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## Community Involvement at an Elementary School: Cultural Differences and Their Effect on Education

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# COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT AT AN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL:

Cultural Differences and Their Effect on Education

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## ABSTRACT

The objective of this service-learning research project was to link Purdue University, a local elementary school, and the Greater Lafayette community to enhance K–12 students’ academic involvement. The participants involved were 36 preservice teachers from Purdue University, 12 faculty members from a local elementary school, and the students and parents affiliated with the elementary school. To answer the research question of how to bridge the cultural gap between students and teachers and using critical theory as the theoretical paradigm, the following methods were employed: interviews, classroom observations, involvement in an after-school program, and reflections of the experience. The preservice teachers interviewed and observed teachers within the school context and then made connections between what they were learning in their teacher education course at Purdue and what they heard and observed in the elementary classrooms, during the interviews, and at the after-school activity. The preservice teachers also had conversations and wrote reflections about the differences they were finding. They also observed the challenges that arise when teachers instruct students from diverse backgrounds. Using this information, the Purdue students contributed to an after-school family event in which the students ran educational games for the elementary students. Following the event, the preservice students presented their feelings about the project to their peers and the potential strategies they believe the teachers could pursue. The results suggest that cultural differences within this context construct language

barriers and instructional obstacles. However, increased communication and involvement between parents and teachers can bridge this gap.

## INTRODUCTION

According to an old African proverb, “It takes a village to raise a child.” While villages may no longer be the norm, it is still true that it takes a lot of help to raise a child. A community has the capacity to play a key role in education by providing resources, knowledge, and opportunities to its members. A community also has the ability to bring people together to overcome almost any obstacle.

At Stevenson Elementary, in Lafayette, Indiana, community involvement is something that parents and teachers have both admitted that they need. This desire for community involvement led to my research question, “how does the involvement of parents and community members impact the academic progress of Stevenson Elementary students?” The principal of Stevenson Elementary notified individuals at Purdue University that the teachers at the school did not feel that they were prepared for a recent influx of students from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds. This change in demographics was a result of families moving into the area because of the availability of jobs, as well as the low cost of living. Many of these families were from urban Chicago, as well as Latin American countries. As a result, the teachers expressed that they were having difficulties communicating in the classroom and communicating with the parents, along with other issues. Thus, there was not a

sense of community among the school members; however, encouraging a sense of community could benefit the students. This new community at Stevenson would be made up of teachers at the school, parents, students, and preservice teachers from Purdue University.

More often, communities are made up of people from a wide range of backgrounds, and there is often great diversity between neighbors. This diversity inevitably finds itself in the classroom. Not only does diversity often mean varying languages spoken in the classroom, it can also mean a difference in conduct among students, as well as what constitutes appropriate curriculum. Stevenson Elementary has a wide range of diverse students, of various race, as well as students of differing religions. Different religions may prevent the students from being able to participate in holiday-themed activities or sing, which are two common activities found in the elementary classroom. For a predominantly Caucasian, English-speaking teacher population, teaching students from ethnically, culturally, and linguistically different backgrounds was a challenge. They found it difficult to interact and build relationships with the parents of multicultural students, something that they felt necessary to enable the students to succeed.

The students and instructors from Purdue decided that to help build a sense of community in the school we needed to bring the parents and teachers together for future positive relationships in which they would work together in helping their students excel academically. The parents and teachers could then cooperate in discovering any assistance the students need and mentor them during their academic career. Before we could make a change, we had to learn more about the teachers and their classroom environments. We conducted group interviews and classroom observations to achieve this goal. A group of six preservice Purdue students interviewed a panel of eight teachers from the elementary school for approximately one hour. The preservice teachers had prepared questions in advance to ask the teachers throughout the interview, but we found that the teachers had a lot to say about overcoming obstacles related to diversity in their school. They explained that they were having difficulties getting students to do homework, and that few parents would come in for parent-teacher conferences which resulted from the lack of communication between parents and teachers. They further explained that they felt unprepared for the issues they were experiencing, as they were not equipped with the tools to teach in multicultural classrooms in their college classes and had not dealt with language issues or cultural differences during their own field experience in classrooms.

To overcome the issues they had been experiencing, the teachers relied on each other a great deal. By sharing experiences, techniques, and simply providing assistance whenever possible, they were able to overcome problems in the classroom. For example, one teacher spoke of how when her students went to music class, a couple of students whose religion prevented them from participating would visit another classroom for quiet reading with a teacher on a break. Another teacher talked about her experience with a student who knew almost no English and how he would talk to one of the teachers who knew a little Spanish when he needed something. The teachers also had to work at understanding motions or nonverbal cues from the student. We also learned that the teachers often would share lesson plans that could be taught to nonnative-English-speaking learners, as well as advice for communicating with the parents. Finally, the teachers also expressed a desire to work more closely with the parents and a belief that this would benefit the student learning. The teachers had developed a sense of community with each other, but were interested in expanding that to include all students and their families.

While reflecting with the other preservice teachers about the interviews, we thought about our own experience in college thus far. We realized that in our teaching careers, we would be in the same situation that the Stevenson teachers were. We had yet to be taught about how to build community inside and outside a classroom. The knowledge we had was on motivational strategies, assessment techniques, how to write a lesson plan, and how to instruct students, but we had no direction as to how to connect to parents. It was easy to say that parent involvement would be beneficial, but reaching that point was a complicated process.

Following the interview, I observed a second grade teacher at the school. What I saw were students with a wide range of abilities, from advanced to two grade levels behind the standard in math or reading. The class was, indeed, diverse with about 50% Caucasian, 35% Latino, and 15% African American students. The students' backgrounds did not seem to affect how they interacted, but the language barrier for a few students was evident. This, along with the normal difficulties of teaching a student how to read and write, did fluster the teacher on a few occasions during my visit.

What I did not see but heard about in the interview and from other classroom observations was the emphasis that the teachers were putting on teaching about diversity. Lessons, activities, and games commonly featured

learning about other cultures or showing that everyone may be different, but everyone is equally important. The students were being educated on what they saw around them, in hopes that they would carry it on as they grew older or would share it at home with their families. The students seemed to love talking about culture and diversity, as it was something new and mysterious and not something of which to be ashamed.

With the information I had acquired at the interview and from shadowing a teacher, we planned an after-school activity in which parents, teachers, and students could participate. We hoped that this after-school activity would encourage community and relationship building. Multiple groups of preservice Purdue students created activities that students could participate in that would educate them while embracing cultural themes. Parents and teachers could socialize during this time and enjoy free food and snacks while the students played games and did crafts.

The activity was received positively, with 121 total participants. It was a very busy night with a good spread of parents and students from different backgrounds and of different age groups. There were multicultural food options, things to paint and color, and my group did a trivia game that all ages could participate in, among other activities. Reflecting on the event, we noticed that most parents stayed on the periphery and interacted with a couple of other parents of seemingly similar cultural backgrounds. Also, many of the activities did not go quite as planned. The students used the crafting supplies how they desired, despite the goal of teaching a diversity lesson. Therefore, we believe that the students would benefit from simple interactions with each other while the parents would benefit from a more structured experience. Using all of the information from the event (what worked and what did not), our next step was to interview the parents in preparation for another community event. While approximately 50 parents volunteered to be interviewed, a small number actually attended the interview. Although a bit disheartening, this fact demonstrated the difficulties that arise when coordinating between the school and parents. Nevertheless, the parents that were interviewed expressed a desire to be involved in their children's education. They also recognized the benefits of community involvement in schools but did not know how to accomplish that. The parents also expressed that they had trouble communicating with the teachers, as one parent expressed a desire to "more easily communicate with teachers" as notes sent home often did not arrive at their destination and long e-mails were "hardly ever read."

The parents' comments provided us with some very useful information. The disconnect was between the parents and teachers. Who knows a child and what they need better than the parent of that child? Both sides did not know how to collaborate with the other, and both were hesitant to move into the arena of the other. We have planned our next community event with this as a foundation—bringing parents and teachers together is the vital piece of the puzzle. Making it easier for them to interact and get to know each other would help break down the barriers that separate the two and make both sides more comfortable working with one another.

Working with Stevenson Elementary forced me to look inwards at my past experiences and compare them. I grew up in a school located in the wealthiest county in Indiana, and I did not witness many academic or communication issues during my education. Almost everyone at my school was from the same socioeconomic background, spoke the same language, and had the same family structure as me. The teachers at my school were also of a similar background; many had even grown up in the area themselves. Once I began to move around and experience different schools, I began to wonder what the keys to my success were. I have worked with students in Tanzania, Chicago, and at Stevenson, and the students from each area were vastly different from each other and from what I had experienced as a student. The students in Tanzania were very reserved and hesitant to participate, as they were used to being lectured, and studied from their notes extensively. On the opposite side of the spectrum, the students in the Chicago classroom were very vocal on nearly every topic that the teacher discussed. The students were also drastically different when it came to the resources that were available to them in the classroom. Only one in ten students in the Tanzanian classroom had a textbook, and each student owned only a few sheets of paper and a single writing utensil. The classrooms had a single chalkboard and very few other teaching resources. The Chicago school, on the other hand, had many extra resources for the students to use since the teacher did not expect them to bring their own. Stevenson fit in between these two schools as far as participation and resources go.

One factor that really stood out to me in each of these schools was the impact that community has on education. I discovered that the academically successful students more often had parents who were active in their school lives. Through interaction with students in lower socioeconomic areas, I learned that their parents were often either absent because of work or simply uninvolved because of the limited education they had themselves. To

remedy this, in a Chicago school I visited, parent volunteers are regularly welcomed into the classroom to act as a sort of teacher's aide.

Another factor that can lead to academic success is the drive that the students have to excel in school. Students in Tanzania are driven to excel because they see it as their only option to achieve financial success. Meanwhile, students I worked with in Chicago had little or no drive to do homework or study, as they felt it did not really matter. When I questioned them about this, they explained that they felt their attempts to achieve in school were futile. They believed they had no hope of paying for college, and many felt that an education would not get them anywhere in life even if they tried. For these students, success was not in grades, it was in reputation. Therefore, they put little effort into their education. Students at my school growing up had active parents who regularly kept track of their child's grades. My own parents and the parents of my peers often pushed their student to succeed and stressed the importance of doing well in school. The communication problems, as well as other barriers that parents of Stevenson students have, often prevent them from keeping up with their students' work or helping on homework assignments.

Thus, the link between socioeconomic status, future success, and community involvement has led me to question which of these factors has the most significant impact on student success. I also began to wonder if one factor could replace any of the other factors. Each school that I have experienced has had a different combination of the three factors. Helping implement community involvement into Stevenson Elementary should provide positive results, and I hope to track the development of the school over the years. What I realized after being in all of these different school settings is that I am privileged by my very involved and supportive parents as well as the financial security my family experienced. My school may not have had ample parent involvement, but at home I could always rely on my parents for assistance. I witnessed the lack of parent involvement in the education of students in Tanzania and became very interested in what teachers could do in a situation where parents were absent. This service-learning project then presented itself.

The project opened my eyes to the complexity of issues that a teacher must be prepared to confront. It is hard to imagine how my educational experience could have been completely different if my parents and socioeconomic background were a part of it. As is the case at Stevenson Elementary School, the teachers either have to confront

this issue or work around it in order for their students to be successful academically and in their cultural acceptance of others. Not only have I had to evaluate my own experience, but I have had to think about what my future role as a teacher would be if I was in this situation. How would I handle these issues? Will the school where I teach look the same? Knowing what I know now about how difficult it is to build a community, it would definitely take some time to figure out. Worrying about what I am going to teach each day seems like a large enough hurdle, and that does not even take into account the fact that the students might not even be able to understand it. Teaching is a profession where it is almost impossible to be successful if you work alone. Hearing from the teachers and seeing the benefits that a supportive community can have, I know that I will need to rely on others in order to give the students the best education possible.

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