Involving Parents in Schools: Toward Developing a Social-Intervention Technology

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Emphasis is on parents and public elementary schools in lower socioeconomic areas. A rationale for direct parental involvement in the school’s instructional and policy-formulation processes is presented. Neighborhood and school social factors are identified, especially those related to the change process in schools, since these could potentially hinder the development of parental involvement. Finally, organization development is examined as a promising means of minimizing difficulties.

Discontent with current school practices manifests itself in numerous ways. On the one hand, taxpayers object to spiraling costs resulting from experimentation and “frills” with little apparent educational value. For many parents and teachers, innovation has become a dirty word synonymous with unfulfilled promises, impractical schemes, and purposeless changes resulting in emotional and physical strain for the individuals involved. On the other hand, inner-city residents, no longer fully trusting the schoolmen’s capabilities or commitment, assume the role of innovators by demanding a greater say in formulating new school policies. Similarly, middle-class parents and students, declaring the system bankrupt, establish alternative schools premised upon different assumptions about the purpose and nature of education.

Rather than dwell upon a critique of schools, I examine in some detail the means of identifying and overcoming the difficulties associated with involving parents from inner-city or poor neighborhoods in a sustained and systematic way as an organized and distinct instructor and decision-making group in public elementary schools. More specifically, concern centers upon parent-teacher interaction in the classroom, which has important implications for the direct involvement of parents in school decision-making.

The paper is divided into five sections. The first presents a brief overview of the possible range of parental school involvement, including a rationale for a specific type of involvement. Next, three school contexts or settings for such participation are discussed: community-controlled schools, alternative schools, and traditional or regular public elementary schools. Neighborhood and school variables that influence parental participation are considered in the third and fourth sections respectively. Finally, a means of manipulating such variables is examined.

Conceivably, much of the analysis may apply to other types of parental involvement and other educational innovations, although such applications are not the concern here. Given my bias favoring increased citizen participation in local institutions, there is probably as much advocacy as analysis in the presentation. However, the claim is not that parental involvement will invariably work, but that it should be tried and an attempt made to minimize drawbacks and maximize benefits of the procedure.

A brief explanation of the terms of the subtitle may minimize confusion and misinterpretation. Social in-
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Intervention here refers to a planned, conscious, or directed process intended to alter social systems or existing sets of human relationships (Argyris, 1970, pp.12-35; Hornstein, Bunker, Burke, Gindes, & Lewicki, 1971, pp.1-7). Technology, as used in this paper, does not refer necessarily to mechanical or electrical gadgets or hardware, although the definition does not automatically exclude these items. Technology refers broadly to linkages between means and ends. In Dreeben’s (1970, p.83) words: “It is most important at this point to establish the idea that technology pertains to the means of getting a job done, whatever the means and the job happen to be.”

Given these meanings, the subtitle promises more than it is possible to deliver. It implies that solutions are now available to the identified problems. Current knowledge about implementing educational innovation, or the change process in schools, is insufficient to permit confident formulations about the procedures or technology appropriate to a given situation. For reasons given below, knowledge is especially inadequate in the area of parental involvement in schools. We seem more adept at specifying and investigating research questions than providing answers and proposing solutions. Unfortunately, identifying problems and analyzing their causes does not automatically ensure appropriate solutions. The criteria for determining guidelines or principles associated with a social-intervention technology appropriate for involving parents in schools are just developing. Nevertheless, enough information seems available to justify specifying some tentative principles.

Varieties of Parental School Involvement

The varied and numerous school activities in which parents can participate seem to fall into three categories: service, student instruction, and decision-making.

Service activities involve technical tasks that indirectly assist the school in the performance of its instructional and decision-making activities. Within the school, at the school level, parents can act as health aides or undertake secretarial duties. At the classroom level, they may also perform secretarial duties and run audiovisual equipment. Outside the school they may be crossing guards, or act as community-school liaison officers by raising funds, making up telephone committees, or even assuming the role of community ombudsmen.

As instructors of students, parents can interact with students in a learning situation, normally within a classroom setting (although extra-classroom contexts should not be ignored). Their classroom role would support or supplement the teacher’s role (Bennett & Falk, 1970, p.30). In the support role, the parent can assist the teacher in whatever learning activities the teacher undertakes—for example, a parent may work with slow (or gifted) readers while the teacher is engaged with the remainder of the class. In the supplementary role, parents can offer learning activities different from those offered by the teacher—for example, a parent may take responsibility for the entire art or music program of a classroom.

In the area of decision-making, parents, along with principals, teachers, and students, may set policy with regard to school-wide matters—staff, budget, curriculum, and pupil policy. Parents can be included in decision-making at the classroom level with respect to individual students, perhaps consulting with the teacher concerning the appropriate program for a student.

Contemporary examples of parents participating in many of the above activities come easily to mind. Parents vote in school elections, sit on school boards, engage in home and school efforts, and attend parent-teacher nights (Sumption & Engstrom, 1966). However, many of these activities fall either outside of the three dimensions or into the service dimension. The first two, for example, take place at the school system level, not the school or classroom level. The last two frequently result in schools providing information to parents rather than parents influencing or contributing to school operations. Other parent-school interactions are likely to be isolated ad hoc attempts by individuals to correct some perceived oversight or personal injustice. While not wishing in any way to denigrate these forms of parental involvement, this essay focuses upon developing techniques of ensuring that parents from the neighborhood served by the school participate in a sustained and systematic way as an organized and distinct instructional and decision-making group within the school.

Many reasons have been advanced to demonstrate the advantages of involving parents in schools—teachers can have more time to teach, parents can gain experience in the use of participatory skills appropriate to a democratic policy. A frequent suggestion is that parental involvement increases student achievement. The last reason receives primary attention here since