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The Role of Parents in Singapore Primary Schools

Christine Clarke

INTRODUCTION

Many educators believe that parent support is important, if not essential, for children to succeed in school, be it preschool, primary or secondary education. What does this 'support' entail? Does it mean checking that the child attends school consistently and punctually and completes homework, or can it imply more than this? How do parents know the full extent of what schools expect of them?

One of the most challenging tasks that many people undertake is raising children. Society implicitly expects parents to be experts in child health, child development, behaviour management techniques and homework supervision, but does not provide readily available training and support in these skills. In the absence of formal training, parents are perhaps expected to learn the 'tricks of the trade' from those who have done it before (e.g. grandparents, or other relatives). However, with fewer families living within extended family units, such advice may now be sought from others, such as from friends or from parenting magazines, television programmes, the Internet, etc. The situation is further complicated in Singapore where many parents are both in full-time employment and therefore have to share aspects of their parenting roles with others. Full-time employment also reduces the number of hours many parents have to spend with their children.

Children's development and education are highly valued in most Asian cultures, although traditionally many parents delegate education to those trained to do this job – the teachers (Lam, 1999; Liu & Chien, 1998). Nonetheless, there are still many things parents do with their children that result in positive outcomes for their overall development. Such activities and practices provided by most families include: providing a well balanced diet, ample sleep, good examples of moral behaviour and providing a loving and secure home. This good foundation will enhance a child's ability to learn the knowledge and skills taught during their preschool and school life. However, many parents in Singapore report that they now feel pressure to be their child's personal tutor in addition to their other parenting responsibilities. Although many parents are willing and able to fulfil this extra responsibility, or can afford to pay others to do it for them,

other parents find it is a burden that they cannot meet, which may lead to frustration and a possible lowering of their self-esteem as parents.

INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH ON PARENT INVOLVEMENT

In a search for definitions and examples of parent roles and parental involvement in the literature, two main references were selected, one from the USA (Epstein, 1986) and the other from the UK (Pugh & De'Ath, 1989). The following is a synthesis of the parent involvement roles they listed:

1. Child rearing, including child health and safety (no or minimal contacts with school beyond ensuring that their children attend school).
2. Parent involvement in learning activities at home, including the supervision of homework.
3. Parents as supporters of schools (e.g. fund raising, sending in equipment for art, etc.)
4. School-home communications (general and specific information often related to their child's progress)
5. Parents as learners (e.g. attending talks and workshops).
6. Parents participating as volunteer helpers in school.
7. Partnership (shared purpose and mutual respect) with parents as co-workers and co-educators with teachers.
8. Control (parents who determine and implement decisions). Parent involvement in governance and advocacy as policy and decision makers.

Following on from these observations, other researchers and practitioners in the field suggest the importance of building up cooperative working relationships gradually and advocate a sequential stage approach (Jones & Lock, 1993; Rennie, 1996):

1. Confidence building or the introductory stage where teachers and parents learn about each other's skills and roles (e.g. orientation meetings and information talks, special assemblies and concerts, sports events and other social functions).
2. Awareness raising or the information stage where parent involvement increases through the two-way sharing of information

through school newsletters, individual child communication diaries, report books and individual parent conferencing, phone calls and home-school notes.

3. 'Real involvement' or the joint provision stage. Parents should now have a clearer understanding of the role of the school, the curriculum and their part in it at home and at school, and may participate in activities such as fundraising, parent helpers in school, reading mums, giving talks for pupils on special interests, etc.
4. Parent-teacher partnership or the shared responsibility stage that includes parents having a real role alongside teachers as co-educators in the delivery of the curriculum with teachers in charge in school and parents in charge at home, or even planning and delivering special projects with teachers at school. It could also include specific communications when a child has learning or behavioural difficulties in order to set up mutually agreed home-school intervention programmes.

In addition to the activities aimed at increasing the level of parent involvement in education generally, there have also been specific research projects targeting families whose children may be at risk of academic failure. Many of these projects were funded under the Head Start programme in the USA from the 1960's and have continued into the twenty-first century. Although the initial focus was on early intervention through preschool education, many studies found longer lasting benefits, especially social benefits, if parent involvement was a component of the programme (Slavin et al., 1994). When Slavin et al. (1994) conducted a Meta-analysis into many of the successful early intervention programmes, he concluded that high quality early childhood intervention was effective at preparing disadvantaged children for school entry. He found that the most successful programmes combined several 'strands' of intervention, including intensive participation by children with their families that lasted for a substantial number of years. He also noted that it was particularly important to carry out the intervention close to school entry age, and to provide some follow-up support if gains were to be maintained.

It is apparent from this brief survey of the literature that the types and levels of parent involvement are many and varied, even in countries where there have been active attempts to increase parent involvement over several decades. Although many of the projects aimed to work in partnership with parents this was rarely achieved. Pugh (1994) and Wolfendale (1992) report that although they found many examples of

parent involvement in schools in the UK, there were very few examples of 'true partnership' as was defined by Pugh and De'Ath (1989), "... a working relationship that is characterised by a shared sense of purpose, mutual respect and the willingness to negotiate".

CURRENT PRACTICES IN SINGAPORE

It is important at this point to consider some differences in the circumstances of parents in Singapore compared to those in the UK and US. Full time employment for *both* parents is common in Singapore unlike those in many of the parent involvement initiatives reported in the literature. Singapore parents often have less time with their children and have to share aspects of their parenting roles with others e.g. extended family members, maids and/or childcare agencies. Although English is the medium of instruction in schools it is not the first language of many families, and both the curriculum and teaching techniques in schools today have changed considerably from when many parents attended school, leaving them unsure about how best to assist their own children with their studies. Finally, it should also be noted that more children are enrolled in Singapore primary schools (between one to two thousand students) compared to the much lower enrolment of British primary schools (one to five hundred), which may affect the type of parent involvement activities conducted.

It has been quite difficult to obtain information about the full extent of initiatives in Singapore, as the local literature on this topic is sparse. From information obtained from school newsletters and the MOE websites on COMPASS (MOE, 2001) and from parent questionnaires (Clarke, 2000), it appears that Singapore primary schools are conducting several of the parent activities cited in the literature. More than half (53%) of primary schools now have parents support groups and/or PTAs (Teo, 2001). There is however variability between school practices.

All Singapore primary schools provide parents with written reports of their children's progress, conduct briefing meetings at key stages in P1, P4 and P6, keep parents informed of events and key developments through newsletters, and generally request that parents check and sign that their children have completed their homework. Phone calls, notes and parent-conferencing have also been commonly used when problems occur with individual children.

More recently there has been an increase in other types of parent involvement activities conducted by some schools. For example most primary schools have at least one orientation day visit for new entrants

and their parents prior to entering P1. Some schools also hold workshops and briefing sessions about new curriculum developments and how parents might assist their children's learning at home. Several schools now conduct parent-conferencing sessions when report books are given to parents. However, due to the large numbers of pupils attending Singapore primary schools this is an onerous task for teachers, and has only been possible at key stages and not every semester, as is the practice in many preschools. An increasing number of schools are also encouraging parents to assist with school activities (e.g. Reading Mums) and to participate in fundraising and social activities. Many schools have also extended the project approach to the home by asking children to collect further information with their parents' assistance.

Although these are very welcome developments in terms of increasing co-operative working relationships with parents, they are not possible for all parents as their circumstances vary enormously. Some parents seem to be finding it difficult to cope with the demands of supporting their children's studies at home in addition to their other parenting responsibilities. There will always be cases where parents may be unable to help with their children's studies, even if support and training is offered, because of lack of time or language difficulties or because of limitations in their own educational backgrounds. It is more likely that this situation will arise at upper primary and at secondary school levels. Some schools have recognized these difficulties and have made links with volunteers to help with homework clubs in school and have sought the assistance of various voluntary agencies and self-help groups to assist children with their studies outside the school.

A SINGAPORE RESEARCH PROJECT ON PARENT TRAINING PROGRAMMES

Docking (1990) stated that educationalists sometimes mistakenly make the assumption that lack of involvement on the part of parents necessarily means a lack of interest in their child's education. There are many reasons why some parents are not actively involved in their children's education, but it is rarely due to lack of interest.

As noted earlier there are a number of possible reasons why parents in Singapore may find it difficult to be actively involved with schools and their child's educational activities at home. Clarke (2000) conducted a three-year research project from 1997 to 2000 to seek effective ways to train and empower lower and middle income working parents of children in their final six months in preschool to enable them to support their children's learning at home, particularly after school entry. The sample comprised mainly of parents considered to be less likely to

participate in school activities and who might find it more difficult to assist their children with their homework.

The 213 children included in the project were attending six childcare centres that encouraged parental involvement in terms of information sharing and social activities. The parents were all in full-time employment, most had only completed primary or secondary education and the majority used little English at home.

A comparison was made between two experimental conditions and a control group. All three groups attended childcare centres belonging to the same organization. The first two groups attended parent-training sessions called 'The Getting Ready for School Project', whilst the control group did not receive any additional parent training. The first experimental group attended weekly parent-child 'guided play' sessions on Saturdays and the second experimental group of parents attended evening workshops on topics related to childrearing and starting school. The children's progress and the level of the parents' support for their development and learning was measured before and after a five month intervention phase by standardized and informal tests, checklists, structured interviews and questionnaires. Their progress was also followed-up at two points during Primary One by school exam results and by teacher, parent and child questionnaires. The follow-up measure was designed to identify whether any gains made during the preschool intervention period had been sustained over time and in the changed environment of the school.

Detailed results can be found in Clarke (2000). A summary of the findings follows:

- Significant improvements ($p < .001$) were made in language and cognitive skills by the end of the K2 intervention period by the children whose parents had attended the parent training sessions when compared with those in the control group, whose parents did not attend the parent training sessions.
- Parents who attended the training sessions increased their knowledge of their child's strengths and weaknesses and likes and dislikes. The time spent completing educational activities with their child, especially reading together increased. There was also an increase in their confidence in being able to assist their child with their learning in primary school compared with the control group.
- There were no significant differences between the two different methods of parent training. Both methods (parent-child interactive learning sessions and the parent workshops/talks) were equally effective.

- Although there were no significant differences between the three groups in the Primary One examination results (SA1 and SA2), there was a clear trend where children who had attended the Guided Play sessions with their parents scored higher results than did the children whose parents attended the workshops who, in turn, performed better than the children in the control group (with the exception of the SA1 MT results).
- Most children settled well into school. The main areas of difficulty cited by parents related to heavy school bags, coping with *Hanyu Pinyin* and how to help their children with project work. Many parents considered that there was insufficient school-home communication compared to preschool. There was also a plea from parents who were not confident in English for more school-home communications (written and verbal) to be conducted in the different mother tongues as well as in English. These parents were also having some difficulty in helping their children with their homework which they feared would get worse as the standard of work got harder as their children progressed through the school.

The overall conclusion from this study was that the parent training programmes held during the last year in preschool were successful in improving the children's skills and in empowering their parents by increasing their knowledge, skills and confidence. There were significant gains in the children's scores on the standardized tests by the end of the project when their parents had attended the parent training sessions compared to the control group. These parents also increased the amount of time they spent reading with their children, and stated that they felt more knowledgeable about their children and more confident about being able to help them in their studies after they started school. The project also demonstrated that even busy working parents, whose main home language was not English and whose educational qualifications were generally limited, were interested in learning how to support their children's learning at home. There was a very high participation rate in each centre where the project was conducted with a very low attrition rate even though the project lasted for several months. Possible reasons for this could be that training sessions were conducted in mother tongue as well as in English, and were held at times when parents were not working.

One disappointment however was that the differences between the experimental and control groups were not maintained in primary school when measured by examination scores in Primary One. These findings are in line with others reported in the literature. The consensus of research is that in order to achieve longer lasting benefits, the

interventions need to be fully comprehensive services of health, education and social support services, longer-term, lasting for several years, with follow-through support for children and their families following school entry for at least two years in primary school (Zigler & Styfco, 1993).

The number of children in this study failing their school exams was very small (5% for the Guided Play group, 4% for the Parent Workshop group and 9% for the control group). This suggests that their preschools were preparing the children well academically for school. It also seems that parent involvement, which was a feature of all the preschools in this study, was beneficial and that the additional parent training sessions increased this benefit further, at least in the short term.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper has discussed parent involvement in early years education and compared the present situation in Singapore with the international scene. A parent training research project that was recently conducted in Singapore was also described. The levels and types of parental involvement in Singapore have increased over the last few years, although this varies from school to school.

Parents have differing skills and needs. It is important that schools consider these differences when communicating with parents in terms of the roles expected and activities offered. The literature on the stages of building cooperative working relationships with parents suggests that, when difficulties arise with parent cooperation, (e.g. in the supervision of homework and in volunteering their services to schools) it may be that insufficient time has been spent in building relationships at the earlier levels and stages.

The following range of parent involvement activities is occurring in some Singapore primary schools. Some possible extension activities that schools might like to consider are included.

Sharing information:

1. Orientation meetings when parents and children visit the schools prior to school entry could be extended to include workshop sessions on the Primary One curriculum and teaching techniques. Activities that could be completed at home could also be modelled. Translation will need to be provided for some parents. It is also important for parents to have an opportunity to provide information to schools. This might be achieved through parent-teacher conferencing and by each parent providing a profile of their

- child's abilities and interests (e.g. through an 'About My Child' booklet).
2. Newsletters from class teachers about the themes and topics being taught each term and specific learning activities to complete at home could supplement the more general information provided in school newsletters.
 3. A homework diary or communication book can provide an important two-way communication channel for busy teachers and parents instead of more time consuming phone calls or face-to-face meetings. However, the language of communication needs to be considered for parents who are not literate in the English language.
 4. Parent-Teacher Conferencing to discuss each child's progress at the end of each semester's exam results may be appreciated by many parents.
 5. School social events, special assemblies, concerts, sports events, etc are often more relaxed times when information can be shared more informally.
 6. Parent workshops on a wide range of topics could be offered at different stages of a child's career. Providing time for informal discussions between teachers and parents at refreshment time is important as this is often when the more fruitful exchanges actually take place.
 7. Parent volunteers in school. Parents have very different skills, interests and time available. Schools need to be both flexible and creative about the type of activities and training offered to different parents so they all feel equally valued.

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