

The Lack of Parent Participation in Rural Schools

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The study attempted to assist low-achieving elementary students in a rural school district by providing free training to parents and increasing the number of classroom volunteers. Students scoring in the bottom quartile of the CTBS were identified and their parents contacted. Few parents completed the training; those who did were positive toward the program. Very few parents were willing to serve as classroom volunteers. Most parents refused to participate because they believed their children did not need remediation. Interview data revealed that parents believed their children were performing adequately in school based on the grades they brought home. Parents also commented that their children were performing at the same level as other children in the neighborhood and didn't appear to be in need of remediation. Based on the information they had, parents refused to believe the data indicating the poor performance of their children on the standardized test.

The data for this study resulted from a federally funded project designed to assist low achieving elementary students in a rural southeastern school district by providing free training to their parents and by increasing the number of parent volunteers working with the students in their respective classrooms. By providing free materials and parent training, the school district expected increased parental support for remedial programs, greater parental participation in programs offered in the district and an increase in the number of parents serving as classroom volunteers. It was further expected that increased parent participation would improve student performance in basic skills.

The recent data on the relationship between parental support and student achievement has not been consistent. Woodruff [4] found no difference between parental encouragement, support, and reinforcement among bright and slow students in the area of mathematics. Hill and Lehner [2] found that parents who received training in how to teach inquiry skills to their first grade children, significantly improved the inquiry skills of the children. This supports the claims made by Sigel and Saunders [3] that parents who are appropriately trained can influence the cognitive development of their children. The research assumes that parents are willing to participate in the appropriate training activities.

Several assumptions were made concerning the proposed outcomes of the project. The researchers assumed that parents of low achieving children when given the opportunity would be willing to help their children by attending free training sessions and by serving as classroom volunteers. The anticipated overall effect of this participation was an improvement in the basic skills level of the children identified for the study.

Method

Subjects

Students (grades 2, 3, and 4) in two elementary schools who scored in the bottom quartile on the Comprehen-

sive Tests of Basic Skills (CTBS) (1) were identified for participation in the study. The two schools are located in the rural southeast and both schools have almost a 100% black student population. The total number of students identified for the study was 338. Parents of the children were contacted by telephone and at home by two trained interviewers. Parents willing to participate were given the opportunity to attend six training sessions designed to provide them with instructional skills in order to help their own children. Parents contacted were also encouraged to serve as volunteers in their children's school.

Data Source

The CTBS was administered by the State Department of Education and scores were on record at the school district. Likert scales were developed to assess the pre- and post-test attitudes of parents and teachers who participated in the study. Parents were asked to evaluate the training program and to assess their own ability to assist their children with school work in the home. Teachers were asked to evaluate how effective classroom volunteers were in improving classroom instruction. Prior to the start of the training sessions, telephone and personal open-ended interviews were conducted with the parents of the low-achieving students. During the study two researchers interviewed participating parents in their homes.

The interview consisted of a set of questions concerning the amount of time spent in various activities. The interview was also open-ended, and the parents were encouraged to react to the study and indicate their own reactions to the progress of their children. At the end of the study questionnaires were administered to participating teachers and parent volunteers to assess their reactions and solicit their recommendations.

The pre- and post-test data on the the Likert scales were analyzed by use of dependent *t*-tests. The data from the interview and questionnaires were reviewed by two researchers who identified the most common responses from the participating parents and teachers.

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Results

The researchers attempted to contact parents of the children to encourage their participation in the study. A total of 178 home visits were attempted and 60 were completed. An additional 198 phone contacts were attempted and 43 were completed. It was difficult to contact many of the parents. Several had no phone so contact was difficult and many worked more than one job and could not be contacted at their residence even after several attempted calls and visits.

Only 35 of the parents contacted ever attended a training session and only 18 parents of the low achieving children completed 5 out of 6 training sessions. Of the 18 parents completing the training, 10 agreed to serve as classroom volunteers. Parents who attended the training sessions were very positive toward the program on both pre- and post-test measures. Scores for parents participating were so high on the pre-test there was no chance for any change in a positive direction. So few parents participated that no meaningful pre- and post-test comparisons for the students on the CTBS could be made.

Teachers who participated and had assigned volunteers who showed up regularly (at the assigned time and for at least one hour) showed a significant increase in positive attitudes toward the use of classroom volunteers ($p < .05$). Teachers who had volunteers who showed up infrequently or irregularly showed no improvement from pre- to post-test measures. The small number of parents participating makes these data useless for generalizing any of the results.

After reviewing the data, the researchers tried to find out why the study was so unsuccessful. A thorough review of all interview data was made in an attempt to identify common elements that might explain the lack of parent participation.

The interviews with parents indicated almost 70% refused to participate because they thought that their children did not need remediation. Many said that their children brought home "good" grades and performed as

well as other children in the neighborhood. Most of these parents ignored, refused to believe or didn't understand the results obtained by their children on the CTBS.

Conclusions

The interview data indicated that parents in this study refused to believe objective data concerning their children's performance because the schools consistently sent information home saying that the children were doing well. The unwillingness of schools to tell parents the truth about the skills children have or have not learned is an issue here. Rural parents look to schools as a place where educated people make decisions about their children. In this study the inaccurate assessments made by the school district helped create a climate where parents refused the opportunity to help their children because the schools had repeatedly said in the form of A's and B's that the youngsters did not need remediation. If remedial programs are to work in rural areas, schools are going to have to support the program and be willing to admit to parents that their children may not be learning as much as the parents believe. Schools must take some responsibility for providing an accurate assessment of students abilities and accomplishments to parents.

References

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