

HOW DO JAPANESE SCHOOLS PROMOTE PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT?

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Abstract

This study describes the different practices in Japanese elementary and junior high schools aimed at forging partnerships between teachers and parents and among parents through parental involvement. The different types of parental involvement are arranged following Greenwood and Hickman's typology (1991) namely, parents as audience, volunteers, paraprofessionals, teachers, learners, and decision makers. Additionally, two other types of parental roles—parents as partners of teachers and other parents—are identified. The data for this paper were drawn from the author's limited participant observation in Japanese schools as part of a larger doctoral study on educational outcomes and experiences of bicultural children in Japan. This paper aims to contribute to the different approaches in understanding parental involvement.

Key Words: *Parental Involvement, School-Parent Relationship, Japanese Schools*

JEL Classification: I00

1. INTRODUCTION

Parental involvement is an important area of research in educational sociology because of its significance to social capital discourses and its positive impacts on children. It is, by itself, a social relation involving teachers, parents, and students where actors function according to their own expectations, familial and social norms, and personal and social obligations. Parental presence has positive impacts on children such as improved academic performance (Lee & Bowen, 2006) and positive outlook on education (Buchel and Duncan, 1998). Besides academic outcomes, parental involvement is also associated with low incidence of behavioral problems among elementary school children (Domina, 2005: 245).

Given its positive impacts on children, parental involvement may need to be integrated in teacher's education whether "as a separate course or infused throughout the entire teacher education program" (Greenwood and Hickman, 1991:286). Parental involvement, according to Greenwood and Hickman (1991:280), affects teachers' roles. In Becker's and Epstein's study (1982:88), teachers "believed that parental involvement at home could be an important contributor toward achieving the goals they have set for themselves and for their students." Therefore, if "there is a strong relationship between teacher's and family member's contribution to children's education" (Smith, 2000:711), then it is imperative for teachers and school personnel to enhance their strategies for promoting parental presence.

Parental involvement is a broad term and can be looked at in many ways. For Epstein (1992:235), parental involvement includes keeping children safe, attending children's activities (see also Scribner, Young, & Pedroza: 1999), and collaborating with community organizations for the purpose of addressing the educational needs of children. Parental involvement can also mean the "actual or perceived expectations for performance, verbal encouragement or interactions regarding homework, direct reinforcement for academic improvement, and general academic guidance and support" (Keith et al., 1986).

Some scholars categorized parental participation in terms of the home (e.g. home discussion) and school (e.g. school participation) environments (Siu-chu, 1995). Others (e.g. Greenwood and Hickman, 1991) examined it in terms of roles. Gordon (1977 in Greenwood and Hickman, 1991) proposed three different models in understanding parental involvement namely, parent impact (impact of parents' involvement at home on children's schooling), school impact (impact of parents' involvement at school on children's schooling), and community impact (impact of parents' involvement at local community on children's schooling). Grolnick and Slowiaczek (1994) focused on the different involvements in terms of behavioral, cognitive, and personal dimensions. Griffith (1998:54) classified parental involvement researches into at-risk (students with less participative parents), descriptive (strategies of parental involvement), and outcome-based (impacts of parental involvement on children).

Is there anything to learn from Japanese schools about parental involvement? Parental involvement (*oyanokanyo* in Japanese) is said to be strong in Japan because teachers "make explicit and

exacting demands on parents” (Holloway, Yamamoto, Suzuki, and Mindnich, 2008). Parent-school relationship is viewed by Japanese teachers as a relationship that is “based on trust, deference, partnership, and cooperation” (Moorehead, 2007:7). The school influences the extent of the parents’ participation in their children’s education (Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, 1997).

How exactly is parental involvement achieved? The purpose of this paper is to highlight Japanese schools’ practices aimed at enhancing parental presence. It specifically describes how Japanese schools foster interdependence between schools/teachers and parents through parental involvement. Following the typology of parental involvement suggested by Greenwood and Hickman (1991), this paper describes the different ways by which teachers relate with parents, that is, “as audience, as volunteers, as paraprofessionals, as teachers of own child, as learners and decision makers.”

2. METHOD

Data for this paper were drawn from my visits to and limited participant observation in different schools in Oita Prefecture, Japan. I also reviewed documents and conducted informal interviews with a few selected parents. My first exposure was in an elementary school in Beppu City, Oita Prefecture from April-June and September-October 2009. I was hired as a translator for a Japanese-Filipino child and such exposure acquainted me with Japan’s primary education system. I went to the school thrice a week for a maximum of 4 hours per visit. For five months while working as a translator, I was also conducting my field work specifically at a grade three class where the said Japanese-Filipino child attended. My observations were focused on teaching styles, classroom and school environment, teacher-student interaction, and lastly the parent-teacher interaction. At various times during the period October 2009-April 2010, I also attended different school-related activities, namely an *undoukai* (sports fest), PTA meetings, *gakushuuhappyoukai* (“presentation of study”), *jogyousankan* (open school), and observed a *kateihomon* (home visit). During these activities, I particularly focused my observations on how parents and teachers interact and how schools promote parental presence both in and outside the school. Schools observed were not chosen systematically. Selection was based on the opportunities presented to the researcher by his dissertation’s case study subjects.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Japanese schools provide venues where parents serve as *audience*. One important function in Japanese schools is the *shinnyuugakujidousei* (school orientation). This is a yearly activity, usually during the month of January or February, which requires parents of incoming first graders to attend. The orientation provides them with information about school norms and policies. Another school activity is the *kyogyoukan* or open school which is usually being held at the beginning of the school year. Parents sit in on a class and listen to the teacher's lecture. When students have school tasks to accomplish, the parents may glance at their children's work.

Gakushuuhappyukai ("presentation of study") is another annual event to which parents are invited. Some schools ask their students to write poems, draw paintings, write reports or perform skits. Last March 16, 2010, I attended such event at a junior high school in Beppu City, Japan. First year high school students were asked to report about what they learned during their *hatarakuhitonimanabukai* (similar to career talk/seminar). The school invited professionals from various fields to share with the students about their work experiences in particular and their profession in general.

Schools in Japan also provide venues where parents can participate as *volunteers*. In one of the Japanese schools I visited, parents were asked to fill up a volunteer form indicating their interests, expertise, and experiences. The information gathered is used to create a "talent bank" or database containing parents' names and expertise which the school refers to when it needs the services of some parents. For example, parents gather for cooking classes and recycling activities. Some parents also volunteer as story tellers. Occasionally, parents read stories to children prior to the start of the first period classes.

Japanese schools also encourage parents to act as *paraprofessionals*. Parents in elementary schools take turns in safeguarding school children on the road (*koutsuuanzennohatamochitouban*). Between 7:00-8:00 in the morning prior to the start of the classes, parents stand at traffic corners and patrol school children as they cross the streets. When they do this, parents wear an arm band with a print "patrol". They also carry with them a small green or yellow flag (*hata*) with a print "oudanchuu" which means "now crossing". Another set of parent volunteers also patrol the streets

when children are about to leave school for home.

During summer break (from 3rd week of July to end of October), parents are expected to act as *teachers of their own children*. They are expected to help their children accomplish their summer homework. To make sure that parents monitor the activities of their children during the summer break in 2009, one of the schools I went to distributed a calendar/diary where the students were to write their daily plan for the entire 40-day break. Parents were expected to indicate their plans for their children as well. In another school, the parents were given a list of the do's and don'ts that they have to impose upon to their children during the break.

Schools in Japan also offer activities for parents. As *learners*, parents are provided with seminars to improve their own efficacy in educating and rearing their children. In one elementary school, parents are encouraged to attend skills training on various areas such as ironing, sewing, cooking, reading, etc. The school also had a seminar on the proper use of mobile phones and internet. Another school provided brochures to parents on the responsible use of mobile phone use. Schools want parents to be aware of how such technologies can negatively affect their children.

Parents in Japanese schools play pivotal role in parent-teacher associations. As *decision makers*, parents more than teachers make decisions about the affairs of the association. Activities of the PTA are often initiated by the parents and not the teachers. Disbursements of funds are decided by the parents. In Japan, PTA officers from various schools meet at either at city or prefectural level to discuss matters which are of interest to school children. Instead of teachers or school personnel acting as facilitators, parent-officers of the association preside the meeting.

In addition to those types, however, my data indicate two other important roles-- as *parents as partners of teachers and of other parents*. How are these roles different from the ones previously mentioned? These roles suggest of an "active" partnership between parents and teachers and among parents through open communication. The role of *parents as teacher's partners* in educating children is particularly evident in Japanese schools because of the open and available communication channels between teachers and parents. One school practice which forges partnership between them is *kateihomon* (home visit). This is a homeroom teacher's visit to his/her students' homes to talk with the parents about school concerns, child's talents and abilities, and

child's safety. Another communication channel available to parents and teachers is the *renrakuchou* (contact notebook). Teachers can convey messages pertaining to school events and student's performance.

The other role of parents as *partners of other parents* may be seen in the *renrakumou* or the contact network. The contact network is used when the schools need to convey information to parents regarding school-related matters over the phone. During the start of the school year, parents are already given this predetermined network-type directory containing the school children's names, their corresponding contact numbers, and chain/order of communication. *Kodomokai* (children association), a community-based group consisting of school children and parents, is another avenue where parents can interact and exchange ideas pertaining to their children's education. Organized by parents, the *kodomokai* activities include garbage recycling and camping.

4. CONCLUSION

Parental involvement, as some studies have shown, has positive impacts on the overall well being of children (Lee & Bowen, 2006; Domina, 2005; Buchel and Duncan, 1998). These positive outcomes warrant the need to look at parental involvement programs which can be very useful for replication. Schools in Japan present various activities to mobilize resources and to provide parents opportunities for involvement in their children's education. However, it is interesting to examine how parents think about parental involvement and to what extent do they participate in school and home activities in relation to children's schooling.

Greenwood and Hickman (1991) described several parental roles which this paper discussed. However, in addition to the roles they presented, I proposed two roles, parents as partners of teachers and other parents. These roles imply that parental involvement is not only limited to the parent-child-teacher but also extends to parent-parent relationships. It also suggests that parental involvement is not only limited to learning activities (e.g. parents helping children with their lessons) and school governance (e.g. decision making in the PTA), but can also include open communication between teachers and parents and among parents.

What then are the implications of the different parental roles? First, parental involvement in

children's education can be "passive" and "active" (as proposed by Siu-chu, 1995:41). Second, parental involvement strategies, especially those that are school initiated (e.g. contact network and contact notebook), mobilize social capital among parents. Third, presenting parents with specific roles is a form of "empowerment" which provides them the "ability and authority....to become actively involved in their children's education" (Siu-chu, 1995:64). Rather than simply giving them a list of tasks, it is more empowering if parents are involved in partnership roles.

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