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## COLLABORATION BETWEEN PARENTS AND KINDERGARTEN TEACHERS

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Educators frequently point out the critical role of the home and family environment in determining children's kindergarten success, and it appears that the earlier this influence takes place, the greater the likelihood of the child's higher achievement. In order for parents to get more involved with children's education, a better communication must be established between parents and teachers in kindergartens. Effective communication between families and kindergartens is frequent and bi-directional, instills a sense of shared purpose, and works toward mutually advantageous solutions to problems.

The aim of this paper is to build an effective communication system between teachers and parents in the kindergarten. Therefore, the current work will focus on the collaboration between teachers and parents, which consists in two main elements: (1) Partnership which presents the parties involved with special challenges that must be navigated unto agreement. (2) Communication which is defined as working level of partnership, e.g. activity of conveying information through the exchange of ideas, feelings, intentions, attitudes, expectations, perceptions or commands.

**Key words:** teachers, kindergarten, parents, collaboration

### Introduction

Promoting family involvement in education may improve children's academic and social outcomes, both in early education and beyond.<sup>1</sup> There-

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<sup>1</sup> D.C. Castro et al., *Parent involvement in Head Start programs: The role of parent, teacher and classroom characteristics*, Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 2004, 19(3), p. 413-430.

fore, fostering family-kindergarten: partnerships has been considered as a priority for kindergarten personnel, including early childhood educators, who are often charged with facilitating parent involvement.<sup>2</sup> Two dimensions of parent-kindergarten collaborations – parent involvement in kindergarten activities and perceived teacher responsiveness to children and parents – hold particular promise of enhancing pre-kindergarten effects on children and are the focus of the current study. Providing parental kindergarten-involvement opportunities is the most common way kindergartens attempt to facilitate relationships with parents, whereas the construct of teacher responsiveness reflects a more recent interest in how kindergartens embrace parents and children.

This paper aims to present collaboration between teachers and parents, which mainly holds two elements: (1) Partnership which presents the involved parties with special challenges that must be navigated unto agreement. Overarching goals, levels of give-and-take, areas of responsibility, lines of authority and succession, how success is evaluated and distributed, and often a variety of other factors must all be negotiated. Partnerships exist within, and across, sectors. (2) Communication which is defined as working level of partnership, e.g. activity of conveying information through the exchange of ideas, feelings, intentions, attitudes, expectations, perceptions or commands. The paper will first introduce benefits in parental involvement and then will introduce several modes of collaboration between parents and teachers.

## Parental involvement

The need for parental involvement has been identified as critical to the child's functioning successfully during the early childhood years (Meyerhoff, White, 1986). The child's teacher has been identified as the key to actualizing positive parental involvement in early childhood education programs (Swick, 1984). Previous studies showed that the earlier in a child's educational process parent involvement begins, the more powerful the effects will be. Educators frequently point out the critical role of the home and family environment in determining children's kindergarten success, and it appears that the earlier this influence is "harnessed", the greater the likeli-

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<sup>2</sup> S. Sandall et al., *DEC recommended practices: A comprehensive guide for practical application in early intervention/early childhood special education*, Division for Early Childhood (DEC), Missoula, MT 2005.

hood of higher child's achievement.<sup>3</sup> Parents role construction may be described as parent focused, kindergarten focused, and/or partnership focused. In the parent-focused construct, parents consider that they have primary responsibility for their children's educational outcome. In the kindergarten-focused construct, parents feel the kindergarten is primarily responsible for the children's educational outcome, and in the partnership-focused construct, parents believe that teacher and parent working together are responsible.<sup>4</sup>

### Teachers' position towards Parental involvement

On of the teacher's side, teachers may view their role as parent focused, kindergarten focused, and/or partnership focused. The parent-focused view evolved out of the parent-cooperative movement. In that movement, teachers and parents worked side by side, empowering parents and giving parents teaching roles. This view is most prevalent in early childhood programs. The kindergarten-focused role reflects teachers who believe in an effective separation of roles and functions between home and kindergarten. This view is more typical in elementary kindergartens and intensifies the older the child gets. The partnership-focus perspective, where family and kindergarten work cooperatively, is a more recent construct, evolving as the literature began to point to the significant benefits that accrue to children, parents, and teachers as a result of the partnership. As with parents, how the teachers interact will vary based upon the beliefs the teachers hold.<sup>5</sup>

Teachers may contend with pragmatic, psychological, and cultural barriers to parental involvement.<sup>6</sup> Teachers may avoid involving parents because they lack practical support for the extra activities implied by active parental involvement programs. Teachers with limited experience or skills may reach out only to give up if initial efforts are not immediately successful. Experienced teachers may be reluctant to invite parents if negative encounters have

<sup>3</sup> C. Webster-Stratton, *The Incredible Years: Parent, Teacher, and Child Training Series (IYS)*, [In:] *Preventing Violence and Related Health-Risking Social Behaviors in Adolescents: An NIH State-of-the-Science, Press Conference*, 2011, p. 73.

<sup>4</sup> R.P. Reed et al., *Parents. motivation for involvement in children's education: Testing a theoretical model*, Paper presented at the symposium. Parent Involvement: The Perspectives of Multiple Stakeholders at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, LA 2000.

<sup>5</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>6</sup> R.L. Huss-Keeler, *Teacher perception of ethnic and linguistic minority parental involvement and its relationships to children's language and literacy learning: A case study*, *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 1997, 13(2), p. 171-182.

cast a pall over the perceived likelihood of successful involvement. Further complicating prospects for effective parental involvement, teachers who feel uncertain of their skills in dealing with 'traditional' families may struggle even more as they consider trying to work productively with families perceived as 'different' from envisioned norms on a number of dimensions.

Given these barriers to regular positive interactions between home and school, communications between teacher and parent may emerge primarily in situations motivated by dissatisfaction, frustration, mistrust or anger from one or both parties. Unfortunately, interactions in such cases may work to create further separation and distance between parents and teachers rather than effective parental involvement. This perpetuates a quandary: teachers may not know how to invite or sustain involvement efforts; and parents whose involvement is not invited may perceive intentional exclusion or low regard for their involvement.<sup>7</sup>

### Models of parents-teachers collaboration

In order for parents to take a significant part in their children's education, a suitable approach should be demonstrated by the teachers. The construct of the teacher as the key figure in fostering parental involvement implies that there are certain skills, attitudes, and behaviors that teachers must possess to carry out effectively the parental involvement paradigm such as knowledge about the critical role that parents perform; positive attitudes toward parents and the parental involvement process; knowledge, skills, and commitment to a developmentally appropriate education for children; knowledge and skills for enacting parental involvement activities; and continued involvement in professional development arenas such as active membership in a professional early childhood association.<sup>8</sup> The kindergarten-focused role reflects teachers who believe in an effective separation of roles and functions between home and kindergarten. This view is more typical in elementary kindergartens and intensifies the older the child gets. The partnership-focus perspective, where family and kindergarten work cooperatively, is a more recent construct, evolving as the literature began to point to the significant benefits that accrue to children, parents, and teachers as

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<sup>7</sup> W.S. Grolnick et al., *Parental resources and the transition to junior high*, Journal of Research on Adolescence, 2000, 10(4), p. 465-488.

<sup>8</sup> M.E. De Carvalho, *Rethinking family-school relations: A critique of parental involvement in schooling*, New York 2014.

a result of the partnership. As with parents, how the teachers interact will vary based upon the beliefs the teachers hold.<sup>9</sup>

Teacher attitudes towards parents' involvement are especially powerful because they are responsive to many parents' expressed wishes to know more about how to support children's learning.<sup>10</sup> Teacher invitations also enhance parents' sense of being welcome to participate in school processes, knowledge of their children's learning, and confidence that their involvement efforts are useful and valued.<sup>11</sup> Invitations of teachers for parents to get involved also contribute to the development of trust in the parent-teacher relationship, a quality of effective parent-school partnerships.<sup>12</sup> Although trust and empowerment in the partnership require two-way communication across time, invitations offer an effective starting point for the creation of a partnership.

Teacher invitations to involvement are effective in supporting parental involvement across elementary, middle, and high school and with varied school populations. Kohl, Lengua, and McMahon (2002)<sup>13</sup>, reporting on a sample of high-risk elementary students, found strong positive links between consistent teacher contacts with parents and parents' decisions about involvement. Critical components of the invitation-involvement connection included parents' reports that they enjoyed talking with the teacher, were comfortable asking questions, and believed that the teacher really cared about their child and was interested in their suggestions and ideas about the child's learning. Closson, Wilkins, Sandler, and Hoover-Dempsey (2004)<sup>14</sup> studied parents of fourth through sixth graders and found that teacher invitations were particularly strong predictors of involvement among the Latino families in their sample. Simon (2004), who analyzed a national database on

<sup>9</sup> R.P. Reed et al., *Parents' motivation for involvement in children's education*.

<sup>10</sup> K.V. Hoover-Dempsey, et al., *Teachers Involving Parents (TIP): Results of an in-service teacher education program for enhancing parental involvement*, *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 2002, 18(7), p. 843-867.

<sup>11</sup> L.C. Soodak, E.J. Erwin, *Valued member or tolerated participant: Parents' experiences in inclusive early childhood settings*, *Journal of the Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps*, 2000, 25(1), p. 29-41.

<sup>12</sup> K.S. Adams, S.L. Christenson, *Trust and the family-school relationship: An examination of parent-teacher differences in elementary and secondary grades*, *Journal of School Psychology*, 2000, 38, p. 447-497.

<sup>13</sup> G.W. Kohl, L.J. Lengua, R.J. McMahon, *Parent involvement in school: Conceptualizing multiple dimensions and their relations with family and demographic risk factors*, *Journal of School Psychology*, 2002, 38(6), p. 501-523.

<sup>14</sup> K.E. Closson et al., *Crossing cultural boundaries: Latino parents' involvement in their children's education*, Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Diego CA 2004, April.

high school students, reported similarly positive connections between teacher invitations and parent involvement.

Hence, invitations – when specific, targeted, and within the range of activities that parents can reasonably manage – promote productive involvement. Balli, Wedman, & Demo, (1999)<sup>15</sup>, examined the effect of teacher invitations on parents' involvement in middle schoolers' homework. Basing their approach on an interactive homework program (Teachers Involve Parents in Schoolwork [TIPS]; Epstein, Salinas, & Jackson, 1995), the researchers had middle school teachers invite parental involvement in one of two ways. Students whose parents received student prompts (requests for specific parental help or involvement) plus direct teacher requests for parental involvement reported notably higher completion rates than parents in the group that received student-prompts only (90% vs. 51%). Both groups recorded significantly more parental involvement than a control group.

Other studies have examined teachers' invitations offered in parent workshop formats. Starkey and Klein (2000)<sup>16</sup>, for example, reported that invitations to involvement through a series of family math classes for Head Start parents were positively related to levels of parental involvement and student knowledge gains. Shaver and Walls (1998)<sup>17</sup> examined the effect of teacher-led invitational workshops for elementary and middle school parents.

As teachers think about their work with parents and families, they often have mixed feelings. There are good feelings of shared efforts and mutually valued achievement with some parents; while with others, there is a sense of frustration, helplessness, or even anger over conflicting perceptions and understandings. The degree of success that teachers have in developing a partnership with parents depends heavily on the fit between parental cares and concerns and those of the teacher. The parent-teacher pairing occurs by assignment rather than choice. The common interest is the schooling of a child. What all good parent-teacher relationships have in common is the absence of conflict, which is optimally, occurs due to the presence of mutual trust and respect.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> S.J. Balli, D.H. Demo, J.F. Wedman, *Family involvement with children's homework: An intervention in the middle grades*, *Family Relations*, 1998, 47(2), p. 149-157.

<sup>16</sup> P. Starkey, A. Klein, *Fostering parental support for children's mathematical development: An intervention with Head Start families*, *Early Education and Development*, 2000, 11(5), p. 659-680.

<sup>17</sup> A.V. Shaver, R.T. Walls, *Effect of Title I parent involvement on student reading and mathematics achievement*, *Journal of Research and Development in Education*, 1998, 31, p. 90-97.

<sup>18</sup> I.U. Iruka et al., *Links Between Parent-Teacher Relationships and Kindergartners' Social Skills: Do Child Ethnicity and Family Income Matter?* *The Elementary School Journal*, 2011, 111(3), p. 387-408.

Teachers demonstrate responsiveness to a parent by communicating openness to new information, suggestions, and other forms of feedback about the classroom, and maintain a welcoming, supportive stance toward parents.<sup>19</sup> Teacher responsiveness to children, such as showing individualized interest in a child's experiences, helping a child feel valued and accepted, and engaging in emotionally warm and positive interactions, has long been considered a core feature of high-quality early childhood classrooms. Parents' perception of teacher responsiveness may contribute to the frequency and flow of information in parent-teacher interactions that affect the child. For example, the perception of a teacher as minimally responsive may prompt a parent to refrain from communicating a request or concern because they won't succeed anyway. In addition, this kind of communication might lead into the idea that parent's perception of a teacher's responsiveness is communicated to the child in ways that enhance a child's engagement in the classroom. Both interpretations of a possible relation between parents' perception of teacher responsiveness and child outcomes conceptualize perceived responsiveness as a relationship variable, consistent with the idea that perceptions are a unique dimension of relationships.<sup>20</sup> Alternately, parents' perception of teacher responsiveness may be an indicator of the quality of teacher interactions with children based on direct observation of teacher behaviors in the classroom and/or indirect information sources such as child reports of teacher actions or views of a teacher communicated by other parents. In the latter interpretation, a parent's perception of teacher responsiveness functions as a proxy measure of teacher sensitivity to children.

### Communication between teachers and parents

Communication between teachers and parents sets the stage for "establishing shared goals and mutual decision-making, avoiding misunderstandings, and helping parents understand how to reinforce learning and kindergarten instruction in the home.". Effective communication between families and kindergarten is frequent and bi-directional, instills a sense of shared purpose, and works toward mutually advantageous solutions to problems.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> K.M. Powell, Kindergarten Teachers' Knowledge and Perceptions of Early Learning-Related Skills and Their Relationship to Academic Achievement, Georgia State University, 2012.

<sup>20</sup> R.A. Hinde, *Relationships: A dialectical perspective*, East Sussex, UK 1997.

<sup>21</sup> J.L. Epstein, F.L. Van Voorhis, *More than minutes: Teachers' roles in designing homework*, *Educational Psychologist*, 2001, 36(3), p. 181-193.

In order to enhance and improve communication between parents and teachers in kindergarten, I will use the model of Eccles & Harold (1996)<sup>22</sup> who suggested there are five main issues in the communication between parents and teachers, defining the level of parent involvement: (a) monitoring homework – how parents respond to the teacher's requests for helping their children with school work such as checking homework or listening to them read); (b) volunteering – parents' level of participation in activities at school; (c) involvement – parents' involvement in their children's daily activities; (d) contacting the school about their children's progress; and (e) contacting the school to find out how to give extra help. The dimensions monitoring and involvement appear to be two behaviors related to directly helping the child with homework, and may, therefore, be better conceptualized as one construct.

In regard to factors which influence **parents'** intensity of involvement in this communication – both in a positive or in a negative manners ,from parents point of view, several factors were found.

**1. Education of parents:** First, Dauber and Epstein (1993)<sup>23</sup> found that better educated parents are more involved at kindergarten and at home. The U.S. Department of Education (1996) found that parents with higher levels of education report less satisfaction with kindergarten practices than parents with lower levels of education, suggesting that more highly educated parents feel more comfortable criticizing the kindergarten. Grolnick, Benjet, Kurowski, and Apostoleris (1997) found that parents who see themselves as teachers and feel effective in helping their children in kindergarten are more likely to be involved. Parents' view of their role as teacher and their comfort level communicating with teachers and helping their children with kindergarten work may, in part, be a result of their own educational experience.

**2. Socioeconomic status** – A number of studies suggest that **socioeconomic status (SES)**, of which parental education is a component, is a factor for parent involvement. Using teacher report, Kohl et al. (1994)<sup>24</sup> found less involvement by families with high mobility, low SES, and minority status. Alexander and Entwisle (1988) showed that a disparity in kindergarten readiness (e.g., cognitive skills, behavioral expectations, and investment in kindergarten) exists between children from low- versus high-SES families as early as first grade. The gap in achievement between these two groups con-

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<sup>22</sup> J.S. Eccles, R.D. Harold, *Family involvement in children's and adolescents' schooling*, Family-school links: How do they affect educational outcomes, 1996, 3-34.

<sup>23</sup> S.L. Dauber, J.L. Epstein, *Parents' attitudes and practices of involvement in inner-city elementary and middle schools*, [In:] *Families and schools in a pluralistic society*, ed. N.F. Chavkin, Albany 1993, p. 53-71.

<sup>24</sup> G.W. Kohl, L.J. Lengua, R.J. McMahon, *Parent involvement in school*, p. 501-523.



tinues to widen as the years progress. Although most studies of SES combine income, occupation, and educational level, there is increasing recognition of the need to investigate these factors separately.

**3. Marital status of parent:** Another factor was **single-parent status**. In several studies, teachers reported lower levels of kindergarten involvement for single parents (Kohl et al., 1994; Reynolds et al., 1992). With the increasing number of single parents, this risk factor is important to study in the context of family- kindergarten relations. Children of single parents have more academic and behavior problems than do those of intact two-parent families. Single parents naturally have fewer resources such as money, social support, and time to invest in their child's education and development. Therefore, single-parent status is a marker of multiple risks that may influence a parent's likelihood of being involved in kindergarten or with the child directly.

**4. Mental competence** of the parent and especially maternal depression were found to be associated with level of involvement. Much research suggests that maternal depression is a risk factor for many child problems including both internalizing and externalizing behavior and social and academic competence. Along with the direct effects of maternal depression on children's academic success, parent involvement in kindergarten may be a mediating factor between maternal depression and children's academic success. Depressed mothers often view their parenting roles less positively and may have less energy, motivation, and confidence to be involved either with their children directly or with kindergarten personnel. In addition, because depressed individuals have been shown to elicit negative responses from others, depressed mothers might have more trouble developing positive relationships with teachers.

**5. Ethnic status:** Previous studies found that ethnic or racial minority status, which relates to lower levels of parent involvement. Kohl et al. (1994) found that minority status was associated with a decrease in the amount and quality of parent involvement by teacher report. Moles (1993) wrote of "disadvantaged parents" – those with low income and minority status – having less involvement in kindergarten by teacher report. Lynch and Stein (1987) reported that Hispanic and African American parents offered fewer suggestions at special education meetings and knew significantly less about their children's special services than did Caucasian parents. Although minority status has been identified as a risk factor for parent involvement, little research has examined the different pattern of relations among other family and demographic risk factors and parent involvement within the context of separate minority groups. Eccles and Harold (1996) suggested that under-

standing the relations between risk factors and PI within the context of a given ethnic group may sharpen the focus of interventions. Identifying risk factors and dimensions of parent involvement that are relevant for specific ethnic or racial groups facilitates the development of culturally sensitive interventions. Therefore, instead of viewing minority status as a risk factor in this study, we chose to examine ethnicity as a moderator of the relations between family and demographic variables and PI.

**6. Cultural aspects** were also found to be correlated. This is perhaps particularly important in seeking the enhanced school outcomes often associated with parental involvement among families who are first- or second-generation immigrants or families who are marginalized with reference to mainstream society. Families in these circumstances often experience the resource limitations associated with lower SES, as well as difficulties associated with language barriers, limited understanding of school expectations and policies, clashes between family values or priorities and mainstream values, varied but sometimes debilitating perceptions of school-initiated barriers to involvement, and perceptions of very limited power to change ineffective school practices. Many parents, across cultural backgrounds and family circumstances, can be and are effectively involved in supporting students' school learning. Many seen by schools as uninvolved are in fact involved, but in ways that schools do not notice or recognize.<sup>25</sup>

To address this potential disconnect, teachers need to seek out information to understand the cultural and linguistic diversity reflected in the families of their students. This knowledge and appreciation can be demonstrated by celebrating the various cultural traditions of their students, by incorporating speakers from the community, by appreciating the difficulties faced by immigrant parents, and by seeking out interpreter services as needed.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, teachers can incorporate the faces of diversity into children's literature in the classroom. Bilingual hotlines, as well as a bilingual phone tree, have been suggested as creative ways to enhance communication with culturally diverse families regarding upcoming events.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, it may be appropriate to provide written communication in several languages to ensure the greatest access to the parent community.

Several factors were found to predict better teachers' communication patterns with parents such as teachers' educational, personal relationships

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<sup>25</sup> R.E. Trevino, *Against All Odds: Lessons from Parents of Migrant High-Achievers*, U.S. Department of Education 2004.

<sup>26</sup> Y. Lai, F.I. Ishiyama, *Involvement of immigrant Chinese Canadian mothers of children with disabilities*, *Exceptional Children*, 2004, 71(1), p. 97-108.

<sup>27</sup> A.Y. Ramirez, *How parents are portrayed among educators*, *The School Community Journal*, 2002, 12(2), p. 51-61.

with mothers and also teachers' attitudes toward parents.<sup>28</sup> On the parents' side, other factors were found to be associated with better communication: better educated parents are more involved at kindergarten and at home (The U.S. Department of Education, 1996). Grolnick, Benjet, Kurowski, and Apostoleris (1997) found that parents who see themselves as teachers and feel effective in helping their children in kindergarten are more likely to be involved. Parents' view of their role as teacher and their comfort level communicating with teachers and helping their children with kindergarten work may, in part, be a result of their own educational experience. Moreover, mental competence of the parent could predict better communication with teachers. Much research suggests that maternal depression is a risk factor for many child problems including both internalizing and externalizing behavior<sup>29</sup> and social and academic competence (e.g., Downey & Coyne, 1990). In addition, minority status was associated with a decrease in the amount and quality of parent involvement by teacher report (Kohl et al., 1994).

## Conclusion

To conclude, literature shows that it is essential to build an effective communication system between teachers and parents in the kindergarten. Therefore, current study will focus of collaboration between teachers and parents, which mainly holds two elements: (1) Partnership which presents the involved parties with special challenges that must be navigated unto agreement. Overarching goals, levels of give-and-take, areas of responsibility, lines of authority and succession, how success is evaluated and distributed, and often a variety of other factors must all be negotiated. Partnerships exist within, and across, sectors. I suggest that in order to get a more deep understating of communication between parents and teachers, several directions for future research: (1) What are the core concerns of parents and teachers in regard to the children? (2) What expectations teachers declare towards parents of kindergarten children and what expectations the parents declare towards the kindergarten teachers as the teachers of their children? (3) What are the relationship between teachers and parents of kindergarten students? (4) How do teachers and parents define the dimensions of collaboration between parents and kindergarten teachers? (5) What are the core

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<sup>28</sup> A. Susman-Stillman, J. Pleuss, M.M. Englund, *Attitudes and beliefs of family-and center-based child care providers predict differences in caregiving behavior over time*, *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 2013, 28(4), p. 905-917.

<sup>29</sup> e.g., Cummings & Davies 1994, Downey & Coyne 1990 and Dumas & Serketich 1994)

features of a mutual collaboration between parents and kindergarten teachers, according to defined above levels of collaboration? (6) To what level parents and teachers are ready to accept the proposed system for collaboration between the parents and the kindergarten teachers?

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