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BRAIN SCIENCE AND PARENT-SCHOOL RELATIONSHIPS IN A TITLE 1 ELEMENTARY SCHOOL IN MASSACHUSETTS: A BASIC QUALITATIVE STUDY

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Abstract

Bandura's (1977) social cognitive theory contends that people think, learn, and perform based upon a sum of personal (e.g., beliefs, emotions, behaviors), social (home-school relationships), and environmental (school culture). Research has also determined that collaboration between home and school leads to better children's social-emotional learning (SEL) (August, Anderson, & Bloomquist, 1992; Cooper & Redfern, 2016; Grant & Ray, 2018). Thus, a basic qualitative research tradition was used to understand better elementary public-school parents' perceptions of the impact of parent-school relationships on children SEL development in a Title 1 school in Massachusetts (MA). Thru the lenses of brain science, a broad research question guided the inquiry: What social and cultural factors, if any, may impact parent-school relationships in a Title 1 school in MA from a brain science perspective? The researchers used two forms of data collection: (a) open-ended interviews with five parents and (b) field notes. The data were collected, transcribed, member checked, coded, and thematically analyzed. Results indicated that all parents have a genuine interest and desire to support their kids' social and emotional growth and establish good relationships with the school. The overreaching themes derived from the analysis indicated that the following might impact parent-school relationships: (1) lack of culturally sensitive information, (2) teachers' attitudes and beliefs, and (3) rhetoric utilized in school communications (e.g., language and tone of school policies). Interestingly, the reflective process allowed parents to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the major social and cultural challenges that hindered strong rapport with teachers and provided them with insightful suggestions for possible partnerships efforts such as creating a communication effort and creating a welcoming environment.

Introduction

Research on the science of learning and development indicated a correlation between student academic achievement and parental involvement (Epstein, 2001; Mapp, 2002; Overstreet, Devine, Bevans, & Efreom, 2005). The major stakeholders in parent-school relationships include biological parents and guardians and those who work within the school system daily, such as teachers and administrators (Overstreet et al., 2005; Wairimu, Macharia, & Muiru, 2016). Concerning involvement within the schools, parents are most likely to play an active role in their children's education when "they are part of a community of people working together" (Redding, Murphy & Sheley, 2011, p. 18). In fact, according to Redding and colleagues, this meaningful interaction is the nature of strong school-family collaboration. Thus, it is critical to understand the nature of meaningful parent-school relationships and how it may

impact children's social and emotional learning (SEL) (Lasky, 2000; Cooper & Redfern, 2016; Wairimu et al., 2016).

Title 1 Schools

Public schools with large concentrations of students whose parents have to receive federal funds to help students at-risk achieve their educational goals are denominated as Title 1 schools (Cox, 1999). Parents who experience socioeconomic disadvantage are typically underprivileged, culturally diverse, with limited English proficiency (MacLeod, 2009; Cox, 1999; Crozier & Davies, 2007).

Detangling the wide range of factors affecting the family-school relationships in Title 1 schools and their effects on students' SEL is a complex task (Battistich et al., 1997; Redding et al., 2011; Valdes, 1996). However, the relations between home and school appear to be less favorable for working-class parents than for higher income parents due to specific stressors facing this population such as structural inequalities, issues of social class and power, deficit-based propaganda, the school culture, teacher attitudes, and language differences (Ahmad, 2010; Lewis-Antoine, 2012; Lewis & Foreman, 2002; Redding et al., 2011).

Instead of taking the parents' socioeconomic status into account, too often, parental involvement policies ignore the particular needs of underrepresented groups, leaving those parents and students farther behind their higher-income counterparts (De Carvalho, 2001; Slaten et al., 2015). To be effective, involvement efforts must become more collaborative, inclusive, culturally relevant, and, most importantly, reflective to communicate with all the school (Durlak et al., 2011; Grant & Ray, 2018; Trumbull et al., 2001).

In particular, the voices of parents in Title 1 schools have traditionally been silenced and muted in educational research, despite their potential to shape students' social and emotional development (Castro-Olivio, 2010; Lewis-Antoine, 2012; Clark & Breman, 2009). Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative study was to understand better elementary public-school parents' perceptions of the impact of parent-school relationships on children's social and emotional development in a Title 1 school in Massachusetts thru the lenses of brain science. A broad research question guided the inquiry: What social and cultural factors, if any, may impact parent-school relationships in a Title 1 school in Massachusetts from a brain science perspective?

Social-Emotional (SEL) Process and Reflection

Research has already determined that collaboration between home and school leads to better children's social-emotional learning (SEL) (August, Anderson, & Bloomquist, 1992; Cooper & Redfern, 2016; Grant & Ray, 2018). SEL is defined as an ongoing process that allows children and adults to establish connections between knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emerging emotional reactions (Cooper & Redfern, 2016). Wairimu and colleagues (2016) indicated that collaborative relationships between homes and schools could foster a shared understanding of students' SEL needs and emotional growth.

Research also suggests that both parents' and teachers' efforts need to be collaborative and reflective to educate children's minds and hearts, resulting in a higher SEL (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Grant & Ray, 2018; Durlak et al., 2011). Reflective efforts can improve understanding of each other and make the most of their experiences, specifically in Title 1 schools, as this school has large concentrations of low-income parents, who often are less likely to engage in supportive relationships with teachers (Ahmad, 2010; Auerbach, 2007; Bourdieu, 1973; Connell et al., 1982; Crozier & Davies, 2007). Issues such as social class differences, language and culture barriers, and the intimidation felt by some parents and teachers who did not

experience successful relationships create obstacles for meaningful involvement and communication (Lewis-Antoine, 2012; Swick, 2008).

Brain Science

Brain science and cognitive psychology are interdisciplinary, scientific fields of study that explores how people think, remember, learn, perceive events and relationships, and make decisions (Fischer, 2009; Marope, 2017). Social cognitive theory contends that people think, learn, and perform based upon a sum of personal (e.g., beliefs, emotions, behaviors), social (home-school relationships), and environmental (school culture) factors (Bandura & Cervone, 1986; Schunk, Meece & Pintrich, 2014). It is commonly expressed that the best way to involve parents in their children's education is through optimizing home-school relationships based on meaningful communication whereby parents gain new insights into their children's' ESL and sense of connectedness (Siegel et al., 2018, Cunnigton et al., 2017; Fisher, 2009, Lasky, 2000, Wairimu et al., 2016). Building on Bandura's (1977) social cognitive theory, researchers such as Siegel et al. (2018) found that parents' feelings of belonging to the school environment, specifically in Title 1 schools, enable them to see more value in home-school relationships and school culture.

August (1992), Grant & Ray (2018) Durlak et al. (2011) indicated that the more parents could share their own experiences and concerns in a reflective manner, the more they have the chance to consistently update their knowledge about what works best for their children's ESL needs. Adopting a scientific groundwork offers promises by providing new ways of collaboration practices and skills to improve home-school communication and gain a new logical view of children's SEL needs (Fisher, 2009; Marope, 2017; Durlak, 2011).

Methods and Data Analysis

A basic qualitative research tradition was used for this study. Participants included five parents of children attending a Title 1 elementary public-school located North of Boston. The school served a high population of students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds and diverse cultures. Upon IRB approval, parents were recruited based on the criteria that their children were eligible for free or reduced lunch.

Parents were both male and female, from various age groups, educational backgrounds, and races. Selection criteria also included the participants' willingness to participate in this study and their willingness to reflect on their parental experiences as it relates to various aspects of school communication and involvement. Parents agreed to offer insights into understanding factors, if any, that may influence their parenting, including thoughts, feelings, relationships, the environment, and past experiences. The researchers used two forms of data collection: (a) open-ended interviews with five parents and (b) field notes. Interviews consisted of 15 open-ended questions. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes. The data were collected, transcribed, member checked, coded, and thematically analyzed.

Qualitative Results and Conclusions

Results indicated that all parents have a genuine interest and desire to support their kids' educational growth and establish good relationships with the school. The overreaching themes derived from the analysis indicated that the following might impact parent-school relationships: 1) lack of culturally sensitive information, 2) teachers' attitudes and beliefs, and 3) rhetoric utilized in school communications (e.g., language and tone of school policies). Figure 1 illustrates the above themes:
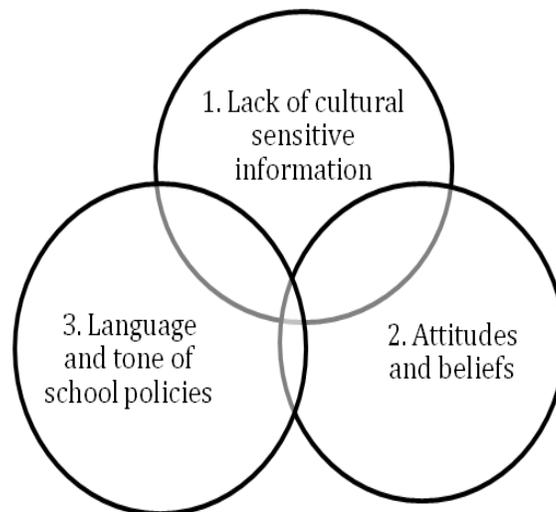
Figure 1. This figure illustrates the major themes derived from the analysis that may impact parent-school relationships.

This study also revealed that reflective thinking enabled parents to discover new ways to think about the links between behavior, feelings, and actions. In brain science, reflective parenting is defined by a parent's use of self-awareness to think and reflect about factors that influence their parenting, including thoughts, feelings, the environment, past experiences, and relationships (Webster-Stratton & Herbert, 1993; Cooper & Redfern, 2016; Vreeland, 2016).

According to one participant, "I had to say before I learned how to speak enough English, it was hard for me to speak with my son's teacher . . . I was always worried about interacting with other people . . . to feel positively involved. . . . also I felt that I couldn't help my child doing his homework."

All the parents interviewed in this study expressed the view that reflective thinking has helped them assess their parenting efforts in and out of schools more effectively and thoroughly their parenting efforts in and out of schools, aimed at supporting their children's social and emotional development. For example, one parent stated that "Today I feel more conscious about my efforts a parent. . . after talking to you, I realized the importance of having something special with my child inside the classroom such as attending his birthday. . . or a Halloween party. . . but you know parents alone cannot tolerate this actions, we need to feel more welcome."

When reflecting on the quality of their relationship with teachers, parents stressed the importance of developing long-lasting parent-school relationships to assist with the social and emotional development of their children. They expressed the hope that reflective parenting would lead to better home-school relationships and, ultimately, would translate into the children's lifelong drive for learning. As one parent stated, "Because I come from a different culture, I see teachers as having superior authority. As parents, we are consistently being given instructions about what we should and should not do with our kids . . . that is ok. Still, it would be easier if we build stronger relationships for more positive involvement." Another participant went on to say, "You made me think that at the end of the day, what gets in the way is this gap in communication with my daughter's teacher. . . I really want to help my baby, but I also need to feel more connected with the teacher."

These results are in line with research in this field, which recognizes the need for the inclusion of critical thinking and reflection as two powerful tools to build stronger parent-teacher relationships that account for children social and emotional development, most notably in Title 1 schools, where parents are culturally and linguistically diverse (Wairimu et al., 2016; Grant & Ray, 2018). While it would be difficult for some parents to establish close relationships with teachers during formal interactions (e.g., school meetings, open house), engaging them in a critical reflection and in-depth dialogue needs to be a priority (Christenson & Conoley, 1992; Grant & Ray, 2018).

When reflecting on the social and cultural factors that influence the relationships, parents observed the following three constructs: lack of culturally sensitive information, teachers' attitudes and beliefs, and rhetoric utilized in school communications (e.g., language and tone of school policies. A parent stated, "your question about being a reflective parent made me think that it is often difficult to get along with all people all the time. . . but with some efforts [such as] keeping positive attitudes, it's not impossible." Another participant expressed the following: " I think I want to come in and say, 'Yes, I have tomorrow off, can I come in?' but because it's such a process you know. . . I do not feel like I can do it. . . I think if we take that barrier away, we will have a lot more of relationships [and] more of parents willing to come in."

One participant shared the following, "I believe if I am not mistaken, there is a misconception of parents who are not involved with their children. I feel some people are a little judgmental of those parents. Many parents are busy, and they don't have time to communicate regularly."

These results are in line with recent literature that examined the major barriers to effectively home-school partnerships (Comer & Haynes, 2014; Baker, Wise, Kelley & Skiba, 2016; Grant & Ray, 2018).) Also, the parents in this case study believed that behavioral and academic interventions would be more successful when shared between the home and school environments. In the absence of effective parent-teacher communication, research studies have found that students can engage in more high-risk academic failure and behavior (August et al., 1992; Webster-Stratton & Herbert, 1993; Graham-Clay, 2005).

The reflective process allowed parents to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the major social and cultural challenges that hindered strong rapport with teachers and provided them with insightful suggestions for possible partnerships efforts such as creating a communication effort and creating a welcoming environment. The findings from this basic qualitative study resonate strongly with several scholars' research and writings in the field of educational sociology, who examined partnerships efforts intended to benefit parent-teacher relationships. Pattni-Shah (2008) wrote, "It is through communication that teachers and parents can learn from each other and work together" (p.86) to ensure the social and emotional well-being of children. Graham-Clay (2005) suggested open lines of communication to promote reflective dialogue across homes and schools. Trumbull et al. (2001) concluded that understanding the school environment and cultural differences that shape teachers' and parents' points of view can improve partnerships.

Discussion

- Findings from this study suggested that Title 1 schools should develop communication means that may enable reflective thinking with parents. Such action may encourage parents' desire to support their children's learning efforts in and out of schools by creating better home-school partnerships, and consequently, positively influencing the social-emotional learning of children.

- Schools should provide well-planned opportunities to parents in conversations that take into consideration reflective thinking. The majority of the parents reported genuine interest in developing lasting parent-school relationships to assist with their children's social and emotional development, could not articulate ways to do so. To this end, schools should take the lead and provide culturally sensitive activities that educate diverse parents and make them feel valued and welcome, nurturing their desire to participate.
- Parents identified communication as a major factor that affects the development of a significant parent-teacher relationship. Schools need to be inclusive and open lines of communication with diverse parents. One way to accomplish this task is to create culturally sensitive welcome opportunities for parents to be involved in day-to-day activities and events in Title 1 schools.
- Parents were able to identify the major factors that cause a rupture in their relationships with schools but suggested multicultural partnership efforts that account for student success, such as creating a warm school climate and fostering home-school communication.

Conclusion

Both school and parents should work together with a common interest in students' academic and emotional growth (Cooper & Redfern, 2016; Mapp, 2002). Social cognitive theory contends that people learn and perform based upon a sum of personal (e.g., beliefs, emotions, behaviors), social (home-school relationships), and environmental (school culture) factors (Bandura & Cervone, 1986; Schunk, Meece & Pintrich, 2014). The social cognitive theory also stresses the importance of critical thinking and reflection (Bandura & Cervone, 1983; Schunk,1991; Fan & Williams, 2010). Through reflection, parents have learned new ways to think about the link between behavior, feelings, and actions regarding their parental involvement efforts and their relationships with teachers that account for student academic success.

The application of brain science principles tandem with more organized and diverse culturally sensitive efforts to communicate with all the school members could bring them into active collaboration and, consequently, contribute to the social and emotional development of diverse children. The scope of this study was limited to one suburb title 1 elementary school north of Massachusetts. Ideologies about home-school relationships may differ significantly nationally. The sample size was small to allow for in-depth reflections. Future studies should expand the current research by incorporating the voices of teachers regarding their relationships with parents.

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