Successful Practices for Immigrant Parent Involvement:
An Ontario Perspective

Background and Purpose

The goal of the study was to first identify the present successful practices of teachers and school administrator which support parent participation in their children’s schooling. Previous research indicates that new immigrant parents often lack access to the ‘culture of power’ (Delpit, 1988) which creates pathways for student success. We hope that our findings also addressed a gap in recent reporting of effective communication practices among teachers and administrators while also giving voice to the evolving needs of new immigrant parents and their families and, in particular, validating the ways in which home literary practices can be recognized as helping to ‘decode the system’ (Stanton-Salazar, 1997, p. 13). Recent research examines such practices, but for the most part, using a case study approach of one ethnic group. Our study aimed to provide parallel data but from multiple perspectives.

Participants in the study included 21 parents, speaking a total of eight different languages, all of who had been in Canada for six years or less at that time. The 61 teachers and 32 principals recruited for the study worked in both Catholic and public schools in the Toronto region with ESL populations of 20% or greater. The research team included Dr. Shelley Stagg Peterson, an Associate Professor with the Department of Curriculum, Teaching, and Learning at OISE and Dr. Mary Ladky, an Assistant Professor with the School of Education and Professional Learning at Trent University. Both share research interests which include socio-cultural issues in literacy learning. Research assistants were recruited for conducting interviews with new immigrant parents in their mother tongue.
Method

Surveys were sent to teachers and principals with a return rate of 77%. We asked teachers about their views on the role of parents in supporting their children’s literacy and on factors influencing this support. Principals were asked about new immigrant parents’ involvement in school activities and the impact of the ESL learners on issues like staffing, scheduling, and policies. Open-ended questions were also included. 12 teachers were interviewed along with ten principals. Various methods were used to recruit parent participants. Letters of request were sent out to parents in ten languages including Chinese, Arabic, and Tamil. From this mail out, we received calls from parents who later took part in interviews. Some interviews, conducted in English, others by research assistants in the participants’ first language, were 30 minutes in length and with approximately 21 new immigrant parents. We asked parents about home literacy practices in both their mother tongue and second language and ways how they felt their children’s teachers and school principals could help them continue to support their children’s literary development. We also wanted to know about the ways in which parents got involved in their children’s learning in their home countries. We used inductive analysis to draw out themes from the written survey responses and interview responses. The categories we derived were used to organize our report of the results.

Findings

Results from the study were organized under four categories: homework and parents’ at-home support, informal parental involvement in classrooms and schools, formal parental involvement in classrooms and schools, and school based initiatives to develop partnerships and cultural awareness. Parents interviewed valued homework as a means for understanding what their children was accomplishing in school during the day as its potential as tool of communication with teachers. Home literacy activities were also valued by all participants and survey results revealed that many parents were consistently engaging in a range of reading and writing activities at home, especially in their mother tongue. Important discontinuities in how each group perceived their roles in homework completion were revealed in the results, especially in relation to feelings
expressed by 85% of the teachers and principals that the demands of a second language hampered immigrant parents’ involvement in their children’s literacy learning. Similar challenges were noted by teachers and principals when asked about parental involvement in school field trips or as classroom volunteers. Nearly 50% felt that new immigrant parents may be reluctant to get involved in their children’s education at school because the tradition of doing so in their home countries. One principal-participant, who spoke Chinese, for example though, was able to raise the participation of parents on the school council from 2 to 15 with a direct phone call home. Formal parental involvement largely took the form of parent/teacher interviews though few parents cited them as effective means of communication with the school. Instead, there was a clear preference for regular written communication. Though report cards were part of this grouping, the effective use of a homework agenda was viewed by as the best means for keeping close contact. Very few teachers had access to translation services for their student report cards. Finally, findings of our study revealed that teachers and principals were engaged in professional development to learn more about the language and culture of their non-native English speaking students. Participating schools offer ESL classes as well as other opportunities for families to become more involved in the life of school.

Implications

Implications of the findings of this study are tied to the continuing need to recognize and support both formal informal parental involvement at home and school. Linguistic barriers continue to prevent parents from becoming more actively involved but results from the study strongly indicate that there are already effective methods being used by principals and teachers to increase that involvement. In particular, the results from the study legitimize the effectiveness of informal means of communication between home and school, in particular, the value and importance of homework as a conduit. That said, more can be done, especially in harnessing by teachers and principals the rich mother tongue literacy practices at home.
About This Summary

This research summary was developed from Mary Ladky and Shelly Stagg Peterson’s study:


This summary reflects findings from this study only and is not necessarily representative of the broader body of literature on this subject. Please consult the original document for complete details about this research. In case of any disagreement, the original document should be understood as authoritative.

Key Words
Student families, Parents, English as a Second Language (ESL), School administrators, Teachers, Language and literacy

References