

# Dynamics of Parent Engagement in Preschool

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## Abstract

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*This is a narrative of the engagement of parents and family in a preschool. The purposive strategy of action planned in the study is detailed. It entails vivid descriptions of creative ideation, designing, development and process of parent and family involvement in supporting school activities and initiatives. The discussion that ensues draws on the underpinnings to establish the implication of meaningful engagement between the home and the school.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Education is a major concern of the community and therefore the participation and involvement of parents and the family in school is pivotal. Parents have a right to be involved in schools where their children are being educated. No one knows the child better than the parents and family, so schools can learn a great deal from parents' intimate knowledge of their children. Involvement of parents and the family facilitates the relation between the school and home (World Bank, 2007). Relationship with parents and family

may be a way to avoid unexpected intrusions and to reduce antagonism and adverse relations between the community and the school. They can provide the much-needed resources and other volunteer support to the school, such as financial, free labour (development of teaching-learning material), sponsorship and expertise. Involvement of parents and family can improve schools' accountability and make the school more responsive to the needs of the community. Enhancing family and parents' participation in the school may help increase student development. In other

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words, community's involvement augments parental involvement and parental involvement in schooling in itself is believed to positively affect children's achievements, attitude, and aspirations, in spite of students' ability and family's socioeconomic status (Epstein, 1995).

In short, the involvement of parents and family in schools makes good sense for several reasons: to gain access to knowledge that parents and family have of their children; to augment learning; and to build an effective support system for schools. The school may need to work with parents and families, not just by demanding more from them, but also by focusing on them as members of the community, and by reckoning how they can be an integral part of the educational conversation.

The preschool in the present study is a multi-cultural hub with children from different social, economic and cultural backgrounds. From the frequent meetings with parents and family members, it was found that they had keen interest in getting involved in the school for the benefit of student learning and in supporting school activities and initiatives. Though the school is well-funded and established as a project of a national institute with ample well-trained staff, the intent of parents was considered positive as the school could provide a platform for engaging meaningfully with parents and the families of these children. Thus, it was proposed to plan for a significant involvement of

parents and family. The objective was to involve parents, family members and their contacts in the community as volunteers or in other services and activities in the school.

This entailed an in-depth survey of the family in terms of its constituent members, professions, interests, hobbies and talents. Some of the families were nuclear, whilst others were joint with aunt(s), uncle(s) and either both or single grandparent. In some homes all adults were employed and in others there were one or two who were not employed outside the home. Some of them were self-employed entrepreneurs and worked from home too. This was matched with varied ways by which they could contribute in the school. Thereafter, a series of well-planned and focused meetings and discussions were arranged with small groups of parents and families to identify ways of involvement in school activities. Some of them were clear about their own initiatives. They were clear about the extent to which each one would realistically involve and contribute and the *modus operandi* of functioning. After the activities were launched, critical feedback enabled to refine and retune.

## **UNDERPINNINGS**

**Medical services:** Two parents, employed as doctors, of which one was a government practitioner and the other an ENT specialist in the neighbouring institution for the

hearing impaired. "As a practicing Physician I can conduct preliminary health check-up for the children free of cost in the school on Saturdays or other holidays. I can also bring in two other pediatric friends to join us in this service." They organised and monitored basic health check-up in school by arranging for visits of physicians and clinicians; prepared health cards for children; and guided parents by arranging for check-up with specialists in case of specific problems such as vision, hearing and speech, locomotor and other physiological problems. They continued to support parents of children with special needs by arranging for referrals and counselling. They arranged for a pediatrician to address parents about nutrition and better parenting. Parents shared, "This talk was very useful since I learned ways to develop the right eating habits for my child", "The recipes of including a little vegetable and fruit in every dish for him was very useful."

**Preparation of teaching-learning material:** Five members were closely associated with the school in designing and preparation of teaching-learning material such as rag dolls, stuffed toys, organic clay, paper pulp toys, wooden toys, models and props. One of them, a tailor's wife, not only supplied pieces of cloth-rags, but also trained two grandmothers to design and make rag dolls and stuffed toys. "I have plenty of waste cloth bits which

can be reused for making stuffed toys, and I can teach others to make the toy cover for stuffing." Another, a carpenter supplied toys, models and props made during his free time. And yet another, a grandfather, prepared organic clay, paper pulp material and vegetable dyes. Based on frequent discussions with teachers about the syllabus for each month, they planned, designed and developed learning material. They created doll-houses, props for story, drama and dance puppets, masks, toys, dolls and models.

**Integrated artwork:** Two parents designed integrated thematic worksheets for various concepts in the curriculum in consultation with teachers. They included worksheets for numbers, self and environment and language integrated with art. They designed these sheets with drawings, dotted lines and incomplete figures. They also aided teachers in designing art activities such as finger and vegetable painting, craftwork, beadwork and bunting making. "These parents are creative in giving ideas for the concepts that we want to teach, they prepare a draft and then we refine on it before preparing the worksheets for the concept", remarked a teacher. They also contributed in designing and developing wall posters in classrooms for school celebrations. A parent who was a retired art teacher worked on the artwork of the thematic sheets, along with another parent who was

the mother of one of the students who associated with this work because of her interest and free time.

**Music, dance and theatre:** Two members keenly engaged children in music, dance and theatre. One was a retired music teacher and the other a talented mother. Children enjoyed their company in learning song and dance steps, accompanied with simple instruments like the jingles, keyboard and drums; role-play of interesting characters of stories; composing short rhyming songs for various concepts in the syllabus.

“I like Arjun’s mom to teach us song and dance along with Mona’s grandpa playing the drums”, remarked Pavitra. They helped teachers develop story characters, song and dance movements for the integrated themes for each month’s syllabus and also in organising various literary and cultural events.

**Involved celebrations:** Parents, especially mothers who were free, associated most willingly for school celebrations. They aided in preparing costumes and facial make-up for children and in managing them off-stage. Sheba, a mother shared, “As I am free I help in the activities with the teachers, and I enjoy dressing the children for various programmes.” They accompanied children to the places of event such as other schools and host venues. Since the school is a multi-cultural hub, children celebrated different festivals in school. Some parents took initiative

in arranging traditional festivities such as decorations, dressing children in special attire, preparing festive delicacies and helping children stage drama and music about the festive theme. Some such celebrations were *Ganesh Chaturthi, Holi, Baisakhi, Sankranti, Rakhi, Deepavali, Dussera, Krishna Jayanti, Christmas, Eid, Easter, Guru Nanak Jayanti, Budhapurnima, Rajyotsav.*

**Associated activities:** Some parents also assisted in accompanying children on field trips to the zoo, community visits to post office, railway station, museums, market, bank, gardens and farms. They aided in the arrangement of transport, took care of children during the travel and at the venue, served refreshments and extended help during emergencies on the trip. A parent who was employed in a transport agency arranged transport for all outdoor activities, since the school did not have its own transportation facility. A parent employed with the railways arranged for a visit to the neighbouring railway station by a trip on the train. He also ensured special security for the children. Another parent employed in the post office arranged a trip to the post office and provided for postal envelopes and children posted handmade greeting cards to their parents in these envelopes. A grandparent working on a coconut grove nearby arranged for a visit there and shared his joy thus, “it’s a pleasure to see them all crowd around

the tree and watch the men climb up to get them coconuts. They have so many questions about this feat." Children learned about the coconut tree and the uses of various parts of it and also enjoyed a refreshing coconut water drink provided there. Some parents also arranged for visits of local artisans and such others to the school, such as a snake charmer, magician, potter and a piper.

**Emergency assistance:** Some parents also extended help and support during emergencies. One parent who was an auto driver was always available during emergencies to rush to the nearby clinic. He also provided the school with the contact numbers of some of his co-workers who would assist in his absence. Similarly another parent who was a van driver, supported during emergencies, and also for transporting purchases of material for the school from the local market.

**Initiated celebrations:** Parents initiated the celebration of teacher's day and children's day. They organised activities for teachers and children, felicitated teachers and arranged for school parties. "Our children are cared for most lovingly by the staff, and in return I feel this is a small token of appreciation by gathering together for a celebration", said Vinci's dad. Parents and family members decorated the venue, staged cultural and literary activities and conducted games. They made creative little handmade gifts for both teachers and children. "I was very excited about the surprise party for the

teachers and aunties, all of us kept this secret till the last date", shared little Manu.

**Collaborative school maintenance:**

One parent, a civil contractor helped in painting the school gate, fixed the pipeline from the overhead tank, provided additional electrical points, installed the water purifier, carpentry fixtures, and repair of door knobs and bolts. He sent his employees on phone-call-demands and promptly attended to the school requirements. "Mr. Karim is always helpful in extending a hand with any repairs in the school", appreciated a school staff.

**Collection of material:** Three mothers volunteered to collect various material for the school, which, neighbours and other parents want to give away. It included toys, bicycles, sports items, storybooks and other such material. They checked the suitability of the material for use by children, and if required got it repaired and renewed for use. They went on monthly collection trips based on the contributors' phone calls and requests for collection of items.

**DISCUSSION**

The gains in this venture of engaging parents and family in the school are multitude (World Bank, 2007). The foremost being, resources were amply brought into the portals of the school. Be it human, material, ideation, talents or services, anything that was required was taken care of by the parent force. Creative ideation,

designing, development resulted in varied learning resources for relevant curriculum (Anderson, 1998). They generated a treasure-trove of learning resources in the school. There were not just sensitive to the needs in the school but were also able to reach out at all times to manage and address problems and issues. There were issues about emergency transport, medical services and building repairs.

This engagement resulted in creating and nourishing a sound community-school partnership. The engagers were not just parents and the immediate family but they enabled to bond the school with other members and associates of the community too (Botes and Van Rensburg, 2000). It also enabled them to realise some of the tenets of democracy wherein the school was open to their ideas, views and opinions. They were willing to engage in a dialogue with the school. It increased the accountability on both sides. Teachers and parents realised that they were accountable to each other, for both were equally responsible for the progress of the child's development. Neither partner entertained unrealistic expectations. The engagement further ensured sustainability in school programmes and activities, as the engagement was viable and dependable. It would also be worthy to state that the feedback from parents and family was that this engagement actually improved the home environment in more than one way. The interactions between parent and family groups enabled

them to carry home much learning that actually aided in coping with challenges at home.

The challenges that ensued from this deliberate engagement are noteworthy for furthering parental involvement. Parent-school engagement tends to overlook complexities and questions of power and conflict within communities (Crewe and Harrison, 1998). Parent and family groups are not homogeneous nor do they have mutually compatible interests. Differences occur with respect to age, gender, wealth, language, culture and so on. Even though marginalised or minority groups may be physically present during discussion, they are not necessarily given a chance to express their views to the same degree as others. The conduct of meetings with parents and family is demanding in terms of time and people management. Teachers become resistant when parents tend to be overtly critical. They tend to feel that they are losing authority within school, as parents incline to be overpowering. But the benefits of such an engagement outweigh the costs. Therefore it is imperative to understand the nature of parent and family groups involved, assess the dynamics of involvement and accordingly establish relevant communication channels (Epstein, 2000).

Thus, in preparing and implementing any efforts to promote parent and family involvement in education, it is important to understand the whole picture of their participation: how it

works; what forms are used; what benefits it can yield; and what we should expect in the process of carrying out the efforts. A deeper understanding of the dynamics of parent and family involvement in the school is imperative for not just larger gains in learning and teaching but for bringing the home

and the school closer (Rugh and Bossert, 1998). This inculcates positive thinking in children when they see their parents participating and contributing effectively in the school. Children no longer feel that the school and home are two worlds apart (Isham, Narayan and Pritchett, 1995).

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