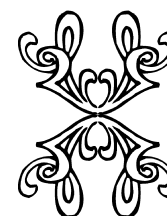


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Introduction

How the Arts Bring Parents Into Schools



The main office of a school is its public facade. It often reveals much of the school's inner workings, including its physical setting, the kinds of teaching and learning that take place, and the resources that are available to students. It may also be a key to the school's culture, a set of deeply embedded worldviews, beliefs, and values that guide the school and silently constrain all of its actions.

School cultures are not all the same. They vary across many dimensions. A pair of vignettes illustrates two particularly stark differences.

A VISIT TO TWO SCHOOLS

Maria has relocated to a new city and is visiting a couple of schools in order to select one for her daughter. Her first stop is at High Standards Elementary. She has heard that it has a good reputation for academics and fights to keep the test scores up. It is a disciplined, no-nonsense school that the principal runs with a laserlike focus on literacy and math.

When Maria arrives at the front office she has to wait behind a group of parents talking with the receptionist, who seems to be struggling to help the parents understand something about standards or assessments. Maria looks at the other office staff hopefully, but they all seem busy with administrative tasks. While she waits, she has time to make some observations.

The walls of the office are relatively sparse. No art, student work, or anything else indicates this place is about kids. Other than the discussion among the parents and the receptionist, there is little sound. Once, though, the intercom interrupts the quiet with an announcement that test results are due.

2 BUILDING PARENT INVOLVEMENT THROUGH THE ARTS

Finally Maria gets some attention. But the receptionist at first seems surprised that she would want to tour the school. After a few minutes she agrees to get someone to show her around.

Maria peers into a few of the classrooms. The kids are mostly doing seat work at their desks. The walls of the classrooms have relatively little student work on display. Occasionally she sees children walking from one room to another, evidently focused on their schoolwork, not smiling or talking. She is shown the library, the cafeteria, and the playground—which are largely empty of children except for those busy with assignments. Maria asks about art facilities, such as a music room. The guide replies that they have little time for such programs anymore. Moments later, Maria drives away, mentally striking this school off her list.

The next day, Maria goes out to Wide Horizons Academy, an alternative school a mile away from High Standards. Halfway through the office door, she receives the smiles of several people behind the desk. One of them summons the assistant principal, and introductions and welcomes quickly ensue. “Perhaps you’d like to tour our school . . . We usually start with the parent center,” she’s told.

For the next hour, Maria is amazed at what she sees. Everywhere, students are engaged in schoolwork that is clearly exciting and occasionally even noisy. The classrooms are splashed with color and art. Outside, there are gardens and natural areas where the teachers involve the students in science experiments. The sounds of children singing come from a music practice room.

The big surprise is that parents are everywhere. They assist as aides and tutors in the classrooms. She sees them in the art room, helping with a mural and serving as co-curators for an exhibition of student work being hung in the hall. They are in the cafeteria at lunchtime eating with the students. Some of them help students tend the garden or recycle. In the parent center, they help plan curricular activities and discuss assessment results. At length, the tour winds back to the office, where the assistant principal asks Maria, “So do you think you might want to send your daughter here?”

“Absolutely,” Maria beams. “And I want to come, too.”

THE WELCOMING SCHOOL

This story, though fictional, distils much of what is known about the public personae of schools. Almost everyone has probably gone into the first type of school and waited for acknowledgment. For some parents, moreover, such discomfort may bring back their own childhood memories of the school office as a place they would never want to have to go. All too often, what happens in the offices of today perpetuates this foreboding memory.

But a welcoming school is different. In such a school, the front office is a gathering place where visitors are greeted with eagerness rather than suspicion, find smiles rather than exasperated sighs, and see abundant student artwork and other evidence that children—and by inference, their parents—are valued there.

What explains the difference between these two types of schools? Both are in middle-class, suburban neighborhoods with no great disparities in funding. Both are in reasonably good buildings. But as we examine the differences, we find that the schools diverge most widely on two indisputable dimensions: *parent involvement* and *the arts*.

THE ROLE OF THE ARTS

In what ways are these two variables connected? Does the presence of the arts cause parents to become more involved in their children's schools? Does the active participation of parents lead to a greater presence of the arts? Or do both of these conditions stem from some third cause?

For me, the answer to these questions emerged on an evening a decade ago, when I observed an event at Brent Elementary, an inner-city Washington, DC, public school whose students were predominantly African American. This school was part of the Smithsonian Institution's Museum Magnet School Program, and this event was not the usual parents' night but the opening reception of a schoolwide museum exhibition built entirely by the hands and talents of students.

Entering the building, I had the immediate impression that this was no longer a school in the ordinary sense. Every classroom, every square foot of the halls, every space in the cafeteria was filled with objects. All of them were made by the students: pyramids, mummies, masks, images of Egyptian deities, Nile boats, flowers, papyrus, obelisks, objects for writing—visual testaments to the various things they had learned about the history and culture of ancient Egypt over three months of integrated study, jointly led by their own classroom teachers and Smithsonian curators and educators.

Already many parents had arrived. They moved eagerly from one room to the next, engaging the children, talking with them, complimenting them on their work. Teachers stood by their students and drank in the praise. Students were involved in every area of the school, conducting parents on tours, talking about objects, giving demonstrations, being curators themselves, participating in living history.

The extraordinary scene itself, the Egyptology displays, and the students seemed to melt into the background, and one thing stood out: the excitement—sensuous, palpable, and pulsing—of parents in the midst of a collective realization of the potential of their children for creativity, achievement, and success. For many, it was the first time.

From this scene the realization came to me: *the arts make student learning visible*. And the visibility attracts parents. Moreover, the effect seems remarkably consistent across regions, cultures, and peoples. The proud parents at the Smithsonian school were mostly African American. But Latino parents in California, Native American parents in Washington state, suburban parents in Idaho, and rural Mormon parents in Arizona all felt the same surge of pride in their children and the intensified connection with their children's schools when the arts came powerfully into play as the catalysts.

4 BUILDING PARENT INVOLVEMENT THROUGH THE ARTS

Research confirms that community-based arts and cultural resources and programs can enhance parent involvement. A number of mechanisms help make this happen. For example, arts programs often culminate in public performances or exhibitions to which parents are invited. Arts projects provide ways for communicating the achievement of standards and assessment results in ways that parents can understand. Large, interdisciplinary projects can involve entire communities. Folklore and local history can provide powerful ways for schools to connect with family and community members. Cultural organizations frequently have deep community connections—especially those that represent specific cultural groups with long traditions, such as a local Hispanic or African American cultural center. And the list goes on.

HOW THE ARTS CREATE WELCOMING SCHOOLS

So a strong relationship connects the arts and parent involvement. Ironically, most of the official programs that seek to involve parents approach the problem from the standpoint that parents understand schooling and want to be there except for obstacles in their own lives, such as conflicts with work. This book takes a different approach, based on the belief that schools can be inherently welcoming or unwelcoming, depending on how they approach the following conditions:

1. Standards-based education, dry and stultified by the bureaucratic language in which it is framed, can be mystifying to laypersons.
2. Parents often find schools unfriendly and unwelcoming.
3. Some parents, especially in traditional minority cultures, perceive schools as off-limits, where expert teachers are beyond question.
4. Minority cultures see themselves as marginalized and less central to the school's work.

Here are some ways that the arts can help rectify these conditions:

1. Standards-based education can come alive when expressed in accessible language and illuminated via student work, including writing, visual art projects, and performances.
2. Schools can create atmospheres that are friendly and enjoyable, where student work is continuously celebrated.
3. Parents can be invited to see schools as places where they have a role in initiating ideas and planning.
4. All cultures can be valued as important in the school.

In short, parent involvement and the arts and culture are linked. The arts can even invite parents to become involved with other subject areas. So it is

beyond merely important—rather, it is essential—that schools learn to tap this important power.

THE MANY ROLES OF PARENTS

As a prerequisite to integrating families into the vital daily life of schools, it is important to fully understand how parents impact their children's learning when they are fully engaged and how they often fail to have much effect when they are not.

If parents or family members are actively engaged in and committed to their children's schools, the schools are better places and the students perform better academically. Ample evidence supports this point. When parents come to school and demonstrate interest in what their children are doing, they signal to the students that the hours they spend in school and the work that occupies their time there are important and to be valued. Moreover, this interaction has a reciprocal effect on parents. By gaining a clearer idea of what schools and teachers are trying to do, they become better partners in the educational enterprise and provide better support at home. Last, parents as volunteers provide invaluable extra resources—both in time and energy—that would not otherwise be available to hard-pressed schools.

PARENTS AND BETTER SCHOOLS

Research has established a strong correlation between parent engagement and school quality. The U.S. Department of Education and the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory provide annotated bibliographies and sources on the connection between parents and several indicators of school effectiveness; both are available via the Web. Briefly, some of these effects may be summarized as follows:

- Student achievement and students' attitudes toward school and learning improve.
- Student attendance increases, along with a concomitant reduction in discipline problems.
- Students appear to develop higher aspirations for their schoolwork.
- Parents develop deeper understandings of what their children are being taught.
- Parents express a greater obligation to help their children with homework.
- Parents are more positive about the interpersonal skills of their students' teachers.
- Parents rate their students' teachers higher in overall teaching ability and their schools higher in overall quality.
- These effects take place irrespective of socioeconomic status. (North Central Educational Laboratory, 2006)

6 BUILDING PARENT INVOLVEMENT THROUGH THE ARTS

Narrowing our focus a little, we can see from the research that parents play an enormous role in their children's success in school. For example, Bransford, Brown, and Cocking (2000) note the following:

Learner-centered environments attempt to help students make connections between their previous knowledge and their current academic tasks. Parents are especially good at helping their children make connections. Teachers have a harder time because they do not share the life experiences of each of their students. (p. 153)

GETTING TO KNOW PARENTS

Many channels, formal and informal, exist for learning more about parents. NCLB and the various state and district plans that it has fostered require parent participation in school governance. School site councils and parent-teacher organizations are other formal channels. So a clear mandate exists for schools in this area.

Extensive research has revealed six broad dimensions of parent involvement, which Epstein and her colleagues (2002) summarized in the following framework:

Type 1: Parenting. Helping parents to provide supportive home environments

Type 2: Communicating. Ensuring adequate communication between home and school

Type 3: Volunteering. Recruiting parents to help and support in the school

Type 4: Learning at Home. Supporting the role of parents as helpers in students' homework and projects

Type 5: Decision Making. Including parents in the school's decision-making processes

Type 6: Collaborating With the Community. Integrating community resources to support learning

The arts, however, go beyond this typology in two vital ways. They help fuse the often disparate cultures of the school and its communities and the families that live in them, and they can provide active roles for family members as tradition bearers and community-based educators in a wide variety of projects and lessons. This latter role reflects Type 6 but transcends it by assigning a place of honor to families for what they understand, know, and can do.

It is *not* a position of *Building Parent Involvement* that parents should take on the role of the classroom teacher. The well-recognized expectation that certificated teachers have the legal and rightful role of educating children finds ample support here. However, a prominent role remains for parents as guest artists or demonstrators of traditional knowledge, as in Chapter 8. In such circumstances the teacher lets go for a time and allows someone else the central role

in the classroom, perhaps becoming a learner along with her students. This should not compromise a teacher's adherence to the legal mandate to meet standards. Effective instruction, especially at the highest levels, involves more than the delivery of content. It includes the skillful interweaving of various resources and sources of expertise—the teacher's own and that of others—into a thoughtful, engaging lesson.

Each of the above types or dimensions presents different challenges and opportunities (Epstein et al., 2002). In *Building Parent Involvement*, you can discover a variety of ways to engage parents that encompass each of these types. Perhaps one of the best ways is to learn more about your students' parents. Who are they? What do they do? What do they know and understand? What traditions, ideas, and cultural artifacts do they value? Chapters 3 through 8 help to answer such questions by weaving active parent roles into projects and lessons while offering extensive opportunities for volunteering and learning at home. Moreover, Chapter 8 includes several lessons that can provide firsthand experience with the many traditional arts that are practiced by people on a daily basis. Many of the chapters, especially Chapters 10 and 11, provide ways of involving parents in planning arts-based programs and spaces.

But before all this, it is important to understand that the arts have intrinsic value to schools, both to the learning that takes place there and the spaces in which it takes place. Chapter 2 briefly reviews what we know about these important connections.