Parental Involvement in Children’s English Language Learning

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National Reading Conference-NRC 2005
Over the past fifteen year parental involvement has played a key role in educational reform and discussed by various business, government, and educational organizations as a means for improving children’s schooling in the United States (No Child Left Behind, 2002, Reading Literacy in the United States, 1996; The National Education Goals, 1995, 1997, 2000; The Metropolitan Life Survey, 2002).
Theoretical Framework

Home-school relationships in Low-Income Communities


- The confluence of such sociocultural factors may act as barriers between parents and teachers resulting in poor communication, dissatisfaction, confusion, or misunderstanding about necessary interventions for improving children’s school-related progress.
Theoretical Framework

*Parent-teacher Conferences*

○ Parent-teacher conferences are one of the most common forms of parental involvement in the United States.

Theoretical Framework

*Parent-teacher Conferences*

- Despite its ubiquity in most schools, parent-teacher conferences are rarely studied—few research studies, abundance of opinion pieces (Baker and Keogh, 1985).
Research Questions

1. What types of information about children’s literacy activities and English language acquisition do parents and teachers discuss during parent teacher conferences?
2. What kinds of information do parents discuss about their children's home and community life?
3. When parents discuss information about their children’s home and community literacy activities, as well as English language acquisition, how do teachers respond?
4. When teachers discuss information about children’s classroom literacy activities and English language acquisition, how do parents respond?
Methodology
Shirley Avenue Elementary School (K-6) located in Rockdale (pseudonym), a small Northeastern city of 130,000 people.

The total student population consisted of 726 students, of which 567 students (78%) were from low-income families who received AFDC assistance and 538 (74%) students participated in the free breakfast and lunch program.

A Title 1 program was offered school-wide and approximately 55%-60% of the students were reading at least one year below grade level.

88 students (53%) spoke a first language other than English and a majority of these students spoke Spanish or Cape Verdean Creole (CVC) as their first language.
Participants

Three Parent-Teacher Dyads

- The subset is drawn from a larger case of five parent-teacher dyads. The findings of the subset are highlighted in this discussion because they represent exemplary cases for examining the questions under review.
- Findings from the other two dyads were similar to those found in the subset and didn’t provide new or important information.
- All of the participants were voluntary and selected using a network sampling technique (Patton, 1990)
Jackie and Stella

Jackie
Teacher Participant

- Late 20s, unmarried, and no children
- Taught 4th grade in a general education program
- Least experienced teacher volunteer with 3 years of classroom experience
- 50% of her students spoke a home language other than English.

Stella
Parent Participant

- Born in Cape Verde, married with 4 children, worked with husband as a factory worker in a medical supply company
- No formal schooling, unable to read or write in Portuguese, oral English language proficiency was limited—understood conversational English better than written text.
- Stella’s daughter, Monica, was 9 years old. Monica spoke English at school and Cape Verdean Creole at home. Monica exited from the Cape Verdean Creole bilingual program contrary to her classroom teacher’s recommendation. Stella withdrew Monica from the bilingual program because she thought her daughter would learn English at a faster pace.
Veronica and Joanna

Joanna
Teacher Participant

- In her early 40s, married with two teenage children
- Fourth grade, Spanish-speaking bilingual teacher with 12 years of experience working in ESL and Spanish-speaking bilingual programs.
- Served in the Peace Corps for a 2 year period in Columbia where she met her husband a native of Columbia

Veronica
Parent Participant

- In her late 20s, born in El Salvador, divorced with four children, lived in the United States for 10 years, and worked as a custodian.
- Prior to gaining employment she had attended a family literacy program at her children’s school over a six week period.
- English language skills were not as developed as her Spanish language skills and preferred to speak Spanish when possible.
- Her son, Juan, was a student in Joanna’s fourth grade Spanish-speaking bilingual class.
Darlene and Juana

**Darlene**
**Teacher Participant**
- In her late 40s, married, had one son, and first language was English.
- 24 years of experience teaching in ESL and Spanish-speaking bilingual programs.
- Taught third grade in a Spanish-speaking bilingual program.
- Traveled frequently to Europe and South America to immerse herself in the Spanish language and to learn more about Hispanic culture.

**Juana**
**Parent Participant**
- In her late 20s, born in Panama, married with 3 children, was a homemaker, and lived in the United States for five years.
- Dropped out of school in the 11th grade to marry her husband who was a data entry technician.
- English language proficiency was limited. She spoke and understood conversational English, but preferred to speak Spanish.
- Her son, Miguel, was born in Panama, 8 years old and spoke English at school, but Spanish at home. Scheduled to transfer out of the bilingual program at the end of the school year.
Data Sources

- Pre- and Post-Conference Interviews
- Two Conference Sessions
- Monthly Parent-Contact Record
- Samples of the focal children’s classroom work, report card grades, test results on a norm-referenced reading test
- Classroom observations noted in self-memoranda
- Data collected over two semesters of a traditional school year (20 wks. Each)
- Participant-observer
Data Analysis

*Transcript Data*

*Structural & Theoretical Analysis*

- Topics, topic shifts, and speaker’s turns; number and type (Brown and Yule, 1983)
- Institutional discourse (Agar, 1985).
- Other discourse actions, such as explaining, reporting, or inquiring
- Social aspects of Discourse (Gee, 1990).
Data Analysis

- All of the data sources were coded to reduce, integrate, and interpret thematic patterns as discussed by Strauss, 1987; Edwards and Lambert, 1993; Miles and Huberman, 1994.
Findings
Jackie and Stella
Teacher-expert & Parent-client

Patterns of Institutional Discourse
Static Talk

Jackie: Teacher Expert

- Diagnosed Monica's literacy progress, provided directives, and summarized information
- Topics were confined to classroom-based literacy and English language acquisition
- Discourse actions were limited to reporting or reiterating information about classroom learning.
- Rarely asked Stella questions about Monica's literacy and English language usage at home and/or in the community.
- Provided few follow-up comments and/or little elaboration after Stella's statements or topics.

Stella: Parent-client

- Unfamiliarity with aspects of school-related literacy activities
- Deferred to Jackie's knowledge about Monica's literacy progress and English language acquisition
- Reliance on Jackie's topics for anchoring the discussion
- Little elaboration on Jackie's directives for improving Monica's progress
- Low incidence of discussions about Monica's home and/or community literacy and language uses
- Reliance on school contacts to be initiated by Jackie
Jackie and Stella  
*First Parent-teacher Conference*  
*Transcript Fragment-I*  
*Institutional Discourse-Static Talk*

(1) J: Okay, ah Monica is working in a fourth grade book and she is being instructed at a fourth grade level. They do work at a slower pace. They work in more detail um(…). Monica is on grade level in reading which is good news. She has a C-through which is not very good and I would like her to have a strong C or even a B. But there’s a couple of things she needs to do to improve her grade. One of them is she needs (...) the first one is she needs to read more at home. (Um (...)) she needs to improve her ability to sound out words that she doesn’t know. She knows the sounds and sometimes she doesn’t use what she knows to learn a new word by sounding it out.

(2) S: Ah ha

(3) J: She also needs to work on improving overall her effort. She doesn’t always try as hard as she should. Sometimes she does, but sometimes she doesn’t. So that’s a weakness that she needs to improve. Along with her decoding skills—sounding out words, she needs to also try to remember vocabulary words. And, Monica forgets them sometimes. Inaudible (announcement over loud speaker)

(4) M: I try to remember.

(5) J: You need to work a little hard.

(6) S: She can’t understand the language maybe sometimes. That’s why. The language is hard.

(7) Okay, but what she needs to do when she doesn’t understand something she needs to ask for help. You don’t do that a lot. Instead you sit there and you’d rather do nothing and wait for someone to notice that your not doing your work…
Joanna and Veronica
Teacher-expert/parent-expert and Parent-client/parent-expert

Patterns of Dynamic Talk
Cooperation for Improving Mutual Understanding

- Joanna: Teacher-expert/parent-expert
  - Invited Veronica’s participation by inquiring about specific home-based literacy and language information to inform decisions about the child’s exit from the bilingual program.
  - Used a conversational discourse pattern (e.g., listened, asked questions, made follow-up comments, etc.).
  - Addressed Veronica’s concerns about Juan’s placement in classrooms taught within the general and bilingual education programs.
  - Explained available options for improving Juan’s English language acquisition skills by suggesting attending Saturday classes, after-school programs and summer school.
  - Increased parent’s cultural understanding of available school services and business transactions in the United States. (i.e., provided assistance for obtaining Juan’s eyeglasses).

- Veronica: Parent-client/Parent-expert
  - Dependent upon the teacher and other school personnel for interventions to improve Juan’s academic progress as learning tasks increased in complexity.
  - Unaware of how to resolve home-relates issues affecting Juan’s school-based performance (i.e, eyeglasses).
  - Shifted topics by ignoring teacher initiated questions and inserted other questions to obtain or clarify information about Juan’s progress.
  - Initiated informal contacts with Joanna throughout the school year to discuss Juan’s progress.
  - Implemented home interventions for improving Juan’s school-related work.
(74) J: The exam begins in May.
(75) V: May?
(76) J: Yes, and it’s going to be difficult. The exam is difficult for the fourth graders who speak English as their native language. But we’re trying to prepare our students so that they will do well.
(77) V: And what will happen if he doesn’t pass the exam?
(78) J: Nothing.
(79) V: I thought he wouldn’t pass fourth grade.
(80) J: No. He is going to pass. That’s not it…it’s something the state requires.
(81) V: To see how they are doing?
(82) J: Yes, okay in this state every student in fourth, eight, and tenth grade has to take the exam.
(83) V: They won’t be able to graduate?
(84) J: Yes, in tenth grade if they don’t pass they won’t graduate.
(85) V: He can’t graduate.
Darlene and Juana
Teacher-expert/parent-expert and Parent-expert

Patterns of Dynamic Talk

Collaborative for Mutual Accountability

Darlene: Teacher-expert/Parent-expert

- Reported on information about Miguel’s classroom-based literacy progress and English language acquisition.

- Rely on personal experiences to share parental insights by discussing similar interests, experiences, or beliefs.

- Inserted questions about Miguel’s home and community literacy and English language uses to increase Juana’s participation during the conference discussions and to learn more about Juan’s literacy and English language acquisition in home and community contexts.

Juana: Parent-expert

- Consistently communicate with Darlene through notes, phone calls, informal encounters, and messages conveyed by Miguel to Darlene.

- Challenged Darlene’s knowledge by questioning information about school-related events.

- Shifted Darlene’s topics to discuss other topics of personal interest.

- Informed Darlene’s knowledge of Miguel’s home and community literacy practices.

- Consistently monitored homework assignments and extended them into other types of activities for reinforcement at home.

- Consistently attended classroom and school-wide events and inquired about homework and classroom assignments for clarification.
Darlene and Juana

Second Conference

Transcript Fragment-Dynamic Talk

(1) D: You wanted the conference to discuss the grades and Miguel’s progress. Well...

(2) J: ..Well, I wanted to say this is a good report card, and I didn’t know he copied.

(3) D: I’m sorry for not telling the parents because that happened close to Christmas.

(4) J: Ah ha, and I told Miguel he has to tell Mommy when things happen.

(5) D: It was an activity with a book. A booklet called Finding the Main Idea of a Story. The answers are in the back.

(6) J: Oh.

(7) D. Okay, they are here. And the children had to work alone.

(8) J: Um, what they understood, they had to more or less...

(9) D. And I was correcting the papers. I think I was comfortable with the children coming to my desk, so I could correct their sentences. So, I wasn’t paying attention to some of them—not only Miguel. Six or seven were checking—copying the answers. So, you know, I explained that. I told them that was not good. That you can’t learn that way. And what will happen when you have to prove that

(10) D: And I told them that they are not going to learn anything.

(11) J: Yes, if he doesn’t know it.
Conclusion

- The participants displayed a range of communicative competencies as expressed in their speaker’s roles which promoted or hindered communication.
- Speaker’s roles contained specific discourse markers (e.g., inquiring, ignoring topics, providing follow-up comments, etc).
- Fixed speaker’s roles (i.e., static talk) resulted in less shared information, knowledge, and understanding about how to improve the children’s literacy progress and English language learning.
- Fluid speaker’s roles (i.e., dynamic talk) resulted in the sharing of information, and led to cooperation or collaboration. A mutual understanding resulted of the necessary interventions for improving the children’s educational outcomes.
Implications and Significance

- Understanding the limits and benefits associated with the discourse actions of particular speaker’s roles may be beneficial for improving parent-teacher interactions in conference settings—especially for teachers working in communities where parents face a variety of challenges for participating in their children’s education.

- Professional development may need to explore how pre- and in-service teachers can monitor and adjust their speaker’s roles to increase understanding, cooperation, or collaboration for improving children’s educational outcomes (Lightfoot, 2003).

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

- Small sample; unable to generalize findings. Nonetheless, the findings provide theory building insights for future research.

- A paucity of studies exist among a plethora of opinion pieces! An interdisciplinary approach is needed drawing upon related research from the medical field on doctor-patient relationships/interactions, sociological, sociolinguistic, and educational fields. Future research should also utilize a mixed methods approach using quantitative and qualitative techniques.