Identifying barriers: Creating solutions to improve family engagement

Key Details

KEY WORDS
Parent Involvement, Culturally Responsive Family Engagement, Parents, Families, Perceptions, Barriers, Communication, Welcoming Schools, Focus Group Research

POPULATION GROUP
All Youth

STEPPING UP THEMES
Strong, Supportive Friends & Families
Education, Training & Apprenticeships

RESEARCH ORIGIN
USA

SOURCE
Academic

> "...effective strategies can help families support their children in different ways... ultimately moving from involvement—being present in the school building—to parent engagement—collaboration built through multiple constructions of how parents are involved" (p. 166).

1. What is the research about?

Parents' interest and support in their children's education can have a huge impact on how well children do in school. Therefore, schools often try to get parents to be involved in their children's education and school community. At the same time, it has been recognized that some parents face barriers that make it difficult for them to participate in traditionally expected ways (e.g. attend parent-teacher meetings, volunteer at school events, etc.). However, these parents still contribute to their children's learning in other, less visible ways (e.g. getting kids to do chores at home, taking them to community events, etc.).

This research is about how schools can move from just thinking about parent involvement in traditional ways (being physically present in the school building) to more expansive understandings of parent engagement (recognizing and responding to parents' feedback and actively addressing barriers that parents identify).

2. Where did the research take place?

This research took place in the Midwestern United States.

3. Who is this research about?

This research is about parents of children in elementary, middle, and high school, as well as staff from these schools.

4. How was the research done?

Twenty focus groups (group discussions) were held with families (50 parents/grandparents), and with 76 staff, in six schools. The main focus of the groups was to answer two research questions:

1. What are the barriers or limitations to families attending school events?
2. What can be done differently to increase family involvement?

The focus groups were tape-recorded and transcribed (written out word-for-word). Then the researchers found common themes that appeared in the discussions, which became the research findings.

5. What are the key findings?

Five key themes were common between parents and school staff:

1. **Providing opportunities for involvement:** Parents said that having other children made it harder to volunteer or attend events, and that having to prepare food before an event was a challenge. They suggested that schools could improve involvement by providing childcare and food, having weekend activities, and making sure they didn't have events on the same day as other schools (in case students have siblings at other schools).

2. **Improving communication:** Parents expressed concern that schools did not give them enough notice of upcoming events. They also thought that, at times, schools only contacted them once major problems with their children had developed. Others noted that language barriers existed. Staff tended to see communication problems in terms of not being able to get in touch with parents. When teachers communicate with parents more often, and more consistently, students seem to perform better in the classroom, and parents feel more informed and better able to be involved.

3. **Welcoming families into the building:** Parents' low level of comfort in entering the school was named as a barrier to their participation. Parents consistently suggested making it easier to sit in on their children's classes as a way to tackle their discomfort.

4. **Time conflicts or making time:** Time was discussed in terms of (i) conflicts with other events, and (ii) conflicts with parents' work schedules. Suggestions for making time less of a challenge included being mindful of which day of the week events fall on, the start time, and providing food.

5. **Moving from involvement to engagement:** Parents argued that their involvement should not be seen through the narrow lens of whether or not they are physically present in the school building, and that the various ways they help their children succeed should be recognized as involvement. Parents also spoke about their limitations to support their children as sometimes linked to the complexity of the curriculum, which was beyond their capacity. They expressed interest in getting support from the school about things they could do at home to engage their children with challenging material.

There were also two themes that only came up with staff members:

1. **Overcoming negative school experiences:** Some staff members spoke about parents not wanting to be involved, and they linked this perception to parents' own "negative school experiences, apathy, and being uneducated" (p. 176). Teachers had the impression that parents may feel too intimidated by the school environment to participate and engage.

2. **Breaking down barriers to access:** Staff quickly identified not having transportation as a barrier. They also stated that the financial costs of being involved, having to pass a background check, and being a single or adoptive parent could be barriers. When asked, staff members had difficulty naming what they were doing to address these barriers in concrete, meaningful ways.

6. Why does it matter for youth work?

Parents named many ways they felt they were engaged in supporting their children's education outside of and within school (e.g. taking them to the library, helping with homework, etc.). However, when we understand parent involvement only in terms of parents being physically present at the school, we erase much of the important work parents do. Moreover, parents who have multiple responsibilities and demands on their time have stated that they are interested in finding more ways that they can be involved that don't require them to be present at the school.

By shifting how we see parent involvement to include a wider range of activities, we can avoid unfairly labelling parents as "uncaring" or "uninvolved." Additionally, if schools are committed to engaging parents, they must respond to barriers that parents face. Across the youth sector, parental engagement strategies could be used in youth programs to harness the benefits parents can bring to support their children and to recognize the work that parents are already doing.

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