted to the school's newly formed task force on parent engagement

Challenges

One of the biggest challenges lies in the continuing disconnect between theory and practice in teacher education. According to Shirley, “It's hard to go to site-based courses and teaching with teachers. One of the problems is the separation between the universities and schools. This was built into the design of teacher education. The challenge is to get faculty off the college campus, into school environments, and into community settings. I love the quote from Jane Addams about social workers, ‘one foot in the library and one foot in the street.’ In teacher education it should be, ‘one foot in the library, and the other in the schools.’ That's the challenge for the profession right now. How can you combine rigorous intellectual preparation with the experiential learning that one needs to go on to become a teacher?”

Another challenge is that of sustainability. Faculty must spend time fundraising and convince funders of the value of community engagement in education reform. This is difficult in today's education reform context. Shirley reflects, “We have to find a way to reframe how the public thinks about public education so that it has a civic engagement component. It should not just be about test scores and outcomes. Right now the discourse around testing is more than hegemonic; it's almost totalitarian.”

Finally, for a university-school-community partnership such as this to work, there needs to be a clear picture among the school staff about what the partnership is about and where it comes from. Often best intentions meet resistance if not clearly explained.

Conclusion

Just as teachers must be prepared to work in urban schools, teacher educators must also adapt their approach to teaching those who will work in urban schools. Finding the right combination of theory and practice is both challenging and rewarding.

According to Shirley, “Where the class is most successful, the student teachers in the class are learning to think critically about a real concrete dilemma and coming up with creative solutions to real problems. They go into teaching prepared not only by years of study, but also by a process of critical inquiry and hands-on practice. Having said all this, I make sure the students are familiar with the research, especially around school-family-community relationships. But they have to have the experiential component. It’s what Dewey, I think, was trying to do when he talked about fusing research-based knowledge with experience. Sometimes progressive educators go too far and say it is just experience; you have to have rigorous academic knowledge as well.”

Resources

- Quezada, T. (2003). *Faith-based organizing for school improvement in the Texas Borderlands: A case study of the Alliance School Initiative*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Family Research Project.
- Shirley, D. (1997). *Community organizing for urban school reform*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Shirley, D. (2002). *Valley interfaith and school reform: Organizing for power in south Texas*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Questions & Answers

Dr. Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot

Lawrence-Lightfoot is the Emily Hargroves Fisher Professor of Education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, speaks about her latest book, The Essential Conversation: What Parents and Teachers Can Learn From Each Other.

Q: Why did you call your new book *The Essential Conversation*?

Lawrence-Lightfoot: I think that in terms of the socialization of children, there's no more important dialogue than that between parents and teachers. If we think about families and their outside connections to physicians, pediatricians, lawyers, or other professionals, there's absolutely no comparison in quantity and quality to the connections that parents have with teachers. With over 4 million teachers, there are approximately 100 million parent-teacher conferences a year, and that's probably an underestimate. So quantitatively it's just mind-boggling. And we haven't paid much attention, I think, to this really important dialogue and to making it meaningful, productive, and informative.

Q: You describe some of the profound struggles parents experience during parent-teacher conferences, including their reticence to speak candidly with teachers. What shapes this parental hesitation?

Lawrence-Lightfoot: The first chapter in my book is called "Ghosts in the Classroom." When parents and teachers come together, their conversations are often haunted by the echoes of their own family and school experiences as young children. Unconsciously, we bring our own autobiographical scripts to the table, usually deep memories of traumatic experiences in our childhood, and these "ghosts" can shape and distort our adult dialogues. In our real grownup lives, we may be self-assured, purposeful, and mature, but as soon as we sit on those small chairs facing the teacher in her classroom, we suddenly feel uncertain, defensive, even infantilized. Again, most of this happens unconsciously, and these feelings of vulnerability take us by surprise. What I discovered in talking with parents and teachers is that it doesn't take much to bring these unconscious autobiographical scripts to consciousness, to name and examine them. Parents and teachers were really very generous and gracious in allowing me to be part of these highly charged, tender encounters.

Q: The teachers you talk about in the book are just remarkable. What are some of their good practices with parents that really stood out to you?

Lawrence-Lightfoot: First of all, I think that teachers who build alliances with parents, know how to really listen to them. They truly believe that parents have a much more complex, holistic, and subtle view of their child, and that this parental knowledge and insight will help them be better teachers of their children. Molly Rose—one of the

teachers I interviewed—has a very structured process for gaining that understanding from parents. She makes sure that the first conference of the year is a “listening conference” where parents do most of the talking. And the first question that she asks parents is “What is your child good at? What does he/she enjoy?” She is not just referring to school skills and knowledge. Rather she wants to learn about all of the gifts that children bring with them to the classroom.

Second, these teachers' descriptions of children are very specific. In general, conferences tend to be highly ritualized events in which teachers typically say something nice about the child, then make some critique, then end with something nice, but without saying anything really specific about the child. They are full of platitudes and pleasantries hoping that parents will just leave. All of the teachers I wrote about present highly descriptive and individualized accounts of the children, through stories, portfolios, pieces of children's work, artifacts. That becomes the basis for the dialogue. This allows parents to listen without becoming defensive, because the teacher is presenting evidence to support her claims, and to help parents see that the teacher really knows their child.

You might even say that teachers need to be trained to be ethnographers, empiricists. They need to learn the skills of witnessing, recording, and documenting the experiences of children in their classroom. They must learn how to gather illustrative stories, vivid anecdotes of children that will help parents get a vicarious view of their child in the classroom and assure them that he/she is really “seen” and “known” by the teacher.

Q: How did these teachers come to be good ethnographers, and how can we help other teachers do the same?

Lawrence-Lightfoot: All of the teachers that I spoke to said that they had received no preparation in their colleges or universities for working with the families of their students. Instead, they feel that they must make it up as they go along, without much guidance, mentoring, or support. So I feel passionate about making this family-school relationship a central topic in teacher education. I can envision, for example, a wonderful course that might be called Teachers as Ethnographers in which the skills of listening, observing, and documenting are taught. It is also important for teachers to learn about what the social historian, Lawrence Cremin, calls “the ecology of education”—the map of the several institutions that educate and socialize children, and their relationship to one another. How do children navigate these various domains, and what role do schools play in this broader educational context? Teachers also need to learn to see and appreciate the parents' perspective, to step into their shoes. The rich portraits in my book are very good for this purpose. They allow both teachers and parents to understand, and empathize with, the others' vantage point. Portraits are also useful in helping people gain insights into lessons that they can translate into their own practice. Part of what I hope *The Essential Conversation* will do is to make these best practices more visible and translatable for parents and teachers.

Q: How are the struggles and practices you describe in your book universal, and how are they markedly different across race, class, and cultural divides?

Lawrence-Lightfoot: I think that all of the things we've talked about are useful to teachers in every community context, such as the value of listening to parents, empathizing with their perspective, and documenting children's work. But it is also clear that the ways teachers talk about the dynamics of family-school relationships are dramatically different in rich and poor communities, for example. This is a broad generalization, where there are certainly exceptions, but teachers see affluent, highly educated parents as more aggressive, assertive, and entitled in their relationships to school; while the parents of poor, minority, and immigrant children tend to feel more reluctant, uncertain, and overwhelmed by an unwelcoming school bureaucracy. Teachers are always calculating the distances and marking the boundaries with parents. Just as they feel they must buffer themselves and their students from the aggressiveness of affluent parents, they also feel as if they must reach out to poor parents and encourage them to come to the school and advocate for their children.

One of the teachers I talked to, named Maria Lopez, who teaches in a bilingual classroom in a city school, is creative in finding ways of pulling reluctant parents into school. She sees that one-on-one, face-to-face conferences with parents do not work; only a handful of parents—recent immigrants from the Dominican Republic, Mexico, Puerto Rico—dare to come to the ritual conference. So once a month she invites parents to come to evening workshops focused on family issues—disciplining their child, communicating with a spouse, etc. She believes that parents—particularly new arrivals to this country—need support in raising their children and making their families strong and functional. Becoming better parents will ultimately help their child achieve in school. The workshops are active and informal. Maria prepares a wonderful Latino spread and provides childcare for the children. The parents and caregivers, usually mothers and grandmothers, come year after year, feeling welcomed by the workshops which feel both familial and culturally comfortable.

Q: Your book closes with a powerful metaphor of borderlands and crossroads. Can you elaborate more on this metaphor and what it means for authentic connections between parents and teachers?

Lawrence-Lightfoot: In order to develop relationships of trust we must first be able to mark the differences between parents and schools, because these spheres are overlapping, but also distinct. What roles do parents, teachers, and institutions play? Parents are ultimately very subjective and are there to advocate for their individual child. Teachers, on the other hand, see a group of children. Their role is one of distance and objectivity. Also, children of all ages, but particularly as they get older, want school to be a place that belongs to them. They want to be away from the scrutiny and shadow of their parents. And so, for all these reasons, individual teachers need to figure out a way to navigate the borderlands.

Schools as institutions must also be able to draw boundaries. Jane Cross, who teaches four year olds in a privileged independent school, welcomes parents and encourages them to come in to the classroom for 30 minutes at the start of the day, perhaps to read a book to their child. But she also experiences parents as pushy and spends a significant amount of time listening to their unrealistic demands. She feels that her openness has backfired in the broader context of a school that has not been clear about defining lines of authority with parents.

I do believe that good fences make good neighbors. Clear boundaries open the possibility of relationships that honor one another. One teacher, Sophie Wilder, offers up a wonderful image of parents and teachers coming together like “neighbors chatting over the back fence.”

Resources

Mundell, L., & Suess, G. (2003, November 12). *What do you think of having teachers “grade” parents on their support of their children's learning?* Answer to question posted to FINE Member Insight page, available at www.hfrp.org/family-involvement/fine-family-involvement-network-of-educators/member-insights/what-do-you-think-of-having-teachers-grade-parents-on-their-support-of-their-children-s-learning

Ruenzel, D. (2003). Conference calls. *Teacher Magazine*, 15(1), 50–51. Available at www.teachermagazine.org/tm/tmstory.cfm?slug=01interview.h15

Teacher Talk

Pat Tutwiler, a high school teacher at Brighton High School in Boston, Massachusetts, talks about his experiences as an educator involved in community organizing. Pat is also a co-instructor in Dennis Shirley's course on the Social Contexts of Education and a doctoral student at Boston College:

My mom is an educator, and long before I had decided to become a teacher it had been explained to me that parents don't really get involved in high school. They are involved when the kids are in elementary school, but when they get older they don't really see the need to. I guess you can say I was a bit of a cynic about family involvement in high school. What has changed in me, and I credit it to the Social Contexts of Education class, is the motivation to do more for community outreach. I now believe we can have significant contributions from the parents and cultivate these more meaningful relationships with them.

A major challenge for our school is that 80% of the students don't live in the community where the high school exists. The dilemma becomes how do you organize a community and galvanize parents that are not a "geographic community?" It's hard to get parents to come from miles away to a school open house when they have other commitments and the weather's cold. The first few years I was at Brighton High School, no one really came to the open house. Open house meant come and get your report card, and maybe talk to your child's teacher. I would only see five or six parents and it was a time for me to sit around and drink coffee and eat cookies.

But last year we had such a huge turnout. Often people ask us how we got the large turnout. I think there are two reasons. First, the teachers at the school made it a point to schedule time during common planning meetings to actually make phone calls and invite them to come in. Although we always send home a mailing about the open house, the calls gave it a personal touch. Then, at the open house, we circulated a survey, and one question asked, "How did you find out about the open house?" A lot of parents said they heard about it through phone calls. It's hard when you have 1,200 students. You can't call everyone. But making that personal contact is what motivates someone to come. Second, we do thematic approaches to our open houses. Last year it was the support services that the school and community offer. Parents weren't just coming in to get report cards. They could also find out about health insurance, the college bound programs, and the tutoring programs. All these school and neighborhood support services were there. It was more like a fair.

This year, we held one session of our college course at a local public housing community. First we took a tour of the complex and then we broke off into groups and talked to the parents of students in the Boston Public Schools who live in that community. Parents talked about raising students in Boston, the challenges that presented, what they envisioned as a good relationship between themselves and teachers, and their experience thus far with their child's teachers. Parents were specific and talked about the element of communication. They talked about their positive and negative

experiences with teachers. The teachers sat quietly and listened as the parents spoke. They were awestruck and like sponges, soaking it all up. The teachers in my small group were new to the profession and don't have much teaching experience. This opportunity gave them a great learning experience and exposure to the importance of the family involvement process.