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Erin McNamara Horvat

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IV. The Personalized Learning Community: Teachers, Students, and Families



Preparing Educators to Engage Parents and Families

Erin McNamara Horvat

Although the relationship between parents and educators has often been characterized as oppositional and political (Cutler, 2000; Horvat, Weininger, & Lareau, 2003; Lareau, 2000; Lightfoot, 2004), significant evidence points to the importance of this relationship in creating strong school communities and improving learning outcomes for students. Although barriers to strong home–school relationships have always existed, recent developments—such as technology’s use in learning, the changing curriculum, and increased pressures for parents—have created new barriers to effective parent–educator relationships that support student learning. In addition, class, race, and language barriers present special challenges to creating and sustaining these relationships. It is increasingly important for educators to have the knowledge and skill to engage parents.

Teacher preparation programs have typically not systematically addressed home–school relationships despite the importance of this topic in improving student outcomes. The advent and expansion of personalized learning—that is, efforts to attend to the pacing, preferences, and interests of the learner—bring both challenges and opportunities to efforts to improve home–school relationships. Personalized learning can, at times, contribute to the barriers between educators and parents. However, a personalized learning approach that puts the learning preferences and interests of the learner first may also provide a path forward toward the reduction of barriers and the creation of effective home–school relationships. This chapter explores the intersection of home–school relationships and personalized learning. It explores the power of personalized learning to better meet all students’ needs and the challenges to equitably implementing personalized learning given the vast differences among students and the capacity of educators to meaningfully connect with students and families.

Definitional and Conceptual Differences

Ample evidence (Epstein, 2001/2011; Fan & Chen, 2001; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Wilder, 2014) suggests that students of all ages benefit from strong relationships between the school and the family. Yet educators, researchers, and parents may have very different

definitions of what is meant by a home–school connection (Smith, Wohlstetter, Kuzin, & De Pedro, 2011; Wilder, 2014). Sorting out this definitional confusion is a critical first step in efforts to promote the creation of effective home–school relationships.

The literature is rife with a variety of terms that refer to home–school connections or some aspect of this relationship. The terms include *parent involvement*, *family involvement*, *teacher–family partnerships*, *parent–school relationship*, *parental engagement*, and *school–family partnerships*. These terms are often used interchangeably, yet they may mean very different things to the stakeholders involved.

Although some may intend *parent* to denote any adult who supports the student’s school experience but who is not associated with the school community, the use of the terms *parent involvement* or *parent engagement* does not signal an understanding of the wider community influences that can support or impede student success. Indeed, the use of *parent* instead of *home* or *family* may reveal a lack of understanding of the important role that the extended family plays in students’ lives and may signal a preference for the traditional nuclear family. So, although it may seem to be an insignificant distinction, a person’s selection of terms used to describe the actors involved in creating and sustaining a relationship that supports student learning in home and school contexts is critical. Using the more inclusive *family* or *home* indicates an inclusive approach to creating and sustaining relationships that support student achievement.

Although involvement signals that family members may be involved with the school when needed, engagement implies deeper, more reciprocal relationships.

Likewise, the choice between using *engagement* or *involvement* may appear to be inconsequential on the surface. Yet these two terms can signal vastly different approaches to the home–school relationship. Although involvement signals that family members may be involved with the school when needed, *engagement* implies deeper, more reciprocal relationships (Smith et al., 2011). Likewise, use of the term *partnership* signals a particular orientation to the work of engaging families with the educational process.

Effective Family Engagement With Schools: Possibilities and Barriers

As noted at the outset of this chapter, historically, relations between home and school have been contentious. Although schools have for many years now understood the need to create and develop strong ties to the home—whether they are aimed at engaging parents, building partnerships, or seeking involvement—educators generally prefer to be the experts in control of these relationships. As Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, and Davies (2007) observe, schools vary in how they construct their relationships with parents. Some schools, typically those with weaker ties to parents and the community, simply want parents to come if called—to remain available to respond to the needs of the school when they are voiced, but other schools endeavor to engage in a true reciprocal partnership that provides opportunities for authentic family engagement (Auerbach, 2010). These varying approaches to the home–school relationship are often reflected in the different terminology used.

Research points to the effectiveness of reciprocal relationships between home and school (Epstein, 2001/2011; Hiatt-Michael, 2006; Horvat, 2011; Weiss, Bouffard, Bridglall, & Gordon, 2009). Whereas Epstein (2001/2011) describes the ideal approach as one that recognizes the “overlapping spheres of influence,” Weiss and colleagues

advocate “co-constructed shared responsibility.” Also, research highlights the importance of school agents (teachers, counselors, nurses, administrators, and aides) taking the lead in developing and maintaining these relationships and holding themselves accountable for doing so (Lopez, Scribner, & Mahitivanichcha, 2001). This notion of reciprocity and the trust that is developed in reciprocal relationships are critical ideas for educators seeking to enhance their relationships with students and their families.

Myriad barriers exist for the development and maintenance of strong home–school ties. Ample research has provided insight into the ways that race, ethnicity, and social class can influence relationships between home and school. It is clear that some families are more well-positioned than others to connect with schools and have a positive influence on students’ careers.

Social class has been implicated in influencing home–school relationships. Schools are middle-class places that value specific kinds of class-appropriate involvement from parents (Lareau & Horvat, 1999). Middle-class parents are better able to understand and meet the often implicit expectations for involvement held by teachers and school administrators. Working-class parents are more likely to view the school as separate from their own world and are more inclined to defer to the expertise of teachers (Crozier, 1999; Horvat et al., 2003; Lareau, 2000). They are also less well-prepared to meet the demands of educators for involvement. These fundamental class differences between parents’ orientation towards schools influence both the ways that parents engage with the school and the ways that they respond to implicit and explicit expectations for involvement from schools. These differences in how parents of varying social class backgrounds are oriented towards their children’s schools and the differing ways that they interact with schools represent a significant barrier for schools to overcome. While middle-class parents are generally more highly attuned to the requests of educators for involvement and in a better position to support their children in school, it can be challenging for educators to effectively engage or partner with working-class parents. Finding ways to bridge the distance between the school and working-class and poor parents and effectively engage all parents continues to be a struggle for teachers and administrators.

Likewise, race and ethnicity create differences and distance that must be bridged in order to create strong home–school connections. One of the challenges facing public schools is an increasingly homogeneous work force that is primarily White and increasingly conservative. Attracting quality candidates of color to the educational workforce has proved challenging. As our society becomes increasingly diverse, this mismatch between the cultural and racial/ethnic backgrounds of teachers and students must be addressed. Although linguistic differences create an obvious communication challenge, different cultural expectations regarding schooling and the appropriate role for families, students, and teachers create a different set of barriers that are equally challenging to overcome (Crozier & Davies, 2007; Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Lopez et al., 2001). Overcoming these barriers is critical to effective home–school relationships.

Some recent developments have exacerbated these preexisting barriers to effective home–school relationships (Horvat & Baugh, 2015). As schools have embedded technology into every aspect of what they do, the digital divide that runs along class and race lines has influenced the capacity of some families to effectively support student learning. Although the capacity for technology to overcome barriers to access is significant—including, for instance, the use of student information systems, email, chat,

teleconferencing, and classroom blogs—challenges to effective use of technology exist both in the school as well as in the home. In the home, low-income parents often have trouble acquiring the necessary resources to effectively use technology and support their children in school. For instance, access to a reliable and sufficiently powerful Internet connection paired with appropriate technology is critical to student learning at home and parent capacity to connect with the school, yet 31% of families making below \$50,000 a year do not have broadband access (Horrigan, 2015). In addition, many schools have yet to adopt systematic, culturally relevant training for teachers and parents that would enable them to effectively use technology to track student progress and communicate (Children’s Partnership, 2010). To close the technology gap, schools need to integrate technology and train teachers. Families need to have appropriate resources such as high-speed Internet access and computers/mobile devices as well as relevant training on their use that takes into account linguistic and cultural barriers. When these basic prerequisites are met, technology can be used to effectively enhance the student experience and better connect families with schools (Children’s Partnership, 2010).

In addition to the escalating demands on schools and parents introduced by expanding technology use in schools, other recent changes have increased pressure also. As the Common Core State Standards and other high-stakes assessments have brought increased pressure to bear on educators, parents have been confronted with supporting the new ways schools deliver content and supporting educators and students in meeting new accountability demands. Additionally, school choice has raised the stakes for parents and further complicated the home–school relationship. The relationship between home and school has become strained by the twin pressures of choice and accountability. As pressure has increased on parents to choose a “good” school for their children and schools are being held accountable for showing increases on high-stakes assessments, the differences between parents who can respond to these new demands and those who cannot become visible and significant, further exacerbating the class differences among parents and complicating the home–school relationship.

Research Synthesis: The Promise of Personalized Learning for Home–School Connections

Dewey (1938/1997) long ago argued that educators must take account of their students’ past experiences. Extending this argument to encompass present day realities, it is reasonable to suggest that educators who desire to be successful in personalizing learning for students ought to consider the context of their students’ learning, including the influences from the home. The idea that teachers should understand their students’ home environments is not new. Teachers have been doing home visits for years. However, as teaching becomes more of a commuting profession, in which the teacher does not reside in the community where he or she teaches but commutes to his or her job, taking time to know and understand the students and the context in which the students live takes on added importance, especially when trying to personalize student learning. This is especially important in low-income and urban areas, where teachers are far less likely to live in the community where they teach, situations in which teachers’ day-to-day lived experiences in their own neighborhoods are markedly different from those of their students.

As educators strive to take into account their students’ lived realities, developing an understanding of the home environment is a critical first step. As is warranted by the

tenets of personalized learning, an educator should strive to understand a student's learning preferences and interests, which can often be best understood by understanding the home environment.

In thinking about how teachers can come to understand their students' lives, the work of Luis Moll and the concept of *funds of knowledge* is especially helpful. Moll and colleagues (Gonzales et al., 1995; Moll & Arnot-Hoppfer 2005; Rios-Aguilar, Kiyama, Gravitt, & Moll, 2011) built an approach to family involvement in schools that goes beyond a simple awareness of difference and provides educators with both the motivation and tools to understand their students more deeply and incorporate this understanding into instructional

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practices. Although a critical first step for teachers is to recognize and move away from a deficit-based approach to understating their students, the funds of knowledge approach is based on the notions of *confianza*, *reciprocity*, and *assets*. *Confianza*, the concept of mutual trust, is especially useful. Moll and colleagues argue that this trust is “reestablished or confirmed with each exchange” and leads to the development of long-term relationships (Gonzales et al., 1995, p. 447). Furthermore, these exchanges provide places and moments where and when learning can take place.

Moll and colleagues argued that educators must develop sociocultural competence in order to work effectively with diverse populations. This sociocultural competence is based on the understanding that all students have “historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills” (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzales, 1992, p. 133) that support their households and individual well-being—or funds of knowledge. This notion that students come to school with culture and funds of knowledge that spring from their lived experience is a critical part of developing cultural competence for teachers (Yosso, 2005). Teachers need not, nor is it possible to, be conversant with all possible cultural backgrounds. However, in order to work well with students from diverse backgrounds, teachers must “develop a critical awareness” (Saathoff, 2015, p. 36) of the ways that culture can be used to distance students from school or, conversely, the ways teachers can tap into students' cultural backgrounds and use them as resources for connecting and understanding one another. Developing this “critical awareness” of the important role culture plays is a key first step.

Once a teacher has developed sociocultural competence—a critical awareness of the role of culture in classrooms and schools generally—it is then possible to implement practices that enable that teacher to develop relationships with students that go beyond the confines of the classroom. When a teacher develops a reciprocal relationship with the student and family that extends beyond the boundaries of the classroom and values the context in which the student lives, a sense of “serious obligations based on the assumption of *confianza* (mutual trust)” (Gonzales et al., 1995, p. 447) can be established. Moll and colleagues (1992) argue that in this environment of trust and reciprocity, the teacher is able to see the student as a whole person, from an asset perspective, rather than as simply a student in the classroom. Such knowledge is critical to crafting a personalized learning agenda with the student and having the capacity to enlist the family in support of this learning.

It is widely recognized that “no ‘one size fits all’ when it comes to shaping effective family involvement plans” (Knopf & Swick, 2008, p. 421). Effective approaches to improving connections with families include a consideration of accessibility, supports for involvement, and multiple opportunities for families to use their talents and strengths in support of their students (Knopf & Swick, 2008). Thus, the research provides a strong basis for building the capacity of educators to effectively engage families in an environment of trust and reciprocity that values the assets in the home.

Following Wolf (2010), Redding (2014) observes that personalized learning requires the role of the teacher to be redefined. In personalized learning, the teacher is responsible for co-constructing the learning with the student and traveling with the student to understand the pacing, learning preferences, and interests of the student. Moreover, the learning is authentic and project-based—both aspects that are enhanced by an in-depth working knowledge of the student’s lived reality.

The role of technology is critical in personalized learning and connecting with parents. Although technology is crucial to the anytime, everywhere nature of personalized learning, the heavy reliance on technology to deliver a personalized education can also prove to be a barrier. In addition to the problematic access imposed by low income, discussed above, the adults in students’ lives may have differential experience and comfort with technology. This means that some students will have adults capable of helping them with the technology or with learning that is powered by technology, but other students will be the technology expert in their homes and will not have the support of knowledgeable adults. Thus, although technology is a critical component to the power of personalized learning and is the key driver in building the capacity of educators to engage parents and personalize learning, not all students and their families are equally equipped to benefit.

Preparing Teachers to Engage Families in the Era of Personalized Learning

Although research in the field affirms that creating strong connections between home and school benefits students and that educators must take the lead in building reciprocal trusting relationships with families, current models of teacher training devote little attention to these topics. Despite this lack of attention to the home–family connection in general and to the importance of strong sociocultural competence and home–school connection as they relate to personalized learning in particular, some practices are in place at schools and colleges of education that may improve the capacity of educators to effectively engage parents and other family members.

Internationally recognized authority on home–school–community engagement, J. L. Epstein (2013) notes, “Everyone knows *that* family and community engagement is important” (p. 115), but we have yet to systematically teach future educators *how* to effectively engage families. Teacher education candidates receive precious little training on how to effectively communicate with and engage families. Indeed, teacher education candidates want more training in this area (Ferrera & Ferrar, 2005; Hiatt-Michael, 2008). This training is especially critical for new teachers in high-poverty areas that are culturally dissimilar from their own backgrounds.

A recent study of current teacher education programs (Miller, Lines, Sullivan, & Hermanutz, 2013) found that, by and large, training on family–school partnering issues are infused into other coursework. Although students and faculty believe that developing sociocultural competence is important and believe more training in effectively engaging

family members with school is critical, there is a “belief to practice gap” (Miller et al., 2013). That is, while students and faculty believe that engaging parents and other adults is critical, training for teachers in how to actually implement this into their pedagogical practice is insufficient. This is complicated by the demands of state licensure and new curricular demands, such as the Common Core State Standards, that do not recognize the need to actively teach these skills and sensibilities to new teachers. Despite this “belief to practice gap,” some practices have proven effective.

Although some programs are attempting to infuse the requisite skills and training into existing curricula, other programs are meeting the issue head on. Rutgers University’s Urban Teacher Fellows program expands the traditional one-semester teaching internship into a three-semester teaching residency. In addition, the program offers specialized course offerings focusing specifically on urban teaching. The program culminates with fellows returning to their schools to “run Youth in Action, an after-school enrichment program that trains youth to conduct civic action research in their schools and communities” (Rutgers University, Graduate School of Education, 2015). This program places preservice teachers in schools early in their training and sustains that involvement over time. In addition, it actively supports the conceptualization of students as active participants in their own learning and values the contributions they bring. Rather than tacking on family–school engagement, the concept is embedded in the program and enacts best principles by taking an asset-based reciprocal approach that values the skills and talents of members of the community.

Other programs have adopted less intensive practices that appear to help preservice teachers connect with families. Mehlig and Shumow (2013) found that preservice teachers who participated in teacher–parent role-playing scenarios gained more knowledge about how to connect with parents than students who did not participate. Another curricular approach that holds promise is service learning, which provides opportunities for preservice students to engage with the community surrounding them (Baker & Murray, 2011). Although these student teachers may not ultimately teach in these schools, they gain valuable knowledge about how to connect with parents and others and practice how to do so.

As educational anthropologist Gloria Ladson-Billings (2006) suggests, teacher education programs need to teach preservice teachers how to build critical cultural competence that begins with their awareness of their own culture and the recognition of the important role culture plays in the lives of their students. Further, Ladson-Billings argues that teachers need to develop opportunities to relate to students in non-classroom settings, such as community centers, sports teams, arts organizations, and so forth. Lastly, Ladson-Billings argues that teachers need to be exposed to a global perspective and become aware of the differences among schools around the world. Further research is warranted to determine how best to prepare and support teachers through ongoing professional development for the important work of engaging parents. However, it is clear that the development of a cultural awareness is key to preparing teachers to engage diverse populations.

Conclusion

Personalized learning presents both vast possibilities and significant challenges for educators. As a result of technological advances, the capacity for educators to tailor learning to best match and maximize each student’s learning has never been greater. Yet this

potential also highlights the inequalities inherent in our current system. One of the most important and glaring of these inequalities is the varying capacity of parents and others in the home to support students in school. This is matched only by the varying degree to which educators are prepared to meet parents and others on their own terms and engage them in their student's learning. Although there is a clear consensus as to the importance of the home-school connection in supporting learning and achievement, the field has yet to systematically address the home-school connection in teacher training or regular, mandated professional development for teachers and other school staff—counselors, nurses, administrators, and aides. Effectively addressing the home-school connection in the years ahead in an environment where personalized learning is taking hold will require attention to the training and development of educators and an expanding capacity to effectively engage parents and others in the home as partners.

Action Principles for States, Districts, and Schools

Action Principles for States

- a. Ensure technology is not a barrier to personalized learning for all students. Develop the capacity to advance a technology access agenda in schools with laptop programs and broker Internet access for families.
- b. Ensure public spaces (e.g. libraries, community centers, after-school programs) have access to adequate technology. As technology becomes more important, it is critical that our public spaces that serve low-income families provide sufficient access to these resources.
- c. Broker partnerships with the private sector to provide adequate connectivity to low-income families. Private sector companies in some areas provide low- or no-cost Internet access to low-income families.
- d. Showcase districts and schools that display high levels of sociocultural competence and connection with students' families. There are some excellent examples in the field that should be highlighted and that could provide useful examples to struggling districts.
- e. Work with teacher training programs to ensure that family-school engagement competencies are included in curricula. Through targeted policies, state agencies can require the development of curricula to address this important issue.

Action Principles for Districts

- a. Work with feeder teacher training programs to build sociocultural competence into the curriculum. The importance of working collaboratively with teacher training programs is greater in an environment with greater differentiation, such as personalized learning.
- b. Work with feeder teacher training programs to build in training aimed at developing strong communication and connection skills with families and homes of the students. Identify the essential components of high-quality communication and connection strategies for family outreach.
- c. Develop a set of core competencies concerning teacher sociocultural competence and clearly delineate the activities school staff members need to perform to connect effectively with families, such as home visits, attending community events, and working with children and youth outside of school settings.

- d. Work with leadership and administration training programs to ensure attention to families is a part of the curricula. Attention to the family–school connection needs to start at the top and be integrated into all levels of schools’ staff training.
- e. Provide ongoing training and professional development aimed at administrators to assist them in developing their own competence in home–school relations (cultural awareness, sociocultural competence) and develop capacity among their staff. Providing effective training to school leaders will improve their capacity to implement similar training for staff.

Action Principles for Schools

- a. Provide induction training for teachers that addresses sociocultural competence. Starting new teachers off on the right foot with background on sociocultural competence is critically important.
- b. Provide induction training that targets teachers’ capacity to effectively engage parents and families. Starting new teachers off on the right foot with background on parent and family engagement is critically important.
- c. Provide ongoing professional development training for teachers on the home–school connection. Continued attention to the home–school connection will improve the capacity of school staff to effectively engage families.
- d. Provide relevant, ongoing professional development for nonteaching school staff on the home–school connection. All levels of school staff need to understand the critical importance of the family–school connection.

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