Engaging Parents, Youth and Schools in Developing Academic Success

Irma MESIRIDZE

Abstract

Recently the role of parents in education has changed dramatically and become overwhelmingly complex and confusing in modern, democratic societies (Davies, 1988). But the state has also a stake in children's education – requiring that all pupils attend school, take certain courses and programs, and, in many countries, attain certain prescribed levels of achievement.

Parents are no longer willing to stand by and let the school bureaucrats make all the decisions. Parents have become crucial to school reform, as key decision-makers. Parents want their child to succeed. Any kind of involvement in a child's education gives a parent a feeling of great satisfaction and reassures the child that the parents care about his or her education.

The paper summarizes the factors associated with the necessity and importance of parent involvement in education which has become a major educational issue since the 1980s; briefly traces the history of parental involvement in education and underlines the key issues of parents' participation in their offspring's education.

The paper examines the role and function of parents as consumers and participants, highlights the factors that solve the dilemmas affecting the roles of parents in educational reforms.

Keywords: Parents as "Consumers", Parents as "Decision –makers", Parents as "Choice-makers", Parent empowerment, Parent governance, Parent networking, PTA(Parent Teacher Association), School bureaucracies.

Irma Mesiridze *is an assistant professor at Faculty of Education and PhD student at the Faculty of Humanities of International Black Sea University, Tbilisi, Georgia*

Introduction

Before 1960s the school community and family were closely aligned. Parents had a direct role in supporting the school, by hiring the teacher or cutting the wood for the school stove. In exchange for the support, the teacher worked directly for the family and the community. Parents were allowed to sit on the school committee, to make frequent visits to classrooms and even examine the students periodically to see that lessons were learned.

In nation after nation, the private sector has been replaced by extensive public systems of education, where parents had difficulty influencing education decision-making, and day-today relations.

Since the 1960s, however, the role of parents has been severely weakened, mainly by school policies, which ironically attempted to guarantee equity. As government became more involved in helping the poor, minorities, and handicapped, regulations which aimed to protect the children increased. However this increase of regulations weakened the power of school-site leaders and parents. Bureaucrats received more power; parents and school teachers and administrators, less (Chubb, 1988).

The governments of Western nations have often created large bureaucratic systems to provide comprehensive, accessible, and equitable education for all, making it even harder for many parents to control the education of their own offspring (Tyack,1974). Many parents became prisoners of their assigned local state or public schools, obtained little or no say in how school was operated, and were not totally happy with what the schools were doing (Hirschman, 1970). The socialization of their children, became a major state function and enterprise with parents loosing much control. Small community schools were consolidated into efficient and elaborate systems of education under state/provincial and national control. Parents somehow did not fit into the scheme of things, losing direct choice over, identification with, and proximity to their children's school. And low-income parents in particular found that schools erect formidable barriers of language, class and attitude, separating them from school professionals (Davies, 1988).

Parents, increasingly show preference to have more choice, access, and information about school programs and quality, while bureaucracies

appear to work best when they maintain control, limit information and access, and curtail choice that might interfere with management prerogatives.

The idea of parents running schools is hardly new. School reformers have realized the importance of the family in school support and have tried to tip the scale back in favor of parent prerogatives and empowerment (Cooper, 1991).

Parents as "Consumers & Participants"

At the very center of school reform in many Western, democratic nations is a re-definition of the role of parents in their own children's education. No longer, it seems, are families willing to be passive on-lookers, dutifully paying their taxes and allowing government school bureaucracies to do what they wish with their children. Instead, parents are becoming active participants in deciding which schools and what kinds of schools their offspring will attend; how these schools will be organized and governed; and where parents themselves will fit into the activities of their children's schools (Ashworth, Papps and Thomas, 1988; Jackson and Cooper, 1988; Cochran and Henderson, 1986).

Furthermore, many western nations are now experimenting with "choice schemes" for parents – encouraging them to select from a range of schools (Cooper, 1989; Lieberman, 1989). These reformers believe that granting greater choice to parents, and making parents decision- makers in a regional education "marketplace", not only benefit the students by helping them to find a challenging compatible school, but also schools by forcing them to compete for students (Cooper, 1989; Lieberman, 1989).

In the United States, parents are increasingly given greater choice in where their children attend school. Minnesota, for example, passed a law allowing children a much wider range of choices than residents of any other state. The Minnesota's reform efforts include an inter-district transfer plan, alternative area schools for "high-risk" students to provide and incentive for them to seek graduation and a post-secondary enrollment option where high school students can concurrently attend college (Cooper, 1991).

Hence, in addition to "Parents as Choice-Maker", parents can also participate in meeting their mutual obligation to students by getting

involved with parent governance and parent networking (Cooper,1991). While choice-making and involvement tend to be one-time, informal, and changing relationships between family and school, parent governance and networking move toward a formalized, continuous situation, in which parents become an integral part of the school.

Schools are giving parents greater access to schools – allowing them to come to visit, observe teachers, and even select a school program and teachers for their children. Parents are welcomed into schools, as participants, volunteering in their children's classrooms, and as ``students`` themselves, taking English as a second language and high school equivalency courses.

In many urban school districts, parents use the school as a community center, becoming "students" in the school themselves (Jackson and Cooper, 1988). Such institutionalization of parent involvement seems particularly useful in poor communities, where resources for families are limited. In one school in Brooklyn, for example, the school functioned as the community center for the largely Hispanic parent group (Jackson and Cooper, 1988). Parents gathered at school, where most of the staff spoke Spanish and attended classes in English, job hunting, high school equivalency, parenting skills, and parent organization. Parents were welcomed in the school and worked as parent aides for the librarian, classroom teachers, cafeteria aides, and administrative assistants for the principal. Parents helped other parents, through the school parent's association.

Somehow the role of parents as participants raises the following dilemma: If parents are serving as part of the formal school governance structure, will it affect their roles as consumers of education, as members of networks? In some cases, yes. Parents who rise to be formal leaders, who determine policies and programs, who expend money, and fire principals, will be perceived differently by other parents and school staff, who wish to use the school as a resource and site for helping themselves. And parents who are busy making use of the school, attending classes and workshop, helping their children at home, trying to improve themselves, will be less likely to invest the time in serving as school governors and on boards and associations.

The dilemma of being a network member and a parent governor can and has been resolved in many schools (Cooper, 1991). Often, parents who start off as network participants, who get their training, perhaps receive a high school diploma, learn English, parenting skills, and help to advocate for parents, are those who, in the next stage, become parent leaders and seek a seat on the school's board of trustees.

In the United States, there is some evidence showing that the network function does lead to more formal involvement over time. In New York City, one district organized a parent relations office, has a full-time(and bi-lingual) organizer, and actually offers courses in parent organizing and advocacy. The leadership in these networks are more likely to run for the district school board, to serve on school committees, and to be visible advocates for children (Cooper, 1991).

Epstein, in her work on parent involvement (1988), found that formal parental networking occurs around three main areas: helping and learning at school, helping children at home and advocating for school and children.

Conclusion

Parents have long been active in starting new schools, serving on boards of education, and making key decisions as taxpayers on school budgets and expenditures. At the center of the reformers in the United States stands an abiding belief that education is primarily a concern of the family, and that the role of the state is to support, fund and expand that ability of families to select and acquire the kind of education they require.

Children learn best when the significant adults in their lives – parents, teachers and other family and community members – work together to encourage and support them. Schools alone cannot address all of a student's developmental needs. The meaningful involvement of parents is essential, as children learn first and foremost from their parents. Parents are teachers, learners, supporters and advocates for their children whether they view themselves in those roles or not. Children learn how to eat, talk, sit up and walk long before entering school.

School improvement research shows that parents are critical in supporting children's education, in preparing children to live in modern

society and in helping to advocate for improvements in education. Research indicates that where parents support the school and help their children with school work at home, the children achieve higher grades, have more positive attitudes, and gain more from school (Henderson, 1987). Better schools, then, have stronger parent support, and higher achieving children have parents who stand firmly behind the school's mission and programs (Epstein, 1988; Henderson, 1987; Davies, 1988).

References

Ashworth, J.P., Papps, I. & Thomas, B. (1988). Increased parental choice: An economic analysis of some alternative methods of management and finance of education. London: Institute of Economic Affairs, Education Unit.

Cochran, M., & Henderson, C., Jr.(1986). Family matters: Evaluation of the parental involvement program. Ithaca, NY: Cornel University.

Chubb, J. (1988). Effective schools and the problems of the poor. In P. Doyle & B.C. Cooper (Eds.), Federal aid to the disadvantaged: What future for Chapter 1? NY: Falmer Press

Cooper, B.S. (1989). Privatization of education. International Encyclopedia of Education Supplement. London: Pergamon press

Cooper, B.S. (1991). Parent choice and school involvement: Perspectives and dilemmas in the United States and Great Britain. Educational Researcher,15, 235-250.

Davies, D. (1988). Low income parents and the school: A research report and a plan for action. Equity and Choice, 4, 51-57.

Epstein, J. (19988). ``How do we improve programs for parent involvement?`` Educational Horizons, 66, 58-59.

Henderson, A.T. (1987) The evidence continues to grow: Parent involvement improves student achievement. Columbia, MD: National Committee for Citizens in Education.

Hirschman, A.O.(1970). Exit, voice, and Loyalty. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Jackson, B., & Cooper, B.S. (1988). Parent choice and empowerment: Implications for the way we train school administrators. Cincinnati: UCEA; also Urban Education.

Lieberman, M. (1989). Privatization and Educational Choice. NY: St. Martin's

Tyack, D.B. (1974). The one best system: A history of American urban education. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.