

Developing Stable Partnerships among Parents, Students, and Schools – A Parents’ Philosophy on Learning

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Abstract

This study describes the development of stable partnerships among parents, students and schools to promote literacy skills. It sets out to explore the involvement of a limited number of parents from different walks of life in their children’s academic life, school provisions in this respect and specific community activities which might contribute to the development of this partnership. The research questions are related to the way parents understand their partnership with schools and to the degree of their “involvement in their children school life”. The participants in this study were parents from different social categories with children at different school levels. Purposive sampling was used in collecting the data. Semi-structured interviews were employed in the collection of data. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim and given to open coding. The results show that parents, no matter what their social status is, are keen in getting involved in their children’s school life in ways which can promote partnerships conducting to the acquisition of literacy skills, learning and life-long learning.

Keywords: parent-school stable partnerships, triarchic relationship, literacy, life-long learning.

It’s a dance, a dance between teacher and student and parent and child and parent and teacher and so on. Knowing when to respond and when to let go and let them find out on their own is a dance, a subtle communication of letting each other know what our needs are and how we can help each other. Interview, teacher (Henry, 1996, p. 182).

Introduction

In a world of material values where success in school and life is associated with high levels of competition, professionalism is the top requirement in a well-paid job with promotion perspectives. Globalization with its advantages, but mostly disadvantages has created unequal social statuses – the rich have become richer and the poor have become poorer. Palestine, once the cradle of civilization, the place where all religions of the world meet in an untimely dialogue is massively affected by all these aspects, the more so, because it is a country under occupation. Decades of struggle for independence and affirmation have not lead to much progress; parents and children realize that their only weapon towards independence is education. Parents have functioned as promoters of this endearing thirst for education, even at times when they were practically illiterate (Al-Rozzi, 2007). It is clear that parents alone cannot reach high levels of success in the absence of a clear school policy which supports and encourages triarchic relationships: parent-teacher-student (Epstein, 2004).

The demand for highly qualified, professional cadre in all fields is so great in a world that is constantly competing with its own standards, standards which are changing daily, that parents are more and more concerned with their children's performance in school. Given the exigency of the new philosophy of learning, parents become more effectively involved in their children's learning. It is well-known that parents can make a real difference in their children's educational life, for they are their first teachers (Epstein, 2001, 2004, 2011). As first readers to their children, parents provide their offspring with literacy tools, encouraging them to become life-long learners (Epstein, 2001). It would be beneficial to find out how and why parents choose to become involved in their children's school careers. Exploring the way parents from different walks of life think about their involvement in their children's education would bring us a step closer to the rationale of the triarchic relationship among parents and students, students and teachers, and teachers and parents. There are some steps to be taken in order to understand parents' roles in their children's academic life. Even though there is no clear theoretical framework to this aspect in Arab research, international research has constantly shown how schools seek to engage parents in their programs, involving them directly into the process of teaching and learning (Epstein, 2001, 2011).

Literature Review

... Parents take their child home after professionals complete their services and parents continue providing the care for the larger portion of the child's waking hours... No matter how skilled professionals are, or how loving parents are, each cannot achieve alone what the two parties, working hand-in-hand, can accomplish together" (Peterson & Cooper, 1989; pp. 229, 208).

Creating stable family-school partnerships is essential in dealing with the challenging aspects of education nowadays, the more so because Palestinian research is very poor in this respect. There have been some limited attempts to address a series of issues related to this aspect (Al-Rozzi, 2007), but an in-depth approach has not been taken yet. I consider that this aspect is of importance especially to a society which is oppressed by occupation where schools cannot fully implement their policies and parents become valued partners in the promotion of quality learning. Family-school partnerships relate to a series of collaborative relationships and activities where teachers, parents and other family members are involved to benefit students, respectively children. These partnerships are built on mutual trust and respect and shared responsibility for the education of children (Epstein, 2001, 2011, Family-School Partnerships Framework, 2008, Sheridan, 2005). Families are considered the first educators of children, their role continuing well into the children's school years and beyond; schools however have the responsibility in helping to nurture and teach future generations, and families trust schools to provide their children with appropriate skills to serve them in the future. Research has emphasized the fact that schools recognize the primary role of families in education, that is why, it is so important that the two work together (Sheridan, 2004). High parent involvement has always had great impact on students' achievement level, regardless of the social or academic background of the family (Epstein, 2001, 2011, researcher's experience). Epstein's model (2001, 2011) emphasizes the equal contributions of the parties involved in this partnership where children/students' needs are respected, on the one hand by creating better programs to sustain opportunities for learning, and on the other, by providing families with more opportunities to contribute to school decisions and governance. The classical model of school, family and community partnership developed by Epstein (2001, 2011) addresses several layers of responsibility and obligations shared equally by schools, parents and communities. The first layer of the model refers to the obligations families have toward their children: to provide them with basic needs like health and safety. The second

layer refers to school basic obligation to communicate with families in a number of ways like: memos, phone calls, report cards and parent-teacher conferences. The third layer relates to parent involvement in school by voluntary activities to assist teachers in the class. The fourth layer relates to parents' involvement in learning activities at home by helping their children with their homework. The fifth layer relates to parents' involvement in decision making, governance and advocacy by serving in PTA committees or in other leadership positions and the last layer refers to collaboration and exchanges with organizations which share responsibility for children's education as afterschool programs, health services and other resources.

Methodology and Study Design

This study investigates the involvement of a limited number of parents from different walks of life in their children's academic life, school provisions in this respect, as well as community activities which could contribute to that.

To examine the perspectives of these parents, the research questions were as follow:

1. What are the levels of parental involvement in their children's learning?
2. How do parents partner with schools?

Participants

The participants in this study were parents from different walks of life with children at different school levels. The researcher decided to use purposive sampling because this suited the qualitative nature of this study (Bryman, 2008, Cresswell, 2008). Information-rich cases which could lead to important results in the research were selected for the interviews where the voice of the interviewees was clearly heard to increase and secure an informant-centered representation (Al-Rozzi, 2007). The total number of parents was limited to 4 in order to be able to cope with the transcriptions and interpretations of the interviews which, as it is well-known, ask for a lot of time and dedication from the part of the researcher. The researcher tried to find parents who have different academic statuses, working and non-working parents.

Instruments

According to Bryman (2008) and Cresswell (2008) an interview method permits the researcher much greater depth of gathering information than any other method of collecting data. Interviews are considered one of the main data collection methods in qualitative research (Cresswell, 2008). Qualitative semi-structured interviews (interview protocol made out of 12 questions- see Appendix (1) were conducted with working and non-working parents selected to participate in the study. The researcher recorded the interviews which were later transcribed into written text. Verbal informed consent was obtained from the interviewees before the interview. At the beginning of each interview, the researcher made clear to the interviewee the purpose of the study and the ethical issues underlying any type of research. The interviewees were assured that the findings would be used only to benefit research and neither the interviewees' identity nor their children's identity would be at any time disclosed in the process of research or after its findings.

Data Analysis

The audio recordings of the four interviewed parents were transcribed verbatim, totalizing over 25 pages of transcriptions. The transcripts were read and given to open coding in which ideas, sentences, paragraphs were grouped into similar categories. The emerging categories were partly based on the questions posed to the interviewees and partly on the topics raised by the parents over the course of the semi-structured interviews. The semi-structured interviews served as a starting platform for the dialogue and were not strictly research questions. Upon the analysis of the transcribed texts, the researcher found some recurring themes that disguised the underlying philosophy of parents' involvement with schools, the way a stable partnership between school and home can be built and the activities parents were involved in to develop communities of learners.

The questions addressed parents' social status, their gender, qualification, number of children and the ways they get involved in their children's education, as well as the way they understand to participate in schools and community to create stable partnerships between them and these institutions.

Results and Discussion

From previous research conducted in this field, we learned that parents sport different parenting practices and styles which can bring about essential changes in the way they get involved with their children and their schools (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Epstein, 2001, 2011; Sheridan, 2001, 2004). The purpose of this research was to find out about the ways parents get involved in their children's learning and seek to build stable relationships with their children's schools and communities. What follows are the findings from the data that addressed our research questions. In order to do that, the researcher sought to answer the following research questions:

Research Question 1: What are the levels of parental involvement in their children's learning?

The answers provided were classified into categories which, at times were pre-established by the interview questions themselves.

Parents Reading to Their Children

All parents, without exception used to read stories, fairy tales, and religious fables to their children when they were little. They understood that reading is the basic form of providing their children with an appetite for literacy skills. One parent declared that he "used to teach them, tell them stories, according to their age, according to their needs and they learned..."

Another one considered that "fairy tales, things like this, things that they can understand" (teacher, PhD), were addressed at an early age to prepare them for school. At early ages, the level of involvement declared by the interviewed parents was the same, no matter what their academic status.

Fairy tales, yani kids' stories and literature regard their age. Yes, this is the kind of the stories that I used to read to them, stories for amusing them. And it used to be in English 'cause their grandmother used to tell them stories in Arabic (female secretary BA)

Academic Status of Parents

Even though the interviewees came from different walks of life and owned different academic statuses, they all had the same perspectives related to their aspirations towards their children's school achievement. They all understood that involvement in their children's academic life might

contribute to their offspring's success and bring about qualitative changes in their children's academic achievement. This involvement took a series of aspects from actual monitoring of homework to thorough revisions of daily material covered in school, to extra-curricular topics addressed in a series of forms: internet, documentaries, and books.

Homework Monitoring and Revision of Material

All parents, no matter what the nature of their job was, were involved in their children's homework supervision (Epstein, 2001, 2011). At times however, academic status was seen as an impediment for parents with a baccalaureate degree in helping their children for they felt that: "the curriculum is very difficult and to help them I need someone whose academic level is higher than mine". The same parent also stated that he can help his kids "with difficulty because of the difficulty of the curriculum". He felt that the curriculum was too demanding and it overrode his abilities as a parent. He showed frustration and became very emotional talking about that. The housewife interviewee expressed her evident concern in not being able to help her children with homework assignments, too. Other parents felt pride in being able to help their children and encouraged them to ask questions whenever they felt they could not deal with their homework, or any given school topic because they wanted their children to be successful:

... but to be honest, we do a good job, I mean at home to make sure that our children have the qualifications, my wife and myself, both of us, we teach them almost every day, we revise everything with them. We check how everything is with them (PhD male teacher).

This parental attitude denoted that parents did not rely on school input only, maybe because they did not really trust the teachers in school, or just to make sure that they have done their duty.

The female secretary encouraged her son and daughter to ask questions whenever they had difficulties with their homework or understanding a given school topic and helped them with memorization issues. It was clear that she did not offer them a solution, but taught them to cooperate with her in finding the answer:

Ahhh, R., he sometimes asks me questions regard English and yeah, I look for the answer me and him together. If it's sometimes is the meaning of a word, I'll ask him to bring the dictionary and then we will look it together. N., I sometimes memorize the things that she needs to learn by hearts to her.

Extracurricular Material

All parents, no matter what their academic level and social status were keen in providing guidance and help vis-à-vis extra-curricular material in written and audio form either as books, TV documentaries, movies, or Internet educational sites (Epstein, 2001, 2011). The housewife declared that she watched movies with her children, but she could not make them read, not as they used to when they were little: “Yes, I do, I encourage them”. Yes, of course, we watch movies together, documentaries, surf the net together, but not the library, not that much”. The lack of books in her children’s life was clearly due to the unavailability of a proper school or district library.

The PhD teacher provided his daughter with books illustrating a given movie she had already seen and monitored his son’s use of Internet to avoid loss of time. He managed to bring his daughter the books from the university’s library to which university employees have direct access.

Yes, yes as a matter of fact yes, especially my eldest daughter ... I keep bringing her like short stories, novels in English, and the last one I brought for her was a novel, quite big novel which is called “Pride and Prejudice” which is a movie. She watched it many times and she wanted to read the original novel which is by Jane Austen.

The fact that parents provided their children with a palette of extra-curricular material to teach and develop their literacy and cultural skills had nothing to do with their job satisfaction. On the contrary, this proved to be a strong reason why parents would find yet new ways of involving their children in educationally-rich activities.

Parent’s Job Satisfaction

The level of parents’ involvement in their children’s academic life had nothing to do with their job satisfaction level. Three of the interviewed parents were not satisfied with their academic level and social status – the housewife would have liked to study dentistry – she was very emotional when tackling the subject because she was aware it was too late for her to make any changes; the secretary would have liked “to be a teacher, to be in the academic track”, or to return to her previous job in the kindergarten where she was a director and the male Xerox-copier would

have liked to continue his studies. In contrast, the male interviewee with a PhD degree stated that becoming a teacher was his high school dream and no other job (he mentioned working in a bank) could have offered or could offer him the satisfaction teaching was offering him.

I won't hesitate to choose this career again. I love it, ahh, as a matter of fact since I was in high school, I started considering studying something at university where I can go back and teach in schools or universities. I like teaching, ahh, I wouldn't think of any other job, ahh ...

However, parents who had real job satisfaction, and were directly involved in the process of teaching were more sensitive to their involvement in their children's academic life.

Parents Desire to See Their Children in Tertiary Education

All parents, no matter what their academic and social status wanted to see their children involved in tertiary education. They understood that this was the key to their future success.

“Ah, (laughing) yes, of course. From now we are planning. R. is planning to be an engineer and to study at Birzeit University” (BA secretary). ” I wish to see them, Inshallah, if God gives us a long life, I'll see them” (Xerox-copier, baccalaureate).

These parents understood that their involvement could contribute to their children's reaching this important stage in their lives.

Research Question 2: How do parents partner with schools?

To answer this second research question, the researcher sought to look into two important aspects concerning the way parents contribute to the creation of stable partnerships with schools: participation in school-meetings and in community activities.

Participation in school-meetings

Upon the transcription of all interviews, the researcher found out that all parents sought to find out about their children's academic life by going to school on a monthly basis. However, the frequency with which they visited their children's schools depended on the type of school their children went to, or to their own involvement in their offspring's academic life. The researcher tackled two types of parents: those who went to school-meetings because they were asked to through a formal invitation, and those who did that voluntarily because they wanted to inquire about their children's accomplishments on a frequent basis. Parents with children in

governmental schools went to inquire about their children on a monthly basis. They used to receive an invitation from the school to participate in a meeting or in the “Father’s Council”.

Of course, if it’s a holiday, I go and ask about them, and if I am not free, then their mother goes to ask about them”....., I am a member in the Father’s Council and their mother participates in the Mother’s Council (Xerox -copier employee).

The PhD teacher did not wait to be invited to school, even though his children go to governmental schools; he went there frequently in order to find out about his children, to make sure that they did well in school.” No, no, just to check on my kids, and ask about them and make sure that they are doing well at school.” He also participated in the “Father’s Council” in the boy’s school. They got together with other parents in order to discuss ways of enhancing education. Those meetings sometimes had a wider range of activities which were related to fund raising for improving school conditions (e.g. building a library and buying computers). It seemed that private schools (as the one which is attended by the secretary interviewee’s son) encouraged more effective relationships with students’ parents. Parents could call school at any time they felt they wanted to find out things about their children; moreover, teacher-students’ relationships were developed by parents and approved by schools.

This year let’s say, just inu called the school for any circumstances or if you want to ask about him and we treated him up to build a relationship between him and his teachers to keep a good relation and in touch. Sometimes R. if he has a problem he calls his teacher and solve the problem, or he set with the teacher and talk about the issue (BA secretary).

The result was a more intimate and friendly relationship among the participants in the partnership, leading to real, qualitative changes and a student-centered policy (Epstein, 2004). By contrast, governmental schools did not nurture similar relationships, the encounters between parents and teachers were part of a well-established school routine. This distanced relationship which is sported by governmental schools is a clear obstacle in breaking the traditional “teacher-centered” models which cannot contribute to authentic partnerships (Epstein, 2001, 2011; Sheridan, 2005).

Participation in Community Activities

This form of participation did not have good representation among Palestinian parents because community activities are very poorly represented in the society, they take accidental forms and are not directly connected to schools. Hence a link in the partnership was clearly missing which made the partnerships incomplete.

The female interviewees did not mention their participation in any distinct community activities, it might be also because the gender issues in the Palestinian community where women's participation in community life is still very limited and at times not seriously taken into account. Female interviewees mentioned activities which were more or less related to those organized by schools like: arts and crafts festivals, otherwise there was a silence related to their involvement in their children's field trips (male children), or other community activities more or less directly related to schools. The housewife interviewee felt really frustrated because she could not participate in her children's trips: "Here one cannot participate in such activities", but if she could and such activities would be organized she "would pack her things and go with them". She considered that any type of community activity could be profitable "even sport events, for I have practiced sport professionally".

The PhD teacher interviewee participated in community activities which could contribute to better partnerships between families and schools. He mentioned that he was involved in the village council. The other male interviewee was a member in the Sport Club and in the Red Crescent Society. He mentioned his involvement in the organization of local field trips, and his enrollment in a "first aid course". Even though they mentioned their involvement with these committees, societies and clubs, they did not give any substantial examples of the activities organized by them.

Conclusion

This modest qualitative study was conducted in order to find out about ways in which stable partnerships among parents, schools and students could be created. The semi-structured interviews offered a thematic skeleton to be used in the organization of categories to be investigated, so the researcher could answer the two research questions. The four interviewed parents talked about ways they got involved in their children's academic lives. They explained

that the emergence and development of literary skills lie at the basis of their children's future education. They also understood the importance of guiding and monitoring their children's school work, providing them with extra-curricular material in a variety of forms, and getting involved in community activities which could bring about essential changes in parent-school relationships. They understood that their involvement in their children's academic life contributed to their children's school success, but at times, this was truncated by their inability to help them because of curricular issues and their academic status. Parents also showed their real concern with the decreasing amount of community activities as an important part of their children's school life. The researcher is aware that the results of this study are limited to a certain area (Jenin school area), the number of participants was very small (4 only) hence their views might not represent or concord with the views of the majority of parents who have school children in Palestine. This qualitative study sought to provide rich, in-depth accounts of the views of a limited number of parents. Larger scale studies are recommended involving parents from a variety of urban and rural communities.

Appendix A

Questions for interviews with parents

1. What do you do for a living?
2. What is your age, academic level?
3. How would you describe yourself?
4. Would you change anything about your status if you had the time?
5. Can you tell me about your hopes as an adult?
6. How many children have you got? What are their ages?
7. Do you read to your children? / Did you read to them when they were young?
8. What is your relationship with school?
 - a. Do you often go to school to ask about your child?
 - b. Do you often participate in meetings organized by school?
 - c. Do you participate in any community activities?
 - d. What would you do if you had the possibility to participate in school-related activities?
9. How does your child do in school?
10. Do you teach your children?
11. Do you supervise their learning?
 - a. Checking homework
 - b. Help them with homework/help them learn
 - c. Do you encourage your children to read extra-curricular material/watch documentaries/use the internet/go to the library?
12. Would you like to see your children involved in tertiary education?

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تطوير التعاون الثابت بين الاهل والطلاب والمدرسة: فلسفة الاهل في التعليم

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ملخص

تصف هذه الدراسة تطوير التعاون الثابت بين الأهل والمدرسة للارتقاء بمهارات القراءة والكتابة عند الطلاب. تعنى الدراسة باكتشاف دور مشاركة عدد محدود من الأهل من مجالات حياتية مختلفة في حياة أطفالهم الأكاديمية والشؤون المدرسية ذات الصلة وأي أنشطة مجتمعية قد تساهم في تطوير هذا التعاون. تعرض أسئلة البحث الطريقة التي يفهم من خلالها الأهل هذا التعاون ودرجة تدخلهم في حياة أبنائهم المدرسية. المشاركون في هذه الدراسة هم أهل من خلفيات اجتماعية مختلفة وأبنائهم في صفوف دراسية مختلفة. المنهجية التي اتبعت في البحث اقتصرت على عينات محددة تفي بالغرض. وفي المقابلات التي أجريت تم طرح عدد محدود من الأسئلة لجمع البيانات. تم تسجيل هذه المقابلات وتحويلها الى كتابة وتصنيفها. تظهر نتائج البحث مشاركة الأهل -بغض النظر عن خلفياتهم الاجتماعية المختلفة- في حياة أبنائهم المدرسية بطرق تؤدي الى تطور هذه المشاركة فيما يتعلق باكتساب مهارات القراءة والكتابة والتعلم على مدى الحياة.

الكلمات الدالة: التعاون الثابت بين الأهل والمدرسة، العلاقة الثلاثية، مهارات القراءة والكتابة، التعلم مدى الحياة.