

Effects of Teacher Comments on Parental Involvement

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Abstract

Parent involvement is one of the least controversial statements in American education because Americans generally agree that parent involvement can make a difference in a child's education. Factors that may negatively or positively affect parent involvement have therefore been extensively investigated. The effect that teacher comments sent to parents about their child's school work have not received widespread attention. In this study, effects that teacher positive and negative statements have on parent involvement in homework completion and school-based activities were investigated. Teachers positive and negative statements were written as part of comments to 62 parents of K-6 children with disabilities enrolled in five contiguous school districts in a Midwestern state during the 2010/2011 school year. Implications for preservice teacher preparation, parent-teacher relationships, and parental involvement in their child's school activities, are discussed.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), has consistently emphasized parents' rights and responsibilities in the education of children with disabilities. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act (2002) also requires parents to be full partners in their child's education by assisting in their child's learning activities and becoming actively involved at school (The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement, 2006, 2008; U.S. Department of Education, 2004). The No Child Left Behind Act, sets specific but ambitious definition of parent involvement for districts and schools receiving Title I funds. Section 1118 of the Act defines parental involvement as the participation of parents in regular, two-way, and meaningful communication about student learning, including activities to: (i) assist in their child's learning; (ii) help parents become full partners in their child's education; (iii) build the capacity of parents to participate in their child's learning; (iv) help parents better grasp state and local standards; (v) provide opportunities for involvement among parents with limited English skills or disabilities; and (vi) provide materials and training to help parents promote learning at home.

Several authors (e.g. Greenen, Powers, & Lopez-Vasquez, 2001; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Machen, Wilson, & Notar, 2005; Padgett, 2006; Salembier & Furner, 1997) have found that parental involvement in the education of their children results in significant differences in overall performance of children. For instance, children whose parents are involved in their school activities tend to obtain high test scores and grades (Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement, 2006, 2008), are well-behaved, and attend school regularly (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

Several studies (e.g., Greenen et al., 2001; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Machen et al, 2005; Padgett, 2006; Salembier & Furner, 1997) have found that parental involvement is inhibited due to factors such as negative teacher attitude that intimidate parents, scheduling problems, transportation difficulties, cultural and language differences. How comments that

teachers send home to parents, concerning students' work affect parents' involvement in their child's school activities, has not been well investigated. National survey data from the National Center for Education Statistics (1998) shows that attending school meetings or events is the leading form of parent participation in schools, followed by school fundraising activities. The survey also found some distinct variations by race. K-8 parents of white students were more likely than parents of African American or Hispanic students to attend a school event, volunteer or serve on a school committee and participate in school fundraising. However, while 82 percent of parents of white students said an adult checked their child's homework, the rates were higher among parents of African American and Hispanic students, which reported rates of 94% and 91%, respectively. Other studies have shown that lower-income and minority parents often have the same level of involvement in education as others — even though it may not necessarily be reflected at parent teacher conferences or school fundraisers

In this study, effects that teacher positive and negative statements have on parental involvement in homework completion and school-based activities were investigated. Teachers' positive and negative statements were written as part of comments to 62 parents of K-6 children with disabilities enrolled in five contiguous school districts in a Midwestern state during the 2010/2011 school year. Implications for preservice teacher preparation, parent-teacher relationships, and parental involvement in their child's school activities, are discussed.

Method

Procedure

At the beginning of the fall semester of 2010, 62 parents (12 Hispanics, 24 African Americans, and 26 Caucasians), were randomly selected from among 142 parents of K-6 children receiving special education and related services in general education classrooms from five contiguous medium-size school districts in a Midwestern state. The names of the 62 parents were randomly selected from sign-in lists of parents who attended their child's school open house session. At their child's open house, each participating parent consented in writing to (1) read, sign, and return teacher report sheets concerning their child's school work, (2) help their child with homework assignments, and (3) participate in at least one school-based activity (e.g., assist in their child's classroom or field trip, or attend a parent-teacher conference).

The participants included 52 females and 10 males, aged between 29 years old and 51 years old (mean age = 38.5 years). Three of the Caucasian parents were male, and 23 were female; 4 of the African American parents were male, and 20 were female; and 3 of the Hispanic parents were male, and 9 were female. Twenty (76.9%) of the Caucasian parents, 6 (50%) of the Hispanic parents, and 9 (37.5%) of the African American parents, respectively, worked full-time. Fourteen (53.8%) of the Caucasian parents, 10 (41.7%) of the African American parents, and 9 (75%) of the Hispanic parents, were married. All the parents had, at least, a high school diploma.

Table 1 is a summary of parents' demographic data. During the fall semester of 2005, one-half of each group of parents (6 Hispanic, 12 African American, and 13 Caucasian), respectively, received only negative comments about their child's school work, while the rest received positive comments throughout the semester. *Table 2* is a list of positive and negative statements sent to parents as part of the study. In the spring semester of 2006, the nature of the comments was swapped; parents who received positive comments in the previous semester received negative comments and vice versa. A 4-item survey about parent's views regarding teacher comments they received was completed by 5% of randomly selected parents from each

group at the end of each term. Parents rated the effects that teacher comments had on their involvement in their child's homework assignments and school activities on a 5-point scale; 1 being strongly disagree, and 5 being strongly agree. Specifically, parents rated their role in (a) helping with their child's homework assignments, (b) signing and returning homework assignments to their child's teacher (c) talking about school activities with their child, and (d) volunteering in their child's school or attending a school-related activity, such as a parent-teacher conference.

Table 1: Demographic Data of Parents

	Group of Parents							
	Caucasian		African American		Hispanic		TOTAL	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	N	%
	26	41.9	24	38.7	12	19.4	62	100
<i>Gender</i>								
Male	3	11.5	4	16.7	3	25.0	10	16.1
Female	23	88.5	20	83.7	9	75.0	52	83.9
<i>Marital Status</i>								
Married	14	53.8	10	41.7	9	75.0	33	53.2
Single	12	46.2	14	58.3	3	25.0	29	46.8
<i>Employment Status</i>								
Employed	20	76.9	11	45.8	5	41.7	36	58.1
Unemployed	6	23.1	13	54.2	7	58.3	26	41.9
<i>Education</i>								
High School Diploma	26	100	24	100	12	100	62	100

Data Analysis

The number of homework sheets that each parent signed and returned, after they received positive comments or negative comments, was recorded separately, and the mean score for each group of parents (Caucasian, African American, and Hispanic) was computed. Secondly, the mean score of the number of times that parents got involved in their child's school-related activity (e.g., assisted in classroom or field trip, attended a parent-teacher conference), after receiving positive and negative comments, respectively, was computed. Thirdly, the mean score for each group of parents on the 4-item survey was calculated.

Results

On the average, only 4 (15.6%) Caucasian parents, 10 (41.7%) African American parents and (25%) Hispanic parents, respectively, signed and returned their child's homework assignment when they received only negative teacher comments. In contrast, an average of 20 (76.9%) Caucasian parents, 18 (75%) African American parents, and 9 (75%) Hispanic parents, respectively, signed and returned their child's homework assignment when teacher comments were positive. Similarly, 8 (30.8%) Caucasian parents, 9 (37.5%) African American parents, and 3 (25%) Hispanic parents, respectively, were involved in their child's school activities (e.g., assisted in classroom or field trip, parent-teacher conference, etc.), when they received only negative statements. In contrast, 23 (88.5%) Caucasian parents, 18 (75%) African American

parents, and 7 (58.3%) Hispanic parents, respectively, were involved in their child’s school activities when they received only positive statements.

Table 2: Positive and Negative Comments to Parents

Positive Comments	Negative Comments
Positive Comments	Negative Comments
Wow! Great day	Had a real bad day
Smart kid!	Struggled with reading, etc.
King/Queen for the day	Troublesome entire day!
Star of the class	Messed up a lot!
Most well-behaved child today	Very disruptive in class today!
Well done!	Must do better!
Keep up the good work!	Falling far behind classmates!
I’m proud of you!	I’m disappointed with his/her work!
Hardworking kid!	Lazy kid! Must work harder!
Wonderful kid!	Needs to be serious in class!
A special kid!	I can’t figure out his/her problem!
Outstanding performance!	Heading for failure!
Superb performance!	May repeat class!
Most helpful child!	Mostly uninvolved in class activities!
Most respectful child!	Most disrespectful child in class!

Eighteen (69%) Caucasian parents, 14 (58.3%) African American parents, and 4 (33.3%) Hispanic parents indicated that they were very upset with teachers’ negative comments. Only 2 (7.7%) Caucasian parents, 3 (12.5%), African American parents, and 2 (16.7%) Hispanic parents indicated that they found both the negative comments and positive comments sometimes useful. Additionally, whereas 96.2% of the Hispanic parents indicated interest to receiving daily teacher comments in the future, only 34.4% of the Caucasian parents and 54.2% of the African American parents indicated interest to receiving daily teacher comments in the future

Discussion

Teacher positive homebound comments led to increased greater parental involvement in their child’s homework assignment completion and school-based activities. Teacher comments used in this study were simple to develop and use, but they seemed powerful enough to encourage parents to, or discourage them from, getting involved in their child’s school work.

Though, teachers may be tempted to tell parents about things that children do poorly in at school, teachers should do so sparingly. In other words, parents often expect teachers to emphasize achievements of their child more than what they failed to do well. Also, the results of this study suggest that parental involvement was linked to parents knowing that their child was making or could be making progress in school. In view of this, teachers’ comments should indicate to parents that their involvement is yielding positive results.

Table 3: Parental Involvement in Homework Completion and School Activities

	Positive Statements		Negative Statements		
	#	(Mean %)	#	Mean %	Homework
Hispanics	9	(75)	3	84.6	
African Americans	18	(75)	10	41.7	
Caucasians	20	(76.9)	4	15.6	
<i>School Activities</i>					
Hispanics	7	58.3	3	25.0	
African Americans	18	75.0	9	37.5	
Caucasians	23	88.5	8	30.8	

All three groups of parents reacted negatively to teachers' negative comments. However, the results of this study show that the degree of reaction among the groups varied. Caucasian parents were most unlikely to help with their child's school work if teacher comments were negative, followed by Hispanic parents, and African American parents in that order. This finding suggests that teachers need to understand cultural differences that exist among ethnic groups that could be a barrier to effective parental involvement efforts.

Comments that teachers send to parents are intended to let parents know about what their child is doing at school. Teachers could generate parental enthusiasm in their child's school activities by sending home positive comments. Findings from this study indicate that reliance on negative comments would result in dampening parental enthusiasm in their child's school work. If parents indicate that they were very upset by teachers' emphasis on negative comments, they could become confrontational at some point.

Conclusion

The results of the study suggest that teachers are more likely to encourage parental participation in their children's school activities by sending home positive reports about children's school work than by highlighting what students are not doing well at school. Teachers must endeavor to increase parent and family involvement in schools, not only to meet IDEA and NCLB expectations, but also because parental involvement makes a difference in their child's academic, social, emotional, behavioral outcomes.

Positive comments used in this study are very easy to develop, and effective in improving teacher parent relationships. Pre-service teacher preparation programs must teach the foundations of positive school-family relationships to would-be new teachers so that they work to promote parental involvement in schools.

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