

Teachers, Parents and Students: Partners in Education

Emile Maxi, Education Superintendent, Quebec Conference, Longueuil, QC

The notion of parental involvement in education tends to be regarded as a unified concept and accepted unequivocally as desirable by all parties concerned. I would like to begin this article to question the assumptions. By considering the different viewpoints and experiences of the main protagonists: the teachers, the parents and the students, the question: *'should we be forced to work together?'* must be considered. This question is located within the current context whereby some schools in the province of Quebec for example are required to instigate Home-School agreements to be signed by all parents guaranteeing that parents assist in the education and success of their children.



While research has demonstrated the value of parental support in relation to literacy and achievements (Merttens & Newland, 1996) at primary level, little attention has been paid to whether parental involvement is either useful or indeed desirable at secondary level from the perspectives of parents, teachers or the students themselves. Likewise, there has been limited consideration of that kind of parental involvement might be viable. Indeed what is parental involvement? Parental involvement is presented as a unified concept but in fact has a range of interpretations, which are obviously accepted or unaccepted by different constituents. What then is the purpose of parental involvement?

Before discussing these questions, there is a further dimension to consider. Up to the late 80's, parental involvement in education in Quebec was more or less voluntary. However, up to recent times, especially public schools were strongly encouraged to take reasonable steps to ensure that all registered parents of students sign a parental declaration to indicate that they understand and accept the contents of the agreement. While parents should not be penalized if they refuse to sign the agreement, nor their children refused admission to the school, this contract will put pressure on parents to comply with the stated values of the school and de facto formalise the expectation of a particular type of parental involvement. All of this is done with a spirit of partnership between the home and the school in an attempt to ensure the success of the students.

Educational researchers have provided evidence, which argues for the benefits of parental involvement to children's learning experiences within the spheres of literacy and achievement. Such involvement is very specific and clearly defined, something that Thomas (1992) identifies as being particularly significant to its efficacy.

The implication is that parental involvement in education is about getting parents to work with the teachers, to get parents to take on their values and goals. The school must actively promote these expectations until they become a part of the home-school association.

Carol Vincent (1996) identifies four possible roles which parental involvement might take: 'the parent as supporter/learner; the parent as consumer; the independent parent and the parent as participant' (p.43). Vincent suggests that the 'independent' parent role is the most common. She describes this as parents who have minimal contact with the school, which may be deliberate or due to particular circumstances (p. 54).

In reality, however, within the day-to-day interactions between parents and school, parents' involvement is more diverse and more complex than one might think. Parents involvement, is concerned, with intervening on their children's behalf or attempting to intervene, which may involve trying to gain access to information about their children's progress or access to information about how they might support their children further.

There is also a whole area of parental involvement hidden from view, which comprises the role of the mothers and fathers at home. While this article does not deal with this aspect, its significance lays in the recognition, or rather, lack of recognition by the schools, of the contribution parents can make regarding knowledge of their own children.

A central aspect of the management of our school is the ability to establish and maintain harmonious relationships. As our schools are increasingly under pressure to involve parents, the task of managing them, especially where there are diverse groups, become all the greater.

I believe that our schools have several aspects to deal with in the involvement of parents: one is representing the diverse interests, managing powerful and influential parents being a key part of this and another is managing criticism.

Beresford & Hardie, (1996) present a few array of factors that affect the nature and extent of parental involvement, especially when the children go to secondary school. It is commonly known that parents (particularly mothers) are more involved with their children's primary school than secondary school. They argue that the characteristics of the primary school, which tend to be more conducive to parental participation, are contrasted sharply once children go to the secondary school.

Another aspect evoked is that the curriculum is more complex and seemingly ever changing and many of the parents do not feel confident in helping their children academically. This, of course is influenced by the parents' own educational background, added to which teachers tend to shroud their subject in mystique and position themselves as the powerful professional.

In trying to present solutions to the problem of parents' involvement, Beresford & Hardie, (1996) identify a need for parents to get more information about what their children are actually doing in order to help and support them further.

A further consideration of the constraints upon parental involvement is the pressure that it puts upon parents' time, and given that majority of actively involved parents are women,

it is thus a further burden on women's time not to mention the one's with more than one child in school (Vincent, 1996).

Regardless of the reasons for the lack of parental involvement, one has to bear in mind that if our kids have to be successful in their **journey to excellence**, it will take the efforts of all parties involved: the school, the parents and of course the students.

Since the school most often gets the blame and its reputation affected when students do not excel academically, there may be a need for a Home-School agreements in the Adventist schools' policy where parents are required to sign and ensure that their children attend school, are punctual, are prepared for the school work for the day in terms of having the necessary equipment, are appropriately dressed and do their homework.

Moreover, special attention should be paid to the needs of the students or that parents might have a part to play in contributing to informing the school about the wider social experience of the child and how this may affect his or her learning.

The notion of developing a partnership between home and school is based on the unified concept of the total participation of the school, the teachers, the parents as well as the students to create a synergy that will seek to guarantee a successful student. Therefore, the parental involvement cannot be tackled in isolation, but needs to be relational taking into account of the responsibility of all parties. It needs to be seen as part of the whole learning strategy, thus involving the students, the teachers as well as the parents.

Resources:

- Beresford, E. & Hardie, A. (1996) Parents and Secondary Schools: a different approach? In J. Bastiani & S. Wolfendale (Eds) Home-School Work in Britain: review, reflection and development. London: David Fulton.
- Mertsens R. & Newland, A (1996) Home-Works: shared maths and shared writings, in J. Bastiani & S. Wolfendale (Eds) Home-School Work in Britain: review, reflection and development. London: David Fulton.
- Thomas, G. (1992) Effective Classroom Teamwork, Support or Intrusion. London: Routledge.
- Tomlinson, S. (1991) Home-School Partnerships, Education and Training Paper No. 7. London: Institute for Public Policy Research.

