

**Bifocal Frameworks for Communication:
Parental Involvement in an Elementary Classroom**

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Nothing motivates a child more than when learning is valued by schools and families/community working together in partnership. . . . These forms of (parent) involvement do not happen by accident or even by invitation. They happen by explicit strategic intervention.

Michael Fullan, 1997, pp. 42-43.

Wright, Horn, and Sanders (1997) concluded from their research involving 60 000 students that the most important factor affecting student learning is the teacher. Classroom management also influences student achievement and R. Marzano, J. Marzano, and Pickering (2003) contend that the teacher-student relationship supersedes all other factors regarding successful classroom management. Being able to make relationship connections with students through conversation and experience is a critical aspect of successful teaching and learning. The development of effective pedagogic relationships with students is powerfully supported by building relational networks with parents in the classroom.

Cunningham (2002), DuFour (2000), and Hirsh (2003) all conclude that involving the family in a child's education is an important element in improving that child's learning experience. Common concerns include providing teachers with appropriate guidance on how to be more effective in communicating with parents (Hirsh, 2003), and teaching parents how they can effectively help their children with their school work (Epstein, 2001). In this paper, we offer four examples which address both these concerns. When a parent and teacher work collaboratively in the classroom, opportunities for increased communication between both

parties is natural and when a parent spends time in the classroom with his/her child and other class members, the parent better understands the areas for which the child needs assistance. Pauline, the teacher, will share practiced examples of communication methods and parent involvement in the classroom while and Nancy and Monika, both parents of children in her former classes, will provide parental perspectives.

Collaborative Ventures

Pauline: It's 3:35 pm: There is laughter, comfortable easy conversation, a lightness, and a voice in my head reminding me not to forget this moment. It is the beginning of October and I am a Grade 3/4 teacher. My class is going to do a dance to the Mission Impossible soundtrack at an assembly. The children are going to hand sew their own karate uniforms (short white kimono-like martial arts outfits), so the parents and I are cutting and ironing the material for 24 costumes. These parents are volunteers and friends. I have come to know them by leaving my door open at 2:45 pm so they can come in out of the Vancouver rain and sit on stools set out for them while the class ends the day with story-time on the carpet. I have ended the day with story-time for many years and parents do come inside to wait for their children. I also start the morning with students doing silent seatwork such as completing a journal reflection, silent reading, or review work. The parents are encouraged to come into the classroom to connect with me at that time about any concerns or information about the upcoming day. The established open door time-slots while class is in session creates openness to our relationship as well as openness to the parental relationship with the class.

Nancy: My daughter Emily was new in the neighbourhood and was having some issues around making friends in the school. It was important to me as a parent that I was able to be involved in her classroom. It was important to Emily as well. When I became involved in the activities I may

not have been right next to her; however, just by being in the classroom was comforting to her and she was able to concentrate more easily on her projects. She also had a sense of pride that I was able to come into the classroom. I realize that having the time to spend in the classroom is a privilege that only a few parents can take advantage of. I believe it is important that the teacher have an open door policy. It is helpful for the teacher to know when the family is experiencing stressful situations such as a death in the family, an illness, or just plain being really busy. The more the teacher knows about the child, the better the teacher is able to address the concerns that may arise. The same holds true for the parent knowing what is happening in the classroom. The parent is better able to support the child's learning if the parent is aware of the classroom activities and goals.

Monika: I always felt welcome in Pauline's classroom, and was happy to come in whenever my children asked me to. The costume preparing afternoon always stood out in my mind, as it not only gave me an opportunity to get to know the parents of my child's friends, but to communicate with Pauline on a more casual level. By getting to know each other better, we were both able to get a bit more insight into Benton's needs and abilities. When parents are able to participate in the class activities, the teacher and parent can work with the child on a parallel field, rather than contradicting each other.

Weekly Parental Drop-ins

Pauline: Once a week, I had an activity called, "Wonderful Wednesdays" or another year, it was called, "Fantastic Fridays." The children signed up available parents on a weekly basis during the time slot between recess and lunch. On this special day, I set up stations in the class and parents each lead a station. For example, for a Language Arts theme day, I might have had a parent listening to a small group of children reading, or another parent might have read a story to a

small group and then guided an activity such as sorting out story sequence strips. With extra adults in the room, children were able to be involved in learning activities in a much richer, more accountable, individualized learning program. On these days we really did have wonderful, familial, fantastic experiences. There is a warmth created in the classroom when parents learn with and teach the neighbourhood children in collaboration with the teacher. One “Wonderful Wednesday,” around Hanukah, I had three parents volunteer and we set up four individual stove top burners and made latkes. Another time, as an integrative math unit on measurement, we made pancakes. Without the parents, I could not have safely attempted these experiences which the children loved. Other weekly examples include a series of sketching lessons provided by one of the parents during our art periods, or special relevant presentations by parents connected to the curriculum in the areas of their expertise.

Nancy: Having parents in the classroom may seem daunting to some teachers. However, when the structure is set up properly, it is an enhancement to the child’s learning. Some of these children may never have cooked before. Due to the different ethnic backgrounds in the class, some of the students had never had a latke or a pancake. Experiential and cooperative learning is an integral element to reach the child who is not an auditory learner. There are so many different types of learners that a varied and interesting classroom is important in order to connect with all the children at some time during the school curriculum. It was exciting for me to be able to be in the classroom to see how the children learned, how the children interacted with each other, and how the teacher interacted with the children and the adults. In my experience as a parent, having dealt with many teachers in several schools and at different grade levels, I have the opinion that the wider the door is open to a particular classroom, the better the teacher-student-parent relationship is going to be. When the door is closed, it is difficult to get an appointment with the

teacher and find out what really is going on with one's child and their academic and social performance.

Monika: Having parents help out with class projects was always beneficial to my children, as they were able to get more hands-on time, rather than watching. This was important to Benton, as he learns kinetically, and was able to grasp new concepts faster this way. Being able to physically measure ingredients in small groups with an involved parent gave him the confidence to try difficult tasks. Watching their teacher interacting with parents in a positive friendly way gave my children a desire to do better.

Use of Email and Technology:

Pauline: Being available to parents via email was a wonderful experience for me. I was able to respond quickly and both parties had a record of communication. In some instances I emailed attachments of worksheets/marking criteria which the student had lost, or misplaced, and everyone was a lot calmer. In some cases, I was able to maintain contact with working parents who could not come in during the school day. As a working parent myself, I understand the difficulties of making connections with the classroom teacher. Parental involvement does not necessarily have to be limited to time spent in the classroom. In my Grade 3/4 class in 2004, a working parent created a worksheet list of her child's spelling with the last four weeks of spelling. She made copies for the whole class to use for optional review. I did not ask her to do this but wholeheartedly, along with the children, appreciated the extra personalized fun sheet. Her son was proud to hand out the sheets.

Another year, my Grade 5/6 class set up a class website. During homework time, one of the weekly rotating class jobs was to input the assignments and reminders from the homework board onto our site via the classroom computer. Parent feedback was very positive with this feature of

our class. Parents could check the site with their child if the child had forgotten his/her day-planner at school. The site also had a chat folder to discuss work, plan projects, share spelling lists and so forth. I generally checked the folder when I got home from work and invariably there would be a question or two that I could answer in a few minutes. The email/folder feature is so much more human than having a parent and child stressed all evening and then the child having to catch up on the work the following day.

Nancy: Being able to access the class website is important if you have the type of child that seems to always forget his/her planner. This way the parent can assure that the homework will be done in a timely manner. If the student has conveniently forgotten to bring home a test for signing that they received a poor mark on, the homework website could alert the parent to the fact that the child needs assistance. The homework website could be a good avenue to begin a dialogue between the parent and student in a non-confrontational way.

Monika: The ability to email a teacher not only helped to keep up with the curriculum, but also made it easy to communicate concerns in a timely matter when it was difficult to get to the school. Private email also provided a way to speak openly without the need to protect the child's self esteem such as after school when the child was in the room. The class web site was not only a great tool for the children, but for the parents as well. We could communicate with other parents, ask questions of the teacher, and keep up to date on the schedule and what we should be expecting from the students.

Monthly Class Newsletters

Pauline: This may seem like an extra job for the teacher but it was simple and the benefits were often voiced. On the cover, I made a list called "Questions of the Month". These were the knowledge based questions or topics we had been covering that month. Inside the newsletter (a

11 x 17" folded paper) were photographs of students learning, poetry, or written projects. Class volunteers were assigned jobs like editors, layout managers, and illustrators. Students proudly took on their jobs. Parents were kept informed with what the children were learning; the pictures provided a window into the classroom; and the writing provided examples of what other children were doing.

Nancy: I looked forward to the newsletter every month. It was very exciting when Emily was “published”. She had a sense of pride and was excited to be able to show her relatives. This type of project is an excellent way for the children to work cooperatively, deal with deadlines, and see how much work is involved in such an undertaking. It was another way that the parents could keep in touch with the goings-on of the classroom activities. It also opened a dialogue between the parents while waiting for their children to enter school or after school when picking them up. There was a connectiveness, a bond so to speak, between people who may not have otherwise had much to say to each other. Many parents were not able to participate in the classroom activities due to their work schedules and this was a way to keep everyone informed. I would even suggest that the newsletter team of the month take it upon themselves to scan the newsletter and upload it to the website. This dual form of communication would benefit those families who have children who are forgetful about giving parents newsletters.

Monika: The newsletter was a great way for the children to share what they were doing as a group with us, and the fact that they were contributors to its publication gave them a real sense of pride. It was a positive aspect of their learning which the students wanted to share with us.

In closing, we strongly believe that the learning environment was positively improved through the relationships we developed. The children experienced activity-based learning which was richer, individualized, and in many cases, only possible with the additional adults in the

classroom. Further, we have only barely touched upon the benefits of students observing collaborative relationships in action; or even the profound benefits of relational connections established between home and school's contextual environments in the hopes of promoting constructs of belonging, safety, and community. Most important in our view is the often unstated notion that teachers and parents both share the same common concern: the child.

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