

research snapshot

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Parent research teams create new relationships between schools and families

What is this research about?

The effort to create meaningful interaction between schools and families is often divided between two perspectives. A family-centred approach suggests that families should be given the resources and support to become decision makers at their children's school. In contrast, school-centred approaches believe that schools, rather than families, are responsible for initiating change. On their own, either of these two approaches does not address opportunities where both schools and families can engage and work together to achieve positive school outcomes. Parent-driven research is a perfect example of meaningful interaction between schools and families that does not fit within the realms of school or community alone.

What did the researcher do?

The study began as a project to increase communication and access between two elementary schools in the Greater Toronto Area and their linguistically, culturally and racially diverse families. At first, a series of after-school meetings was held at each school for parents to discuss issues that affected their families. These included topics like learning, equity policy, minority languages, and immigration.

What you need to know:

Parent research teams offer the chance to break out of school-centred or family-centred approaches to school change. It offers an opportunity to collaborate and give meaningful roles for each stakeholder to create knowledge and to act.

After 3 years of the study, the author proposed to each school the idea of a parent research team. These teams offered families the chance to investigate priority issues that came up from the afterschool meetings. One specific research cycle was used as a case study in this paper: a parent research team investigating the topic of discipline.

Interviews and focus groups were held off-site from the school. They included relevant community spots like coffee shops or places of worship. For 30 minutes, participants were asked open-ended questions and their responses were recorded, translated and transcribed. The data was then interpreted by a research team made up of parent researchers, an on-site research coordinator, a school board-based researcher, and the author. He was interested in assessing the potential for parent-driven research to create more inclusive decision making processes in school communities.

What did the researcher find?

The findings on discipline by the parent research team fell into 3 specific categories:

- 1) Parents' motivation for discipline: sharing knowledge with children; helping them grow up to be good adults; and parenting with love.
- 2) Communication in discipline: maintaining and increasing the exchange of information between parents and children.
- 3) Language concerns with discipline: raising sensitivity around the place of parents' other-than-English first languages in disciplining.

The experience of parent-driven research was a valuable one. The work of the parent researchers demonstrated its ability to function as legitimate research. It focused on a priority topic, followed a specific methodology, and produced meaningful and deliberate findings.

The parent research teams also saw new relations grow between schools and families in the process of creating knowledge. Parents not only gained institutional capital through their role as researchers, but they also networked findings so as to inform school procedures in areas such as school safety and mental health and wellbeing.

How can you use this research?

This research may be useful for school administrators and staff, as well as personnel working in community spaces or higher education. The study offers important insights on the potential outcomes of collaborative research between different stakeholders in a

community. For administrators and teachers, it sheds insight on strategies to seek parent engagement in school issues. For community agencies and researchers in higher education, the research offers insight on the value and process of facilitating collaboration for educational change.

About the Researcher

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