Family, school, community engagement, and partnerships: an area of continued inquiry and growth

Sarina C. Molina*

Department of Learning and Teaching, School of Leadership and Education Sciences, University of San Diego, San Diego, CA, USA

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This article responds to the theme issue by providing a glimpse of the historical and contemporary efforts in the area of developing school, family, and community partnerships, a long-standing area of need and inquiry in the literature. It reports on the collective learning from these articles where implications of the findings pointed to the importance of elevating the importance of these partnerships. Implementation ideas of strong family, school, and community partnerships are considered along with areas that require continued attention including, but not limited to providing professional development learning opportunities, inviting voices from all stakeholders involved, shifting the paradigm of family and community involvement from a deficit model to a resource-rich model, and promoting a more free flowing sharing of research-based practices between the research community and those who are in the frontlines of these partnerships.

Keywords: family; school; community partnerships; family involvement; community involvement

Introduction

Developing sustained and comprehensive relationships with schools, families, and the community is a long-standing area of need and inquiry for schools and researchers alike. There is no curriculum guide that provides a step-by-step approach to developing powerful connections between schools, families, and communities that would be applicable in all contexts and surmount the incredible complexity and unique nature of these settings. These relationships take time, vigilance, a deep understanding, and a desire to bring together the schools, the families, and communities together to identify needs, and most importantly, the abundance of hard and soft resources to support the one unifying mission for all – that is, supporting the aspirations of our children. Such powerful partnerships can support them not only academically, but also socially and emotionally (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

The articles selected for this journal provide us with additional layers of these efforts in local, state, international, and online contexts. Within each of these layers, there are a multitude of stakeholders that play an important role in the lives of these children. Part of the success of these partnerships is identifying stakeholders and having sustained conversations where their voices and concerns are heard and addressed. Other areas include supporting leadership initiatives from these different constituents.

*Email: sarina@sandiego.edu

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so that these voices can be heard and their negotiations can be more bidirectional in understanding and influencing school decisions that affect their children. Most importantly, it is ongoing collaborative learning opportunities that need to be integrated into the professional development of teachers, staff, parent groups, families, and community members on the integral nature of education where assumptions and beliefs of self- and other are analyzed, confronted, and re-evaluated on an ongoing basis.

Understanding the significant role that families and communities play in the success of their children in schools is of paramount importance and begins with pre-service teacher education and continues through professional development within the schools, and beyond through collaborative efforts with families and communities. Pre-service teachers can benefit from opportunities to participate in parent-teacher conferences or school-wide events with experienced, veteran teachers, staff, and administrators who have had success in involving families and communities in their classrooms and schools.

The articles in this issue explore possibilities for infusing a deeper understanding of family and community involvement through teacher education coursework and fieldwork experiences, recognize the necessity of a paradigm shift for teachers from a deficit model to a value-based model in order for these partnerships to work, call to action for stakeholders at all levels not to only talk about the importance of these partnerships, but to put resources behind these initiatives, and encourage further research on effective partnerships that demonstrate a link with student learning to be disseminated to teachers on the forefront of these partnership opportunities.

Teacher preparation

Coursework

Miller, in her article “Preparing educators to partner with families”, identifies the need for deeper infusion of topics related to family and school involvement in coursework and across disciplines. This can be done through reviewing research and case studies on effective school, family, and community partnership initiatives that are known to support student learning and specific strategies to obtain resources to support these initiatives. The focus then should not be on what is successful and effective, but the pulling together of processes and resources necessary for effective partnerships. Teacher educators need to scaffold teacher candidate learning through feedback and ongoing support even on online platforms as Nathans points out in her analysis of online discussion responses of teacher candidates on Epstein’s Six Types of Parent Involvement. Teacher educators need to help pre-service teachers bridge theory with practice and begin to see this knowledge from the perspective of their future roles as teachers, rather than students completing a course. Mehlig and Shumow, in their article “How is my child doing?: Preparing preservice teachers to engage parents through assessment”, provide a compelling argument for situated learning through role play as one example where pre-service teachers can develop a context-based protocol for involving parents in understanding their children’s progress, learning, and areas of strengths and needs through discussions about the different forms of assessment and what they mean.

Fieldwork

Criteria for field placement can include schools with high levels of parent and community participation in diverse contexts. Pre-service teachers can participate in
small-scale action research projects involving an analysis of the parent and community engagement levels of the schools in which they are placed, interviews with families and community members to deepen their understanding of the context, and look for ways in which to collaborate with their teachers and schools on inviting and including voices from families and community members in the decision-making processes and functioning of the schools. Field experiences beyond the schools to community organizations and homes could also support a deeper understanding of the context and needs and possible opportunities for engagement with schools.

Paradigm shift
Michael Evans, in his article “Educating preservice teachers for family, school, and community engagement: a review of the literature”, presents a compelling argument and urgency surrounding the issues of school, family, and community partnerships where he states, “The next generation of teachers must be capable of preparing increasingly diverse groups of students for a globalized world, while simultaneously confronting vast social inequities in the classroom.” It is critical for teachers through their pre-service training and in-service professional development to challenge their assumptions about their beliefs towards their students’ families and the communities in which they teach. This shift in perceptions of teachers from the deficit model of thinking to acknowledging the rich resources and funds of knowledge inherent within these families and communities can only emerge when such critical self-reflective practice takes place through ongoing bidirectional dialogizing with the families and communities about the education of their children (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Harvard Family Research Project 2002; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzales, 1992) and participation in safe spaces where all stakeholders can come together to hear each others’ voices. Martinez and Ulanoff, in their article “Latino parents and teachers: key players building neighborhood capital”, identified how having a strengths-based lens can truly dispel the often misguided perceptions teachers may have of families and communities in neighborhoods they serve and reveal the genuine interest that families and communities have in the education of their children.

Call to action for all stakeholders
Hands, in her article, “Including all families in education: school district-level efforts to promote parent engagement in Ontario, Canada”, notes the importance of district level policies necessary to support family engagement in terms of training, money, and time. These resources need to be filtered through pre-service teacher education and through professional development within the schools including administration and staff members. When parents’ roles are expanded beyond that of volunteers to valued members with a vested interest in their children’s education, they can become strong advocates for their children and the schools and bridge deeper connections with the community. Swanke, Doktor, Shrestha, and Zeman in their article describe an online parent community that involve parents with children with autism and the powerful means in which parents communicated about how to support their children in schools. If teachers were considered team players and were included in these conversations concerning their children, they would be more aware of the needs and struggles of these children and would be able to partner
more effectively with the parents in providing an optimal educational experience for their children. These spaces will provide opportunities for mutual learning, collaborative problem-solving, and event planning with families and communities in which they serve.

**Strengthening research and dissemination of research**

Lastly, if we are to convince our teachers of the value of schools, families, and community partnerships, future research needs to forge more explicit connections between family and community engagement with student learning. Teachers need to be able to access this information and be provided guidance as to how to go about implementing effective practices in family and community involvement in their schools.

**Conclusion**

Though much progress has been made in assessing and addressing the needs in the area of school, family, and community partnerships, it is clear that much work remains to be done. From the compilation of articles selected for this special themed journal, there appears to be a continued need for teachers to be provided opportunities to think about their thinking and how this manifests into their work and experiences. Teachers, staff members, administrators in schools, districts, and states not only need to recognize the importance of these partnerships, but also put resources behind initiatives that support the professional development and implementation of these practices. The paradigm of families and communities that schools serve needs to shift from one that is focused on lack to one that is focused on strength. Lastly, further research on best practices for creating and sustaining these partnerships needs to be infused into coursework and professional development with all stakeholders involved so that there is a more cogent relationship between what is learned through research and how such research can be implemented into the classroom.

**References**


