

Parents' Educational Beliefs: Implications for Parent Participation in School Reforms

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The purpose of this study is to explore parents' ideas about basic issues underlying current constructivist school reforms. Recently, educational policy makers, researchers, and practitioners have supported numerous educational reforms. One proposed reform, aimed at facilitating student achievement through building relationships between homes and schools, is the inclusion of parents as partners in education (U.S. Department of Education, 1994). Little is known, however, about parents beliefs about their inclusion or about the basis on which parents make decisions regarding educational issues. It is important to learn more about such parent beliefs at this time in which educators advocate widespread reform of curriculum, instruction, and assessment predicated on constructivist epistemology.

The notion of partnership, so popular in descriptions of current initiatives to involve parents (Comer & Haynes, 1991; Epstein, 1995; Haynes & Ben-Avie, 1996), implies working together toward some purpose. Dewey (1916) explicitly identifies shared goals as a foundation of partnership. Yet, although many professionals are enthusiastic about the reforms described below, educators have recognized that some parents may reject school reforms, rebelling against progressive constructivist educational practices and advocating a return to the traditional practices with which they were familiar (Casanova, 1996; Dillon, 1990; Dow, 1991; Konzal, 1996; Mirel, 1994). Some suggest that schools should acquiesce to parents because of their primacy as stakeholders in children's education (Carr, 1995), whereas others demonstrate that parents may be amenable to accepting reforms after they have learned about them (Matusov & Rogoff, 1996; Shumow, 1998). Although seemingly disparate, both these views underscore the need for educators to consider the content and basis of parent beliefs about schooling and learning. Both also underscore the importance of establishing

intersubjectivity, a working understanding, among professional and parent participants in educational decision-making.

If parents are to be included as partners in education then their views on these issues need to be considered. The idea of including parents as decision-makers in education has been touted as a high level, democratic, and desirable practice (Comer & Haynes, 1991; Epstein, 1995). However, educational systems that currently include parents in decision-making roles actually tend to include relatively few parents who serve as committee or council "representatives" (Carr, 1996; Wells, Kratzer, & Bernal, 1995). The extent to which these parents actually represent other parents is open to question. Recently, several scholars have suggested that parents who participate in decision-making roles are not necessarily representative of all parents. Rather, they tend to come either from the elite of the community (Carr, 1996), with a personal ax to grind (Casanova, 1996), or as a result of being chosen for their cooperativeness by educators who run the committees (Konzal, 1996). In the present investigation, beliefs were sampled from a broad range of parents with the intent of listening to the voices of all parents. I hope to demonstrate the importance of garnering views from a spectrum of parents, as well as understanding the grounds on which parents base their beliefs and the motives that they express for their views.

Despite the observation that proposals for school reform resemble a "gathering babel" (Cohen, 1995), several ideas have gained broad acceptance. For one, many reforms aim to have students construct knowledge with understanding, solve problems, and communicate effectively (Hiebert, et al., 1996; National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, 1989). These goals are not new ideas in education, indeed they are similar to those championed by Dewey, but they do differ distinctly from essentialist ideas prevalent in public education since the decline of progressivist ideas earlier in the century (Darling-Hammond, 1996). Another commonality among reforms, which is supported by recent research on learning, is active participation of students in authentic tasks (Brown, 1994; Cognition & Technology Group at Vanderbilt, 1990). Yet another widely shared idea is that of the teacher as a guide of student learning rather than as a transmitter of information solely. A final popular reform examined is authentic assessment (Darling-Hammond, Ancess, & Falk, 1995; Lesh & Lamon, 1992). Understanding parent perspectives on these issues, as well as the manner in which they perceive their own role, may facilitate productive communication and enhance partnership efforts between schools and parents. The present study examines parent beliefs about fundamental issues in schooling addressed by current reforms. These are: (a) the goals of schooling, (b) learning processes, (c) teacher's classroom roles, (d) assessment of children's learning, and (e) parents' roles in education.

Prior research on parent beliefs about schooling indicates, not surpris-

ingly, that parents have a range of ideas about learning and schooling. Cohen (1981) observed that mothers accepted constructivist ideas only while their children were in preschool and that they endorsed traditional views once children entered formal schooling. Goodnow, Cashmore, Cotton, and Knight (1984) found that parent beliefs favoring traditional education remained stable despite a school initiative to inform them about educational expectations consistent with children's cognitive development. On the other hand, Matusov and Rogoff (1996) observed parent practices consonant with constructivist educational philosophy among parents with longer tenure as helpers in an "innovative" elementary school than among parent volunteers who were "newcomers." They concluded that parents gained new ideas as a result of their experiences in the school. With these findings in mind, parents of second graders were included in the present study because their children had made the transition to elementary school identified as important by Cohen (1981).

Method

The study was conducted in two neighboring elementary school classrooms within a Midwestern school district implementing numerous educational reforms. The classroom teachers were recognized as leaders in implementation of reforms. These reforms included whole language, invented spelling, Cognitively Guided Instruction in Mathematics (Fennema & Carpenter, 1989), authentic assessment (student portfolios), and promotion of multiple intelligences. A great deal of political rhetoric against school reform was evident in the community (local newspaper, school board election, and complaints to school principals). Of all the reforms mentioned above, authentic (or outcome-based) assessment was most controversial. A small politically conservative citizens group opposed school reform: they organized, held meetings, wrote letters, and put forth candidates for school board. On the surface, it appeared that the community was fomenting against reforms.

Forty parents were invited to participate in a study examining parent views of learning and schooling (34 parents agreed). Thirty-one parents (6 fathers, 25 mothers) of second grade children completed interviews (3 interviews were not completed because of parent or child illness). Of the six parents who declined, one cited reticence because of problems with English, three were experiencing extremely stressful life events, one was moving, and one was a foster mother. Parent educational levels ranged from high school to graduate degrees with a median level of some college attendance (attended but did not complete a postsecondary program). Parent occupations ranged from clerical workers to professionals. Parents of primary grade children were selected because they tend to be more

involved in schooling and, although they have some experience with the school program, they are less likely to be influenced by a child's educational history than are parents of middle or high school students. As a result of materials sent home or presented at open house by the teacher, all parents had some prior exposure and information about the school program.

Parents responded to a semi-structured interview. All parents were individually interviewed in their homes with the exception of two parents who, at their request, were interviewed in an office at the university. Interview items concerned: (a) the goals of schooling, (b) how children learn, (c) the role of teachers, (d) the needs, skills, and interests of their child, and (e) the role of parents in facilitating children's learning. In addition, parents provided opinions on the value of various sources of assessment (e.g. standardized tests, examining child's actual school work, talking to teachers) in helping them to determine how well their child was learning. Their responses were very (3), somewhat (2), or not (1) helpful. Finally, in order to tap ideas about teaching and learning, parents were asked to nominate a classroom teacher they had known who was an expert at teaching and to explain the basis on which they decided that this particular teacher was expert.

Scholars have suggested that researchers provide parents greater latitude in defining their own ideas (McGuire, 1986; Miller, 1988). Because of an interest in allowing parents to define their own ideas, a content analysis of five interviews was used to generate a coding scheme based on the views parents expressed not on predetermined categories or scales. Interviews were then coded by a research assistant unfamiliar with the children, families, or schools.

The goals of schooling identified by parents were coded as: (a) transmission of basic skills - no higher order thinking mentioned, (b) higher order thinking included, and (c) other. Views of how children learn were coded as: (a) through practice or demonstration, (b) practical experience, (e.g. "hands-on" activities), (c) social interactions such as discussion and exposure to the views of others, and (d) motivational factors. The role of teachers was coded as: (a) transmitting knowledge, (b) providing meaningful and novel experiences, or (c) focusing on individual children. Parents identified their own roles as: (a) providing emotional support, (b) providing enrichment, and (c) drilling. Parents rated the value of authentic (school papers, homework) and comparative assessments such as grades and achievement tests as: (a) very, (b) somewhat, or (c) not valuable. Responses to parent views on teaching expertise were coded as (a) the teacher benefited their individual child, (b) the teacher benefited all children, or (c) other.

Twenty-five percent of the interviews were independently coded by another research assistant unfamiliar with the families for the purpose

of the study. Interrater reliability was high (exact agreement = .89). Disagreement between coders was resolved by the author who created the coding scheme.

Results

Parent Beliefs about the Goals of Schooling

Few parents identified goals consistent with those of current reforms. Rather, most (61%) parents identified the traditional goals of transmitting basic skills as the most important purpose of schooling. It was not unusual to hear parents concur with one mother who said “you need your basics covered all the way up through – your reading, spelling, and arithmetic, your phonics.” Only 19% of the parents mentioned critical thinking, problem solving, or communication skills as important. One parent who identified the important goals of schooling as “the learning skills, by that I mean reasoning and communication, and the ability to solve problems” was in the minority. In fact, when asked directly about whether teachers could teach thinking skills, more than half (55%) of the parents either disagreed or did not know. Parents usually stated that they did not believe that it was possible to teach thinking because it is an innate process. The remaining 19% of parents mentioned “other” goals such as development of social skills. For example, one parent replied that an educational goal should be “. . . functioning together as a class, I think that forces them to become somewhat of a team . . . it also, I guess, teaches them to be polite.”

The reasons parents gave to support their view about what was important to learn in school were within the practical realm. Some parents saw practicality as meaning efficiency. One mother thought that teachers needed to get together and divide up the skills children needed to learn in an orderly manner so that time was not wasted in repeating or reteaching skills across grade levels. Other parents thought practicality meant preparing children for future success, and they believed that children need to learn those essential skills in first grade that will allow them to succeed in second grade. Likewise, some thought that elementary schools needed to prepare children for middle school. Yet others focused on the value of school learning in its applicability to “everyday adult life,” such as the ability to balance a checkbook or read instructions. Only a few parents talked about the pursuit of knowledge and the joy associated with learning as reasons to learn in school.

Parent Beliefs about How Children Learn

Although slightly more than one-third (35%) of the parents felt that

traditional methods of drill and practice of isolated skills accounted for academic learning, the other parents expressed ideas about children's learning processes that were more consistent with current reforms. For example, an equal number of the parents (35%) believed that direct (hands-on) experience explained school learning. Another sixteen percent believed that social interaction was a critical mechanism accounting for learning. One mother, who endorsed the value of children "figuring it out for themselves", said that "a light will go off in their head" as a result of the open exchange of ideas during classroom conversations with groups of children. The remaining parents saw motivation and home-school consistency (10%) as key determinants of learning. One parent did not have an opinion.

Parent Beliefs about the Role of Teachers and Parents

Parents' ideas about the role teachers should play in the classroom also tended to be consistent with those of the reforms. Parents first discussed their beliefs about how teachers should go about meeting the goals the parent had identified as important. Parents talked about "making it relevant." About half of the parents (48%) believed the role of the teacher was to expose children to new ideas, activities, and problems and to facilitate individual exploration of new information and ideas. Nearly one-third of the parents (32%) said the role was defined by focusing on the student either by beginning from student's knowledge or by connecting school material to meaningful experiences in the student's life. Fewer parents (19%) expressed traditional ideas of teachers as transmitters of knowledge, including two parents who mentioned the importance of informing parents which they saw as the teacher's responsibility.

Parents then discussed their children's interests and abilities. The majority of parents viewed themselves as jointly responsible with schools for furthering children's talents and interests. They believed that the teacher's role in promoting individual development was assigning projects, providing enrichment opportunities, and allowing for individualized instruction. Whether parents were discussing furthering basic skills or developing children's interests, the majority saw the primary parental role as providing encouragement, positive feedback, and support to their children. Parents also emphasized the importance of providing enriching activities, materials, and experiences. They talked about providing materials, lessons, and taking children places. For instance, one mother said, "I'd rather get him something he can learn from (for holidays and birthdays) than some junky toy that's going to be thrown away in two weeks. . . . And we visit museums so he can see. . . . We buy him books on the subjects he is interested in, which helps his reading, but it also helps him learn about the things he's interested in."

Parent Views on Assessment

Surprisingly, given the political hoopla in the district, parent views on methods of assessment also supported reform views. Parent ratings of the informative value of different means of determining learning progress can be seen in Table One. The mean and standard deviation for each item are reported. Also included on the table are the percentages of parents endorsing each source as very, somewhat, or not helpful. Overall, parents rated authentic forms of assessment as most informative. For instance, parents rated the work that the child brings home from school as the single most important source of information; 89% of the parents found these to be a very important indicator of how the child was doing in school. Also highly rated were feelings the child expresses about school, their experience with the child (including homework), and discussions with the classroom teacher. Achievement tests were rated as very important by 32% and as not important by 21% of parents.

Table 1: Parent Endorsements of Information Sources about Children's Learning

| Source | Percentages of Parents Rating the Value of Source | | | |
|---|---|------|----------|-----|
| | Mean (SD) | Very | Somewhat | Not |
| 1. Papers child brings home from school | 2.89 (.32) | 89 | 11 | 0 |

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| 2. Feelings child expresses | 2.78 (.43) | 74 | 21 | 5 |
| 3. Experience with child, including homework | 2.74 (.45) | 79 | 26 | 0 |
| 4. Conference/discuss with teacher | 2.74 (.45) | 79 | 26 | 0 |
| 5. Newsletters | 2.58 (.51) | 58 | 42 | 0 |
| 6. Report cards | 2.42 (.77) | 58 | 26 | 16 |
| 7. Personal educ. background | 2.42 (.69) | 53 | 37 | 10 |
| 8. Achievement tests, if given in grade 2 | 2.10 (.74) | 32 | 47 | 21 |
| 9. Experience with older children | 2.06 (.83) | 32 | 32 | 26 |
| 10. Opinions of friends, neighbors, relatives | 1.63 (.83) | 21 | 21 | 58 |

One parent expanded upon the value of portfolios as compared to grades, "I've noticed, you know, positive feedback is good, but if she (child) can see it herself. A real good example was when we looked (at the portfolio) and in the beginning she only had like two sentences written and then later she had a whole paragraph. You know, I saw that and she saw that, and she felt really good about that, so I think that's a good way of saying, this is where you're at now. Look at how you have progressed!"

Parent Beliefs about Teaching Expertise

The final issue examined was the justification parents used to decide if a teacher was an expert. The majority of parents (57%) used their own children's reactions to a teacher as the criterion for determining educational expertise and effectiveness. For example, one mother identified a teacher she knew as a real expert in teaching. When asked how she knew this, the mother replied, "Because, she was great with my son." Another mother said, "Well, I am not a teacher, but I do know my kids so I look at how they are learning from her and how they like her." Another said, "If my daughter wants to go to school and wants to give her teacher presents, then I think

that teacher is an expert.” Slightly less than a third of the parents (32%) suggested that the common good (in other words, all the children) mattered in deciding how expert an individual was as a teacher. These parents tended to argue that you would have to look at the overall class achievement or how clearly understood the subject matter was by the class as a result of expert explanation by the teacher. Only two parents (6%) based their criteria on professional qualities like educational preparation, knowledge, and dispositions towards ideas. Two parents did not give codeable answers; they seemed confused about the concept of teachers as experts.

Discussion and Implications

Overall, parents seemed to agree more with educators on the means than ends of reforms. There appeared to be significant discontinuity between the educational goals of parents and those of the reforms, yet parent views of instructional approaches, assessment, and teacher's roles were more congruous with current reforms. These areas of agreement may form a basis from which to work in establishing home-school partnerships. Examination of parent beliefs and reasoning suggest considerations for and approaches to including parents in their children's education.

Reformers need to take seriously parents' desire to be assured that their children are learning the “basics” and that children's needs are being addressed. In the current enthusiasm for school reform, professionals may take for granted that parents understand that new perspectives on subject matter, instruction, and learning are geared toward improving children's preparation for the future and toward developing knowledge in the content areas. Emphasizing that all parties want children to gain academic skills may be essential to garnering parent support. Parental views about assessment indicate that parents prefer and may be persuaded by concrete evidence that children are progressing. This finding is consistent with those of Shepard and Bleim (1995) that parents are amenable to authentic forms of assessment. Strategies for promoting parents understanding of their children's progress and for talking with parents about projections for the future and the practicality of reform goals need to be found.

The importance of gathering views from as many parents as were willing to express them should be stressed. Most parents held different views than the few parents who complained to the principals, wrote letters to the local newspaper, or ran for school board on an anti-reform platform. This study suggests that schools have much to gain by talking with a broad sample of all parents rather than by changing policy or shutting parents out because of generalizations or fear based on complaints made by a small minority of vocal parents. Otherwise, schools are in danger of greasing the squeaky

wheels while ignoring the majority.

Not surprisingly, parents held diverse views on each issue; they were not a monolithic interest group. Konzal (1996) also identified a wide range in parent beliefs about education in one seemingly homogenous community. A critical questions raised by this variance in parental views is how schools will make decisions. Will the majority rule? What will be the relative weight given to the views of parents and to the "expert" stance of school teachers and administrators? Which issues will be jointly decided and which may be best left to those individuals with specialization? Like prior research by Carr (1996), parents expressed a lack of educational knowledge and expertise as evidenced by statements like "I am not a teacher." Parent responses to questions about teacher expertise and promoting thinking in the present study revealed that parents had limited knowledge about professional practice. In their desire to include parents at the table, many who champion parent participation in decision-making have not addressed this important issue.

An additional cautionary note about parent representatives on decision-making committees needs to be made. The majority of parents in this study based their views of what was valuable on the needs and dispositions of their individual child. This finding is also consistent with research by Carr (1996) that identified the most frequent justification parents provided for participation in school decision-making opportunities as concern for their individual child. On the one hand, this tendency is to be expected and encouraged. Parents should be advocates for their children. On the other hand, if the parent representative has an agenda based on their own child(ren), this limits their representativeness, in effect creating a new power elite. Perhaps schools should attempt to obtain the opinions of all parents. One way to accomplish this is to conduct focus groups or surveys of all parents on important issues. A less formal approach is to use the natural flow of information in communities (Weenig & Midden, 1991) by having members of the school community present and discuss issues with others in their social circle and report back to the committees. Communication among parents and teachers also needs to be fostered, so that the front-line adults can work effectively towards providing for the education of each child. Direct attention toward meeting children's learning needs on a daily basis, both at home and school, may be the most effective way to direct parents' advocacy efforts.

The latter suggestion is consistent with parents' own views of their role in children's education. Overwhelmingly, parents defined their role as providing support and encouragement to their children. Interestingly, in rating the value of sources of information on how the child was learning, more parents were interested in their children's feelings than in achievement test results. In this way, parents demonstrated that they were attuned

to the whole child. The importance of sensitivity to children's emotional adjustment during learning tasks should not be overlooked. This is a quality at which Japanese mothers excel, and one which has been used to explain Japanese children's diligence and academic achievement (Bacon & Ichikawa, 1988; Reischauer, 1977). An important way that schools may involve parents as experts on their children is to elicit and listen to parents' understanding of how children are faring emotionally with their learning. Teachers, in contrast to parents, are not very aware of children's psychological distress (Shumow, 1997).

Parents also saw themselves as providing enrichment opportunities to enhance their children's education. Children's learning and classroom lessons may benefit if teachers encourage this practice. Writing, science, social studies, and mathematics are enriched when extended from children's experiences in their families and neighborhoods (Calkins, 1994; Corno, 1996; Hill, 1994). Considering the findings of Lareau (1989), parents' enthusiasm for this role may be a result of the middle-class sample because working class parents may define schools as responsible for teaching academic skills and need encouragement to view their homes and communities as contexts for sharing with school. This issue warrants further investigation with diverse samples.

In summary, parents' views of school goals, learning processes, parent and teacher roles, and assessment were examined in relationship to constructivist perspectives underlying reforms. Results indicate considerable diversity among parents and raise issues about parent involvement in school decision-making. Few parents have embraced the goals of the reforms. Increased communication and sharing among parents and teachers about children's learning, adjustment, and progress, as well as representation of children's home experiences in school offer promising avenues for promoting home school relations.

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