

# Involving parents in children's education: what teachers say in Malaysia

*Sharifah Md. Nor Jennifer & Wee Beng Neo*

## *Abstract*

*This study examines the teachers' perceptions towards the concepts, school practices and barriers of school and family partnerships in primary schools in Malaysia. A total of 553 respondents answered the questionnaires. The findings showed that the respondents' perceptions of the concepts of partnerships were partial. Only a few school practices were carried out and parents were identified as the primary barrier to school and family partnerships. The findings suggest that schools should adopt a comprehensive model where parent involvement should extend from home-based learning activities into school-based instructional activities. Schools should also solicit the collaboration and participation of families and communities in overcoming the barriers faced by them.*

## **Introduction**

### *Background of the Study*

The present education system in Malaysia focuses largely on teachers as the key players in the children's education with little concentration being placed in having parents as co-partners in the children's learning process. Schools are aware that there is a gap between the school and family institutions that often created unnecessary problems for the children they share. School, as a social system, functions within the framework of the open system and it is shaped and changed

through the interactions with the environments (Ballantine, 1997; Hoy and Miskel, 1982). Schools cannot exist independently of the purpose they serve for other structures in society (Katz, 1978). Schools need families and communities to co-partners with them to address the multidimensional needs of children other as none of them can work in a vacuum. Families' support and cooperation in improving the children's education has been emphasized by Hallinger et al. (1992) and Epstein and Becker (1982). Synthesis of reviews by Dreeben (1968) and Lightfoot (1978) note although differences between schools and families exist, there is a need to recognize important similarities: overlapping of goals, responsibilities, and mutual influence of the two major environments which simultaneously affect children's learning, growth and development. This means schools recognize the importance and potential influence and contributions of all family members in the children's education.

Obviously, the individualistic roles played by the schools and families which adhere to the concept of separate responsibilities of institutions is not practical anymore (Epstein, 1987a). A paradigm shift in the school system is essential where the concept of separate responsibilities of institutions must be transformed into overlapping responsibilities of institutions which emphasize the coordination, cooperation and

complementarity of schools and families, and encourage communication and collaboration between the two institutions. A shared responsibility is a powerful tool for improving schools and by bringing teachers, parents and families together, there will be less blaming and finger pointing at each other in the children's education.

Currently, parental involvement in the Malaysian schools is via the school PTA's platform. This level of partnership is not integral in enhancing school and family partnerships at all levels of the children's schoolings (Wee, 1995; Wee, 1996). Parental involvement need to expand further beyond the current practices if parents are to be co-partners in the children's education. One of the school's challenges is to collaborate and tackle the issues collectively with families. No baseline information on parent involvement practices in primary schools exists; yet such practices are an essential element of effective, accelerated and SMART schools. This study proposes to examine the teachers' perceptions on the concepts of partnership. Also, it attempts to identify the school practices in parental involvement and the barriers to school and family partnerships in primary schools.

School and family partnerships is largely an uncharted territory in the Malaysian education system. Little is known about parental involvement in schools except via the role of the schools' PTAs (Wee, 1995; Wee, 1996). It is hoped that the findings of this study may benefit all headmasters and teachers in primary and secondary schools with information, knowledge and skills on how to solicit and involve parents and families to play supportive roles in assisting the children in their learning process.

### **Research Questions**

Specifically this study focuses to answer these research questions:

1. What are the teachers' perceptions of the concept of school and family partnerships?
2. What are the school practices in parent involvement?
3. What are the barriers to school and family partnerships?

### **Review of related literature**

#### *Concepts of Partnerships*

The primary aim of partnership is for the school to reach out to families, prompt them to realize that they have a role, and they are responsible toward the children's learning process.

Partnership in education is the connections where both the school and the family recognize, respect and support each other in the children's learning process (Epstein, 1992). It refers to the assistance it provides in escaping the dilemma of whom to blame for the children's failure in education. Epstein (1995) states the principal goals of partnerships is to develop and conduct better communication with families across the grades in order to assist students to succeed in school.

#### **School Practices in Parent Involvement**

School and family partnerships represent a shared approach to the education of children. Partners recognized their shared interests and responsibilities for children and they work together to create better programmes and opportunities for students (Epstein, 1995). A strong partnership between the school and the home is needed if quality education is to be provided to all children (Haley and Berry, 1988). By working together, school and family can reinforce each other's effort towards a common

goal; and without this cooperation, neither the teacher nor the parent can be fully effective. Schools need parents and families to join them in their crusade to improve the quality of education for all students. Earlier studies and reviews suggest that the key to partnership is via Epstein's six types of parent involvement practices (Epstein et al. 1997; Epstein, 1995; 1988; 1987). This model includes:

*Type 1 - Parenting: Basic Responsibilities of Families*

This refers to the basic responsibilities of families: to ensure children's health and safety; to provide parenting and child-rearing skills needed to prepare children for school; to respond to the continual need to supervise, discipline, and guide children at each age level; and to build positive home conditions that support school learning and behavior appropriate for each grade level.

*Type 2 - Communication: Basic Responsibilities of Schools*

Type 2 refers to the communications from school to home about school programmes and children's progress. In the light of the school's responsibilities in this parent involvement practices, school should design effective forms of communication so that families could be informed of the school's programmes and the children's improvement (Epstein, 1992).

*Type 3 - Volunteer: Parent Involvement at School*

This type refers to parent volunteers who assist teachers, headmasters, and children in classrooms or in other school-based activities. It also refers to parents who come to school to support students' performances and sports activities; to attend workshops or other educational and training programmes; and to improve themselves so that they are able to assist their children in their learning.

*Type 4 - Home Involvement: Parent Involvement in Home Learning Activities.*

It refers to parent-initiated activities or child-initiated requests for help, and instructions from teachers for parents to monitor and assist their own children at home on learning activities that are coordinated with the children's classwork.

*Type 5 - School Governance: Leadership and Participation*

Type 5 refers to parents taking decision-making roles in the PTA/PTO, advisory councils, or other committees or groups at the school, district, or state level (Epstein, 1992; Epstein and Dauber, 1991; Becker and Epstein, 1982). It also refers to parent and community activists in independent advocacy groups that monitor the schools and work for school improvement.

*Type 6 - Collaboration: Collaborating with the Community*

Type 6 practice refers to school having connections with agencies, businesses representatives, religious groups and other groups that share responsibility for the children's education and future successes. Likewise, it refers to connections that schools, students and families contribute to the community (Epstein, 1988; 1992; Dietz, 1992).

**Barriers to School and Family Partnerships**

Study by Leitch and Tangri's (1988) on the barriers to school and home collaboration found that teachers and parents acknowledged changes in attitudes and behaviors; their need for independence on one hand, and for structure on the other was not fulfilling their responsibilities. Teachers perceived too much permissiveness at home, and parents spoke of lack of discipline and limited expectations at schools. Teachers perceived the cumbersome school systems and culture, teachers' lack of knowledge, skills and attitudes as the major barriers to school and

family partnerships (Leitch and Tangri, 1988). Educators' lack of knowledge, skills and training on how to solicit parents to be involved have also been identified as barriers to partnership.

Some parents believe that the school and family constitute separate roles in the education of the children, and their role is caring and nurturing their children outside the school. Parents' heavy work schedules, lack of time, negative attitudes and experiences were identified as the barriers that affect their involvement in schools (Leitch and Tangri, 1988).

### Methodology

Survey methodology was employed to gather data and information. Samples consist of 553 respondents from 20 primary schools in Petaling district. Proportionate stratified random sampling was used to select the samples. The instrument used was formulated after a synthesis of existing instruments by Joyce L. Epstein and Karen Clark

Salinas (1993); Michael Dietz (1992); Wee's (1995) and Epstein et al. (1997). The questionnaires were validated by a panel of experts and pilot tested using 30 teachers, randomly selected, from a non-sampled school. Data were processed using SPSS for Windows Release 6.0 and descriptive analysis using frequencies and percentages were used.

### Findings

#### *Concepts of Partnerships*

Teachers' perceptions on the concepts of school and family partnerships were partial (refer Table 1). Majority teachers indicated a higher need for parental involvement in *Type 1: parenting practice* (96.4%); *Type 4: home involvement practice* (91.3%); *Type 6: collaboration practice* (88.2%) and *Type 2: communication practice* (74.5%). Only a minimal need for parents to be involved in practices pertaining to school governance (4.3%) and as volunteers in classroom instructional activities (14.8%).

Table 1 - Concepts of Partnerships

practices	% Respondents indicating the Need for Parental Involvement (n=553)	
	f	%
Type 1: Parenting	533	96.4
Type 2: Communication	412	74.5
Type 3: Volunteer	82	14.8
Type 4: Home Involvement	505	91.3
Type 5: School Governance	24	4.3
Type 6: Collaboration	488	88.2

**School practices in parent involvement**

The findings in Table 2 showed that the teachers reported that only a few types of school practices were carried out by their schools

- (a) Type 4 home involvement practice, that is parent involvement in the children's home learning activities predominates high (84.3%). Teachers reported that the schools asked parents to be more involved in the children's home-based learning activities, such as *assisting their children in their homework and reading activities*.
- (b) A variety of communication tools, such as telephones, letters notes, memos and newsletters were used by the schools to communicate with parents / families. The schools' contact with parents / families were mostly pertaining to *children's academic difficulty and classroom disruptions*, rather than *informing parents of their children's success or soliciting parents to be involved in the children's learning activities*

However, some school practices were not popular in the schools studied. The practices include:

- (c) Teachers reported that parental involvement in Type 5 school governance practice was in non-governance activities, such as *attending PTAs' meetings* and in *planning parental involvement programmes in the schools but not in activities related to the school management and decision making process*.
- (d) Teachers reported that their schools collaborated with the community especially in *assisting the community to organize after-school programmes for students*. The schools also received financial support from various businesses' agencies.
- (e) Parental involvement in Type 3 volunteer practice was not a popular practice in most schools (29.8%). Parent volunteers were mainly in *fund-raising activities but not in classroom instructional activities*. Headmasters, teachers and the school's PTA were used to solicit parent volunteers.
- (f) Type 1 parenting practice was the least popular practice carried out by the schools (26.2%). The schools *neither provide parents /families with techniques in assisting the children with their homework nor courses or seminars on parenting*.

Table 2 - School Practices in Parental Involvement

practices	% Respondents indicating the Need for Parental Involvement (n=553)	
	f	%
Type 1: Parenting	145	26.2
Type 2: Communication	421	76.1
Type 3: Volunteer	165	29.8
Type 4: Home Involvement	466	84.3
Type 5: School Governance	319	57.7
Type 6: Collaboration	287	51.9

**Barriers to school and family partnerships**

Parents were perceived to be the primary barrier to school and family partnerships. Parents' *job commitments and lack of time* (95.7%); *parents' negative attitudes and lack of skills* (64.2%) were identified as the barriers that emanated from the family (Table 3).

A few barriers also emanated from the school environments such as *lack of school funds to finance partnership' activities* (62.4%); *insufficient parent involvement activities* (28.4%); *no close rapport between teachers and parents* (37.3%); and *no time to organize parent involvement activities* (23.9%).

Table 3 - Barriers to School and Family Partnerships (n=553)

barriers	f	%
Teachers' negative attitudes	36	6.5
Teachers have no knowledge on how to involve parents	59	10.7
Lack of initiatives from teachers	57	10.3
No close rapport between teachers and parents	206	37.3
School has no time to organize parent involvement activities	132	23.9
Lack of school funds to finance partnership activities	345	62.4
School does not provide activities that encourage partnership	157	28.4
Parents' negative attitudes and lack of skills to help the school	355	64.2
Parents have no time and are too busy with work	529	95.7
Parents fear of not being able to communicate with teachers	121	21.9
Low social economic status of family	171	30.9
Parents' low level of education	120	21.7
Distance from house to school	88	15.9

**Implications and recommendations**

1. Findings on the concepts of partnerships show a partial partnership existed between schools and families. Therefore schools need to initiate and lead parents / families to be involved by developing fundamentally different kinds of capacities to involve them in the children's learning activities.
2. Only a few school practices was carried out. The lack of school-based parental involvement practices suggests that schools need to expand the involvement of parents from home-based and school-based support activities into class-based and school-governance practices by reinforcing that

parents / families have to play a greater role in the children's learning process. Schools can provide opportunities to strengthen parenting skills, enhance parent networks, and minimize the stresses of parenting.

3. Barriers to partnerships can also be overcome with the participation of everyone involved in the children's education. Schools ought to solicit the collaboration of the state and district education offices, community and corporate agencies too. Their support are also needed to assist schools and families to overcome the conflicting schedules of working parents and teachers via strategic planning plans. A corporate culture where

education is everybody's business ought to be instilled in the school environment.

4. Currently, teacher education programmes in Malaysia did not incorporate family involvement training in their curriculum. The absence of in-service and pre-service training programmes indirectly required teacher education programmes to design an innovative curricular so that substantial family involvement training can be incorporated to inculcate positive attitudes toward family involvement.
5. Presently, there is rarely a coherent policy framework to support schools in their efforts to reach out to families and communities although such policies are badly needed. It is time that the education system needs some transformative changes. The Ministry of Education needs to put parent involvement on the national education agenda by including it in a list of National Education Goals. Federal government support at Ministry level to enter into a new partnership is essential if we want to achieve the goals of SMART schools and the National Education Philosophy.

### **Conclusion**

The education system in the new millennium should encourage all schools to promote and adopt partnerships among educators, parents and families, communities, businesses and corporate organizations in their improvement efforts. Schools need assistance, support, recognition and on-going guidance in order to develop and maintain successful programmes of partnership. Any efforts to include parents and families in the children's education require a shift in the educators' and parents' mindsets and attitudes pertaining to the importance of children's learning. Families need to be more involved in improving the children's learning not only in the homes, but also in the school's environment so that an integral partnership between the school and the family institutions could be established. School and family partnerships will only be successful when students, families, teachers and communities collaborate and interact with one another in the children's learning process.

## References

- Ballantine, J.H. (1997). *The Sociology of Education: a systematic analysis*. 4th Ed. New York: Prentice Hall
- Becker, H.J. and Epstein, J. L. (1982). 'Parent Involvement: A Survey of Teacher Practices.' *Elementary School Journal*. 83(2): 85-102.
- Dietz, M. J. (1992). Principals and Parent Involvement in Wisconsin Middle Level Public Schools. Unpublished Doctor of Philosophy Dissertation. University of Wisconsin-Madison.
- Dreeben, R. (1968). On what is learned in school. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Epstein, J.L. (1986). 'Parents' reactions to teacher practices of parent involvement.' *Elementary School Journal*. 86 (3): 277 - 294.
- Epstein, J.L. (1987). 'Parent Involvement: What research says to administrators.' *Education and Urban Society*. 19 (2): 119 - 136.
- Epstein, J.L. (1987a). Toward a theory of family-school connections: Teacher practices and parent involvement across the school years. In K. Hurrelmann, F. Kaufmann, and F. Losel (Eds.). *Social Intervention: Potential and constraints*. New York: de Gruyter. pp. 121-136.
- Epstein, J.L. (1988). 'How Do We Improve Programs for Parent Involvement.' *Educational Horizons*. 66 (2): 58-59.
- Epstein, J.L.(1992). 'School and Family Partnerships.' In M. Atkin (ed.) *Encyclopedia of Educational Research*. New York: MacMillan.
- Epstein, J.L. (1995). School-Family-Community Partnerships: Caring for the Children We Share. *Phi Delta Kappan* 76 (9): 701-712.
- Epstein, J.L. and Becker, H. (1982). Teachers reported Practices of Parent Involvement: Problems and Possibilities. *Elementary School Journal*. 83 (2): 103 - 114.
- Epstein, J.L, Coates, L., Salinas, K.C., Sanders, M. G. and Simon, B. (1997). *School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Your handbook for Action*. California: Corwin Press.
- Epstein, J.L. and Dauber, S. (1991). 'School Programs and Teachers' Practices of Parent Involvement in Inner Elementary and Middle School.' *Elementary School Journal*. 91 (3): 289-303.
- Epstein, J.L. and Salinas, K.C. (1993). *School and Family Partnerships: Surveys and Summaries. Questionnaires for Teachers and Parents in Elementary and Middle Grades*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University.
- Haley, P and Berry, K (1988). 'Home and School as Partners: Helping Parents help their children.' In *Parent Involvement and Student Achievement Information Folio*. Arlington, VA: Educational Research Service.
- Hallinger, P., Murphy, J. and Hausman, C. (1992). 'Restructuring Schools: Principals' Perceptions of Fundamental Educational Reforms.' *Educational Administration Quarterly*. 28(3): 330 - 349
- Hoy, W.K. and Miskel, C.G. (1982). *Educational Administration: Theory, Research and Practice*. 4th Ed. New York: Random House.
- Katz, D. (1978). *The Social Psychology of Organisations*. 2nd Ed. New York: John Wiley.
- Leitch, M. and Tangri, S. (1988). Barriers to Home-School Collaboration. *Educational Horizon*. 66(2): 70-74.
- Lighfoot, S. (1978). *World Apart: Relationships between families and schools*. New York: Oxford University Press.

- Wee Beng Neo, Jennifer (1995). The Role of Primary Schools in Soliciting Parent Involvement in Hulu Langat District. Unpublished Master of Science Thesis. Universiti Pertanian Malaysia.
- Wee Kok Leng. (1996). Penglibatan PIBG Di Sekolah: Persepsi Pengetua and AJK Guru Dalam PIBG di Sekolah Menengah Taman Tasik. Laporan Penyelidikan Ijazah Sarjana Pendidikan. Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.