BETTER THAN BEFORE: BUILDING ON EXPERIENCES REGARDING SCHOOL TO HOME ENGAGEMENT IN A POST COVID-19 PANDEMIC WORLD

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Abstract

Working with pre and inservice teachers, one can see an ongoing disconnect between stated beliefs and actions regarding the significance of families and caregivers in a child's academic development. Teacher beliefs regarding the importance of school-home engagement were often limited to what teachers knew from a few school-based encounters. These were typically teacher led, such as parent-teacher conferences, meetings regarding behavior and academic concerns, and other discussions regarding school issues. Home-visits and other more personal encounters were not common-place or expected in many schools. While teachers might voice the addage "parents are the child's first teachers", methods to engage with parents to build on these practices were often neglected. Much of this could be attributed to a deficit perspective, as languages and cultures unknown to the teacher could be undervalued and misunderstood. Globally, the COVID-19 pandemic's effect on public spaces caused the rapid pivot to alternative forms of teaching. A much more home-based approach to schooling was embraced by school administrations. This included virtual teaching across ages, geographic regions, and economic levels. Teachers worked with children virtually in kitchens, living rooms, and other personal spaces. Teachers were often dependent on parents and siblings to initiate and even interpret the content of lessons in the home context. With an insider's view, teachers taught across a screen, with windows into sometimes more than 20 homes—thus families-- at a time. Did a more positive belief and understanding about parent engagement develop or did misconceptions regarding parenting—including language and cultural deficits--persist? This paper presents findings regarding teachers' beliefs about working with parents in 2023, the third year of the COVID-19 pandemic's effect on schools. Information from studies in six countries will be presented, with findings and emerging trends in parent engagement examined. Traditional school-based programs are explored, such as Family Math and "shared book experiences," made new with technology and electronic communication. Implications for how teachers and families can acknowledge and make use of practices in both settings will be presented.

Keywords: Technology, school-home engagement, family literacies.

1. Introduction

On average school age children spend six hours in a somewhat homogenously designed space—the classroom. Grade level standards are expectations for all children. The ono-to-two teachers a child sees each day are ultimately responsible for design, interpretation, and implementation of the regulated curriculum.

In a quick transition from school to home, the child arrives at their living space. The diverse households receive each child as their own; the child is now a member of a group different from the classroom community. The child's "membership" into the family group, regardless of age, contributes to the home. No longer is the child seen as a student, identified by a reading level or sorted into a group academically. The intimate relationship begins—nicknames, relationships and responsibilities to siblings take precedence; routine household tasks are the norm and taken in stride. The student is replaced by the child. In many cases both in the US and around the globe, the child is now a part of a collective.

This bi-directional *dis*-connection of school-to-home cultures can impede a supportive relationship between the two. From school to home, expectations may be lost. Likewise, the parents' and caregivers' expectations for the child may be misinterpreted, misused, and misconstrued by the school.

The abruptness of the COVID-19 pandemic school pivot to virtual instruction revealed how deeply this misunderstanding or disconnect ran through. For many, school closures were mandated for all. Together teachers and families problem solved to provide some form of instruction. Some parents

provided Wi-Fi access and set up mini-classrooms in the home. Other parents worked collectively to provide a shared classroom — in a home, outdoor or community space. Other parents requested instruction to be more asynchronous, where children worked from their homes and submitted work electronically to the teacher. Still other families used what Wi-Fi was available, catching it in snippets. A study conducted in early 2020, found that parents drove to Wi-Fi free access spaces, such as a McDonald's parking lot, a public school, or a church after services ended. Other parents requested traditional hard copies of schoolwork—in these cases teachers created paper-pencil packets for weekly work. Parents drove to the school parking lot to pick up and/or submit the packets at a specified time of day. Still if that wasn't feasible, teachers drove packets to individual homes. This long list of measures to meet the needs of children, families and school is evidence of the efforts the multiple stakeholders made to maintain connections on behalf of the child (Fox, Roney, & Hargrove, 2022).

2. Objectives of this paper

As teacher educators, we work to prepare pre-service and inservice teachers with the knowledge and skills to help all children reach their potential. We know that with parent and caregiver engagement, classrooms can become culturally responsive settings that value both self and others. What gains were made in the bi-directional problem solving that occurred between schools and homes during the COVID-19 pandemic? What did teachers learn about the home languacultures, or rich linguistic and cultural intersections (Agar, 1996), that could positively impact their relationships with parents and caregivers post-pandemic? This study, conducted in the third year after the initial widespread school closure period of 2020, captured teachers' perceptions of working with parents whose culture, home language, and ethnicity often differed from their own. During the COVID-19 pandemic the teachers' working relationship with parents and caregivers went through periods of change, from independently working in two settings to co-dependently working to the home's virtual classroom, to a return to independently working. The period when schools were closed to face-to-face instruction forced teachers to depend on parents and caregivers to invite them into the home, albeit virtually. Children's instruction was mediated by Wi-Fi access, space, timing, others in the space, and understanding of the role of education. What was previously practiced as "homework," was now schoolwork, although situated in the home. What was teacher-assigned schoolwork to be done in the home and submitted to the teacher for check and review, was now dependent on a parent/caregiver to have the technology and wherewithal to support the child's electronic submission. The work that was previously assumed to be conducted independently in the home setting was now assumed to be collectively conducted during the day and evening, with others around.

The research question then is, what experiences from these virtual home visits have impacted instruction and school-home relationships as schools reopened and children returned to traditional face-to-face instruction? This paper presents findings from a study of teacher beliefs about working with parents in 2023, the third year of the COVID-19 pandemic's effect on schools.

3. Theoretical framework and literature review

According to Creswell & Poth (2018), of the five most common types of qualitative designs, phenomenology provides the clearest framework for describing a particular phenomenon from first-hand reports. Because of the rapid pivot in settings, instructional methods, and expectations, teachers were put on the front line of change. Their firsthand experiences were important to examine, including the lessons learned as they reflected on the experience. Furthermore, as described by Neubauer, Wiktop, and Varpio (2019), the researcher played an active role in the interpretive phenomenological analysis of data as it evolved in real time.

Previous studies examining gaps in teacher training suggested that the types of knowledge and skills-based learning in education methods courses addressed only a small subset of learning experiences (Hughes, 2013; Moore-Adams, Jones & Monty, 2016). Working with parents and caregivers was one area often neglected beyond surface level acknowledgement. Therefore, teachers were often unprepared to design lessons that would bridge school to in-home instruction (Duncan & Barnett, 2009). In a report to the National Education Policy Center, published just prior to the pandemic, a meta-analysis on virtual schools identified barriers to successful academic gains in virtual schooling (Molnar, Miron, Elgeberi, Barbour, Huerta, Shafer & Rice, 2019). As reported, a lack of attention to cultural differences in homes and communities was evident in virtual schooling design and delivery, even those specifically targeting underserved communities. Pre- and inservice teachers' use of technology for differentiation across cultures, languages, socio-economic differences, and technology ability was likewise neglected. Resta and

Leferrier (2015) suggested a focus on intercultural training for teachers, researchers, and policy makers to address the logistical challenges of a digitally networked world across cultures and diverse demographics.

At the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic and school closings, an initial study was conducted with a similar group of teachers in the same geographic areas. Questions focused on teachers' emotions regarding the pivot to virtual instruction. Responses revealed frustration with school expectations and feelings of exhaustion, fear and vulnerability. When referring to parents and caregivers, teachers described a partnership, where parents were invited to share across the screen. Concerns with parents were more about lack of WIFI and the training it took to support children academically. Teachers described methods of communication that had emerged during the pandemic that they would maintain when school returned to what they described as "normal" face-to-face instruction (Fox, et. al, 2022).

4. Methods

As a teacher educator in language and literacy studies, I work with both pre-and inservice teachers. Interested in school and family engagement, I pay attention to my students' comments regarding their communication and involvement with families. As children returned to the classroom in the 2nd and 3rd years after the COVID-19 closing of schools in our area, inservice teachers in graduate level classes used phrases such as "back to normal" when describing their school setting. To get at what they meant with this phrase, particularly when describing school to home engagement, I conducted an anonymous survey of 11 students currently teaching grades Pre-K through 9th grades. The three question survey asked if there were changes in their relationships with families, if so, what these changes were, and what they would like to see in the upcoming year. In a quick turnaround my students described disappointment in their engagement, concern that parents either would not or could not help their children and that parents were more disengaged than ever. Although this informal study with a convenience group of only eleven participants, was short and questions were generalized, the findings struck me as worth investigating further.

Building on the informal pilot study of classroom teachers' beliefs about school-to-home engagement a survey was sent to a convenience sample of 77 inservice teachers asking about their current relationship with parents and caregivers. The teachers were identified through a master distribution list created for the university professional development system (PDS). To be a partnership teacher implied mentoring and modeling for a student intern in their final year of teacher training. To serve in this role a teacher is required to hold a teaching license, have taught a minimum of 3 years teaching in the public school system, and agree to both training and ongoing professional development offered by the university. This group of teachers is seen as having achieved a level of mastery. Invitations to participate in the study were distributed through the university email system and sent from the PDS office email. Participants were assured their responses were voluntary and anonymous. The survey was sent to the 77 partnership teachers across the state, with 22 completing the survey, or 29% return rate.

Questions were designed to give participants open-ended response regarding what they learned about working with parents and caregivers during the period of virtual instruction and the following months. Questions were framed from an additive stance, i.e. What new ways of engaging with parents and caregivers have been maintained since the COVID-19 pandemic's school closures? Had their communication style changed and if so, in what ways? Had parents and caregivers become more or less engaged in the curriculum and/or instruction? Had parent and caregiver visibility at school or the classroom changed and if so, in what ways? For a complete list of survey questions, see Table 1: Survey Questions for Partnership Teachers Regarding Parent-Caregiver Engagement.

5. Findings

During the early period of the COVID-19 pandemic, initial reports from local anecdotal evidence and media showed an openness from teachers to include parents in the virtual instruction. Parents too showed appreciation as well as a willingness to participate in the virtual instruction set-up and delivery (Fox, et.al, 2022). In the current survey results, however, teacher respondents showed increased frustration towards parents and caregivers. During the first months of the COVID-19 Pandemic school shutdown, the relationship was described as mutually supportive, but was now negative, even accusatory in some cases. Teachers described parents as holding unreal expectations but "falling short when it comes to parenting." Others described parents as "really busy and less engaged in their student's academics and more concerned with their social life." Still other teachers described feeling undervalued, i.e. "They [*parents]* do not value teachers beyond being babysitters." Complete survey responses are available upon request.

6. Discussion

Despite the success of the collaborative work that occurred during the pivot to virtual instruction brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, participants in this study expressed gratitude of "going back to normal." Rather than building a sustained partnership with parents, teachers seem to disrespect parents' involvement in education. Perhaps the responses to the survey echoed what was being reported broadly by school officials and government statistics. The youngest children's entry into the school was plagued with lack of school readiness. Test scores across all areas fell, but particularly in the earliest grades. Most recently, the 2022 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) scores across 77 countries showed a decline in math scores for 15-year-olds in the year 2022 (PISA, 2023; Schliecher, 2023). Parents turning to home schooling in 2023 showed disturbing trends. Home school numbers soared from 2. 65 million in 2020, to 3.7 million and grew to 4.3 million in 2022. The need for teachers has not lessened, however. In the state in which the study took place 16% of teachers left after 2022, compared with less than 12% in the three years before the pandemic (Barnum, 2023). This was the same population that expressed their stress, feelings of exhaustion and being overwhelmed in the larger study of teachers in the first month of the pandemic. Unfortunately, rather than building a sustained partnership with parents and the community as an outcome of their earlier co-dependency, teachers seem to have an increased disrespect for parents' involvement in education. This too, was reflected in worldwide PISA findings, which found that fewer conversations happened between teachers and parents and caregivers in 2022 (Schliecher, 2023). The "learning across the kitchen table" opportunities (Ginsburg, 2007) have fallen short of providing a window to the home as a learning space. Lessons learned seemed to reaffirm old beliefs rather than build on additive events that helped sustain schooling during some of our most challenging times as educators.

7. Conclusion

Octavia Butler (1993) states: "All that you touch, you change. All that you change, changes you." We recognize that all are touched and changed when distrust, oppression and exclusion are made visible. The classroom is a starting point with a far reach. Connecting Butler (1993) with Walt Whitman, on my undergraduate and graduate teacher education courses I start the semester with the poem, "There was a Child Went Forth." As Whitman said, more than one hundred years prior to Butler,

There was a child went forth every day,
And the first object he looked upon and received with wonder or pity or love or dread, that object he became, many
years or stretching cycles of years…

(https://poets.org/poem/there-was-child-went-forth-every-day)

Just as research into children's literature has shown that books can provide a gateway to mirror one's identity, they can also provide windows into others' contexts. When viewing the classroom as a text, an open classroom is a text not only for the child but for the parent and others. Likewise, "reading the world" of the home, can provide valuable information to the teacher and other children for promoting a truly bi-directional cultural understanding. To better address the question*, "What kind of world [school, community, home] do we want to live in?"* schools of education must operationalize the response. Beginning with pre-service teachers, teacher education programs can require both a critical analysis and a subsequent action plan for addressing the disconnect between the classroom and the home. More than providing lip-service to culturally relevant pedagogy, the relationship between the two most influential and consistent entities in a child's life—the home and school—can be explored, addressed, and put into practice in teacher training. Whether through interactive newsletters and discussion groups with parents, invitations to parents to participate in cultural activities across the electronic classroom, or simply holding virtual home visits, pre-and inservice teachers can open the school to the home in a truly bi-directional and additive partnership.

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