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Hong, Soo. (2011) *A Cord of Three Strands: A New Approach to Parent Engagement in Schools*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press

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A Cord of Three Strands is founded on the premise that “schools have much to learn about the families and communities they serve and that they stand to gain clarity and greater understanding from those individuals and groups that are closely connected to the lives and experiences of those communities”. To provide an example of how such clarity and understanding might develop, Dr. Hong conducted a layered ethnographic study of a neighborhood in which parent engagement in school was a priority of the community action organization, the Logan Square Neighborhood Association (LSNA).

Certainly an emphasis on parental involvement in school is not a new phenomenon. There is an ample body of existing

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research demonstrating a wide variety of positive outcomes of parental engagement. For example, when parents are engaged in their children's schooling, attendance improves (Sheldon & Epstein 2004), students tend to be better behaved, (Harris & Goodall, 2008), develop better social skills (El Nokali, Bachman, & Votruba-Drzal, 2010) and deepen their cognitive engagement (Mo & Sing, 2008). Henderson and Mapp's (2002) synthesis of research on parental engagement found evidence of positive effects across all socioeconomic levels and all racial/ethnic groups; although there were differences in how different demographic groups expressed their involvement.

Hong used both prior research and her own experience as a teacher to critique the traditional model of parent involvement as focusing solely on the needs of the school, and succeeding only in engaging middle-class, Caucasian parents who are already comfortable in the culture of the school. When school officials see that parents are not involved at school, they often make the unfounded assumption that lack of involvement stems from lack of caring (Sturges, Cramer, Harry, & Klinger, 2005). Many teachers and principals hold a deficit view of minority parents (Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006), as evidenced by a principal quoted as saying "...What about the many parents who won't be positive role models to students? They've got substance-abuse issues, they don't speak English, they're not working. Do I hold them up as models and expose them to my students?" (p. 195).

This principal was over-generalizing and perpetuating a stereotype of low-income, minority and immigrant parents. If willing, this principal might consider that parents who are not yet fluent in English may be of tremendous assistance at school to children who are not yet fluent in English. Those parents who are not working are the very parents that would have the most time available to serve as parent volunteers. This principal appears blind to the fact that parents and students live in the same community, so they are already exposed to one another. Extending that exposure into the school could have significant positive benefits for all parties – the students, the parents, and the teachers.

When school officials hold such deficit views of parents, they do not invite parents to be involved in the school, nor do they work at making school a welcoming place for parents. If teachers, in turn, view this lack of involvement as lack of caring, then parents who want to be involved have an uphill battle. Research has shown that many parents actually desire greater involvement in their children's school, but wait for teachers to invite them in (Sanders, Epstein & Connors-Tadros, 1999). Deficit views of families support assumptions that families need to change their behaviors and practices, to better support the needs of children and schools, instead of considering the fact schools must also change their practices to better support the needs of children and families. Indeed, some families may sense that they parental involvement at school is a privilege reserved for those who have earned that right by adopting the habits and practices of the majority culture.

In contrast, Hong presents an ecological view of parent engagement in which parents, schools and communities are viewed as equal partners working on behalf of children. As parents, teachers, students, and community members work together, they develop complex webs of relationships that enhance their collective capacity to advocate for children. In this view, "Parents are not a tabula rasa to be written upon by schools that know what is best for their children. Any form of parent engagement must be based on a mutual conversation or dialogue between school staff and families" (p. 180). This kind of engagement must be founded on a conscious recognition of the strengths that parents can bring to the table, including such things as providing a sense of connection between home and school, understanding the children's culture and first language, and familiarity with the neighborhoods in which the children live.

The traditional model focuses on activities parents can do to assist the school; the ecological model focuses building supportive relationships between families and schools. In the traditional model, parents are expected to change their behaviors, to become more engaged in the activities of the school. In contrast, in the ecological model, both parents and schools – teachers, principal and other school personnel – are expected to change – to fundamentally change their views and become more accepting of one

another as valuable humans who are willing to work together as partners on behalf of children. *A Cord of Three Strands* presents the story of how this was accomplished in the Logan Square neighborhood of Chicago, a neighborhood with a high percentage of residents of low socioeconomic status, racial/ethnic minorities, and immigrants – many of whom who were not yet fluent in English.

The LSNA, a community action organization recognized that schools play a central role in communities, and that the health of the community is closely related to the health of the school. The LSNA realized that parents could, collectively, become an independent base of leadership within the school. In consultation with school principals who desired greater parental involvement at their schools, the LSNA created a Parent Mentor Program. This program was carefully planned and structured to address both the needs of schools and the needs of parents. Recognizing that some parents would have anxieties stemming from their own negative school experiences; and some parents would be fearful about interacting in English, the Parent Mentor Program was structured to begin with a week-long training session in which parents come together two hours each morning. In this highly interactive training, parents are encouraged to share their concerns, fears are addressed, and relationships are established. A few parents who are already working as mentors attend each training session for new mentors, specifically to encourage the new mentors. Current mentors also explain to new mentors some of the ways that they assist teachers in their classrooms, to help new mentors gain confidence about the skills and value that they will bring to the classroom.

Once trained, each parent mentor is assigned to a teacher with whom they will work two hours per day, Monday through Thursday. During this time, mentors may be helping teachers prepare instructional materials, listening to children read aloud, providing individual assistance to students, recording homework completion, or doing clerical tasks. But they are simultaneously building a relationship with the teacher. On Friday mornings, mentors meet together for two hours of reflection, sharing, and ongoing training. New cohorts of parent mentors are continually trained, and parent mentors encourage new parents to join.

The parent mentor program serves as the backbone of the LSNA's efforts, but the parent mentor program has spawned other programs, including a Family Reading Night, a Parent Tutoring program, a neighborhood Safety Committee, and a Literacy Ambassadors program in which a teacher, parent mentor and group of families share dinner and story-reading activities in the home of a parent host. The Literacy Ambassador program has the added value of bringing teachers out of their comfort zones, into a community home, enabling teachers to better learn the culture of the community, and perhaps challenging some of the teachers' assumptions about students' families.

Although the approach seems straightforward, from the rich vignettes through which Hong tells the story it becomes clear that the Parent Mentor program works because of the strong, consistent emphasis on building relationships that are collaborative, encouraging and focused on the assets of all players. The benefits of this approach are numerous. Most importantly, as they are the central focus of all activities, children benefit. In large classes, having a parent mentor in the classroom means there is more opportunity for children to receive individualized attention from an adult. When the child is an immigrant and/or minority child, the parent mentor being a member of the community in which the child lives, may cause the child is likely to feel more comfortable at school, and less fearful of the unknowns of the school culture. Seeing their own parent and parents of their classmates and friends working at the school reinforces for children the idea that school is important.

Schools and teachers benefit by having more hands in the classroom to assist with preparation of instructional materials, monitoring of classroom activities, and providing assistance to individual students. Teachers gain deeper understanding of their students through conversations with parent mentors who understand the culture and community. Relationships between the students and the parent mentors help to improve student behavior, as students are likely to see the parent mentor as one who understands them, as they share the community culture. As the parent mentor program grows and parents deepen their inter-relationships, parental support for the school broadens.

Parents benefit by having a closer connection with their children through a better understanding of the school culture and curriculum. They become better able to encourage and support their children in both academic and social domains. But parents themselves also benefit from the experience of making a meaningful contribution to children's learning. As parent mentors gain skill and confidence, they experience increased self-esteem. The parent mentor training includes encouragement toward self-improvement and many parent mentors have reported seeing new qualities in themselves that reduced their sense of powerlessness and fueled a growing self-efficacy.

More broadly, the community benefitted. Numerous meaningful, caring relationships developed between parent mentors, parents and teachers, parent mentors and other parents, that served to increase the sense of community as a neighborhood of people who not only knew each other, but supported and encouraged one another. This sense of community has helped the LSNA to develop a communal voice for advocacy in social justice issues, such as education and housing – both important factors in children's development.

Hong explains that these benefits were accomplished through three phases. First, induction of new parent mentors introduces them to the school culture, allows them to share their fears and concerns, and surrounds them with encouragement. Integration continues, deepens, broadens and expands the relationships begun during the induction phase, and parent mentors begin to recognize leadership skills in themselves. Investment in the personal growth of parent mentors, enabling them to pursue their personal goals and dreams, comes back to benefit the school and the community in new ways.

Presented as an engaging account of a neighborhood that has successfully developed a strong partnership between schools, family and the community, this book would be a good choice for a professional learning community of teachers or school administrators to read together as a catalyst for reviewing their own approach to parental involvement. It would also serve as an excellent text for a teacher education course dealing with parent-teacher relationships. *A Cord of Three Strands* challenges the

status quo, and does so in an encouraging way, with a compelling message that it is possible for administrators, teachers and schools to develop authentic relationships, founded in shared power and leadership that better meet the needs of both schools and parents by focusing collaborative efforts on the students. “When schools thrive, communities thrive” (p. 201), and implementation of the ecological model of parent engagement certainly appears to be a force toward that end.

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