Effective Strategies for Teachers Working with Transient Families, Families of Generational Poverty, and Families with Mental Illness

Approved:  Date: May 5, 2009

Paper Advisor
EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES FOR TEACHERS WORKING WITH TRANSIENT FAMILIES, FAMILIES OF GENERATIONAL POVERTY, AND FAMILIES WITH MENTAL ILLNESS.

A Seminar Paper

Presented to

the Graduate Faculty

University of Wisconsin-Platteville

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirement for the Degree

Master of Science in Education

by

Megan E. Crowe

2009
EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES FOR TEACHERS WORKING WITH TRANSIENT FAMILIES, FAMILIES OF GENERATIONAL POVERTY, AND FAMILIES WITH MENTAL ILLNESS.

Megan E. Crowe
Under the Supervision of Sue Alborn-Yilek

Statement of the Problem
The purpose of this paper is to identify strategies and create a problem-solving framework for educators to use when working with transient families, families of generational poverty, and families with mental illness. There is a lack of research on how to best serve the aforementioned families in regards to teachers and schools. As a special education teacher, it can be difficult at times to help students from these families. They can be inconsistent, difficult to contact, and sometimes with which difficult to communicate.

Methods and Procedures
Through a review of literature, it becomes clear that the only variable that can change enough to assist the students and families is the teacher. However, the evidence found in the literature points to a need for knowledge of families of transience, families of generational poverty, and families with mental illness.

Summary of Results
The results of the findings indicate that there are a variety of issues surrounding working with transient families, families of generational poverty, and families with mental illness. While these families have huge barriers in accessing
consistent education and meeting everyday needs, it is clear that the teachers are the lynch pin to their possible academic success. When teachers can develop a working construct of how to best serve these families, they can help reduce the barriers within school while reducing the amount of stress that these families can create. However, this depends upon the teacher’s flexibility and most importantly the understanding of the myriad of factors influencing the lives of the students and parents outside of school.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

APPLICATION PAGE ........................................................................................................... 1
TITLE PAGE ........................................................................................................................ 2
ABSTRACT ............................................................................................................................ 3
TABLE OF CONTENTS ........................................................................................................ 6
CHAPTER
I. INTRODUCTION ............................................................................................................. 7
   Statement of the Problem
   Purpose of Research
   Significance of Problem
   Assumptions
   Analysis of Research
   Method
   Definition of Terms
II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE ......................................................................................... 11
   Transient Families
   Families of Generational Poverty
   Families with Mental Illness
III. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS .................................................. 18
IV. REFERENCES ............................................................................................................... 21
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

As a teacher, working with families and watching the relationships between students, teachers, and parents grow can be a very rewarding experience. As the relationships grow stronger and the partnership develops, parents can be some of the most influential people on the success of a student in your classroom. The core elements of working with families of all kids are multifaceted. Creating consistent communication with parents is essential in helping bridge the gap between home and school. In turn, bridging this gap can be essential for getting a student to perform at optimal levels and keeping them accountable behaviorally and academically. In addition, a consistent call home and a form of documentation or phone log can be a way to keep track of communication and help strengthen the bond between parents and schools. Another way to strengthen the bond is to invite parents into the classroom so they have a vested interest in what students are doing and how the information the teacher is presenting is impacting their lives and making them grow. Students often become more involved and show pride in their work when parents visit the classroom. In addition, teachers visiting the homes of their students can be powerful and show that the bond between schools and home doesn’t end at the conclusion of the school day.
Statement of the Problem

Sometimes there are issues with parents and situations that can become barriers that are very difficult to overcome that lead to a student disconnect and can lead to teacher burn out. Some of the most difficult issues to overcome with parents and families include transients, generational poverty, and parents with mental health issues. Student difficulties such as emotional problems, learning disabilities, and language barriers are also problematic; they can be overcome or reasoned with by consistent attendance and flexible curriculum. Transient families, families from generational poverty, and parents with mental health issues often provide the largest barrier to overcome. Problems such as gaps in educational continuity and truancy due to often-uncontrollable factors can lead to difficulty with school connectivity. However, what can sometimes set these groups apart from others is that the inconsistency in communication can become a huge barrier. Issues that stem from these barriers are ones such as volatile or angry exchanges between parents and teachers (due to misinterpretations or miscommunications) and a sense of entitlement based on socioeconomic status (since one gets public services, teachers must ritually make extra efforts to accommodate their child). In larger schools, often transients, families of generational poverty, and parents/families with mental health issues are co-morbid and come in various layers. Due to the various layers, it is extremely important to understand each factor in order to develop a consistent approach to limiting the aforementioned barriers. The question this paper plans to address is when working with families of generational poverty, families with mental illness,
and transient families, what are the key components to creating a consistent framework to deal with the barriers to communication which can lead to stress, teacher burn out and student disconnect?

**Purpose of Research**

Special Education teachers can have some of the most rewarding jobs in the teaching industry. However, one theme that I have been able to note in my limited amount of teaching experience is that a large number of special education teachers have difficulty working with some parents. Sometimes these parents are often the focal points of stress that become a barrier to the students learning opportunity as well as huge time commitments that take the teacher away from the classroom. In addition, these parents can make teachers continually second guess their decisions based on possible conflict avoidance. When looking closely at the factors created by this barrier, the special education teachers have the most difficulty with parents who have mental illness, parents/families that are transient, and parents/families that come from generational poverty. The purpose of this paper is to look for effective strategies for working with each issue in order to reduce the stress that teachers have to endure from those issues.

**Significance of the Problem**

Some of the most difficult parents for teachers to work with have barriers they cannot control. While parents are the lynch pin to student success, it is important to understand some of the incredible barriers that can lead to discord between teachers and parents/families. Some of the most difficult issues for teachers show
up when teachers need to work with parents who are mentally ill, families from generational poverty, and families who are transient. These issues are often lumped into “difficult parents” categories though literature reviews. However, they need to be placed in a category of their own. Otherwise, the underlying factors drive these parents and teachers into barriers that can result in issues such as teacher burn out and parents/student disconnect.

Assumptions

For the purpose of this paper, it was assumed that all research and review of the current literature was accurately reported. It is also assumed that the literature will make recommendations on how best to use the research available.

Analysis of the Research

The research will be conducted in and through the Karrmann Library at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville, over one semester. Primary searches will be conducted via the internet through EBSCO host with ERIC and Academic Search Elite as the primary sources. Key search topics included:

- Teachers and Parents with Mental Illness
- Teachers and Difficult Parents
- Teachers and Families of Generational Poverty
- Teachers and Transient Families
- Teachers and Burn-out
Research on teacher burn out was limited to factors primarily aimed at relationships with parents, not factors such as lack of support or lack of teacher involvement.

Method

A review of literature on the factors affecting families of generational poverty, families with mental illness, and transient families in regards to educational barriers was conducted. The literature was compared to reviews of teachers working with difficult parents. The findings were summarized and recommendations were made.

Definition of Terms

Transient Families - A transient family is a family who moves, often from one area to another, or within an area. These families may include “children in need”, or children for whom there are believed to be child protection concerns. The families’ movement from place to place may compound such concerns. This movement may be associated with a deliberate attempt to evade the authorities, and on some occasions, with the intent to impede child protection procedures (Source).

Families with Mental Illness – Families who have difficulty with managing disabilities such as personality disorders, mood disorders, or other disorders that make their behaviors erratic or volatile.
Families of Generational Poverty – Families who have been defined as poor and unskilled due to factors such as mental illness, learning or emotional troubles, or criminal issues for two or more generations.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Transient Families

The first difficult barrier to overcome is working with transient families. Transient families are families that move or migrate from place to place based on job need or an inability to establish them in any one community for any duration of time. While there are many causes of transient families, they can be caused by generational poverty and mental health issues as well as unemployment and lack of skills necessary to secure long term employment that can pay for housing. Transient student are at serious academic risk due to the lack of academic and instructional continuity (Kunjufu, 2002). In addition, transient students have difficulty creating long lasting relationships and can be often ignored by teachers as they feel like they may not need to make a serious investment in time with those students (MacArthur and Higgins, 2003). Even though teachers can be an obstacle, they can also be an instrumental tool in helping students overcome some of the distance between parents, students, and schools. One of the ways teachers
can seriously help students is by drawing the parents into a partnership with themselves or the classroom. However, before that can happen, teachers need to focus on what is important about working with transient families. One area to focus on is to focus on the student and make him or her feel special or accepted (Nann, 1982). Doing this will possibly allow positive and collaborative communication home as transient families may be very difficult to reach. Creating this positive relationship based on the student can often get parents to answer the phone when they know the call is most likely for a good reason.

Another issue to consider when creating a partnership with transient families is not to dismiss the future. Create plans with families even if they may seem unrealistic. Help parents and students draw out a plan for the future education of the student. Throughout the educational planning, inform the parent as much as possible about the student abilities via testing and your informal classroom observations. Creating a paper trail to put in the students cumulative file can help the schoolwork with this family and create positive lines of communication where your work left off. Also, it is important to empathize with the family or parent and not to sympathize. Being a good listener can help the parents trust the school and provide valuable information about the student and their barriers to learning that may need to be overcome. Being a good listener extends to not wanting to help too much. Often teachers can find themselves eliciting advice and information that may make a parent feel embarrassed or inadequate and that can lead to a major obstacle for creating a positive working relationship with the parents. Finally, be available. Make time for any parent. If need be, go out of
your way to be available to a transient family or parent as they may only have short amounts of time they can talk due to work or other issues. Even being available on a Sunday via a phone call can make a huge difference to a parent and show you care tremendously about their son or daughter. With these ideas in mind, you can overcome most obstacles with transient parents.

Families of Generational Poverty

Another tough type of parent and family to work with are families from generational poverty. Generational poverty is described as being families who have been in poverty for two or more generations. Meaning parents and grandparents alike live below the poverty line financially. The issues surrounding generational poverty are numerous and can be difficult to pin point. However, Kerri McCormick (2003) developed a seven-point checklist of the “hidden rules” of generational poverty that should be noted for anyone working with students or parents from generational poverty families. This list includes:

**When looking at this list, it is important to note that this list assumes schools are middle or upper class institutions.

Food – Quality vs. quantity

Wealthy – The presentation of the food, making it aesthetically appealing is what is important.

Middle Class – The quality of the food is what is important

Generational Poverty – It is about the quantity; having enough to eat.

Fighting – How conflicts are resolved

Wealthy – Done through social exclusion and lawyers

Middle Class – Done verbally; issues are discussed.
Generational Poverty – Done physically with fists and bottles.

**The World** – How individuals see themselves in the World

Wealthy – Part of international/global world

Middle Class – National; staying within continent

Generational Poverty – Locally; rarely leaving the state or county.

**Time** – How it is viewed and perceived

Wealthy – Traditions and past history are what is important

Middle Class – The future is what matters; planning and preparing

Generational Poverty – It is about the present – living in the moment and meeting immediate needs.

**Destiny** – Fate vs. Choices

Wealthy – “Noblesse oblige”; the wealthy are bound by obligations that determine their destiny.

Middle Class- Believe in choices; change the future with well-made decisions.

Generational Poverty – Believe in fate; not much can be done to mitigate chance.

**Possessions** – What is important to own

Wealthy – One-of-a-kind objects, legacies, pedigrees

Middle Class – Material items (cars, electronic gadgets, and clothes)

Generational Poverty – People and relationships.

**Love and Acceptance** – What determines love and acceptance?

Wealthy – Whether the individual is connected and has social standing

Middle Class – Achievement and success

Generational Poverty – Whether the individual is liked.

What makes this list important is the fact that it illustrates that rules are different based on social class. Often, teachers with students of generational poverty try to hold students to a set of values they are not in line with or do not even understand (Beegle, 2003). It is this distance between the middle class institutions such as
schools and families of generational poverty that can create huge obstacles to communication as well as friction between parents and teachers.

Some of the ways to diffuse the socioeconomic rules can be done in a variety of steps that the teacher can easily do. However, most of the strategies for working with families from generational poverty surround creating a safe environment for the student at school (Sider and Uhruh, 2007). One way to help bridge the gap between parents and teachers is to allow some flexibility for some of the more difficult behaviors. As presented in the list above, it can be difficult to work on academics if you don’t know when or where you may get your next meal or if someone is trying to usurp your status in a friend group. By helping the student develop positive coping skills for social situations you can begin to break down some of the barriers. These skills and strategies will look different for each student. However, they should center on creating several positive outcomes for the same problem so they feel empowered through choice. This process can be excruciatingly difficult, as students will work within their social rules rather than the school rules when presented with fighting or social isolation. The important thing to remember is to stay positive. Students from generational poverty settings often reported school as a negative place for them as they often have to, again, play by a completely different set of rules. Another important strategy is linked to mentorship. A study done by (MacArthur and Higgins, 2003) indicated that early mentorship programs can often lead to increased education rate in students, which in turn, leads to a likelier positive interaction with schools and teachers. Thus, mentoring is a modeling strategy that students from generational poverty
situations hopefully have access to. This is important because parents from generational poverty need to see success in their children in order to help foster relationships. Often, parents who cannot meet the needs of their students feel ashamed and are distant with the schools. However, creating positive and successful school experiences will likely draw in parents to be more involved with the teacher and school as a whole. It is important to keep in mind that the rules the parents play by are similar to the students. Rather than impress upon the parents the differences, impress upon the parents the successes and that the flexibility of the school should foster his or her student’s academic growth. This type of understanding and flexibility shows you as a teacher care for the student and that you are appreciative of the parent’s ability to parent their student (Brooks-Gunn and Duncan 2000).

**Families with Mental Illness**

Some of the most difficult parents and families to work with are those who have mental health issues. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, at least one in five people over the age of 18 experiences a diagnosable mental health disorder at least one year during their life ([www.intellihealth.com](http://www.intellihealth.com)). Schizophrenia, depression, and bi-polar disorders are all mental health illnesses that can make it difficult to create positive relationships with the parents and families and hinder communication (Woolis and Hatfield, 2003). The communication is often inconsistent and, at times, can be immensely stressful as the parents can scream and threaten teachers on the phone even if the call home is a positive one. Without appropriate teacher and administrator support, these
relationships can lead to teacher burn out in a short amount of time (Ross, 2001). There are several things teachers can do in order to work with families and parents who have mental health issues. The strategies for working with these families and parents involve consistency. Being consistent in mannerisms and tone during a telephone conversation is extremely important. Consistency creates a framework and routine for parents that can alleviate stress and anxiety. Being aware of when to end a conversation is also key. If a parent becomes abusive or angry, it may be necessary to say, “I am sorry, but this conversation is inappropriate. I will be hanging up now. Have a nice day” (Wilde, 2000). This is followed immediately by the most important strategy for working with parents who have mental health issues. That strategy is to document all phone calls and contacts. This helps to recall earlier information and can help to relay information to school social workers and administrators who may or may not be involved with the student.
CHAPTER 3

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Families and parents from transient situations, generational poverty, and those parents with mental health issues can be some of the most difficult and trying parents to work with due to factors outside of their control. They can lead to several symptoms identified as teacher burn out, such as emotional distress, feelings of worthlessness, and disconnections from staff. However, there are some basic strategies for creating effective and positive relationships with all three groups discussed above. The strategies include:

1. Stay positive about the parents and student. Be sensitive! No matter how tense a situation becomes, always remember that your student is someone’s precious baby. Open your conversation with parents by acknowledging the child’s strengths before you focus on areas of concern.

2. Document phone calls (all of them). This creates a way for teachers to cover their communications.

3. Document formal and informal student progress, barriers, and successes. This can be a useful tool in helping parents feel as though they are a part of the student’s education and success.

4. Create a supportive environment that students feel comfortable in. This will be based mainly on grade level, region, and current student interests.
5. Call home in order to bridge the gap between home and school. Sometimes common interests, such as activities, hobbies, or sports can link parents and teachers together. Finding common ground can be very useful.

6. Be consistent. Use the same approach for each parent if possible. This can create a comfortable environment for families to share information and experiences with you.

7. Understand that the rules may change between social classes. As mentioned in the literature review, there can be differences with each social class. It is important to understand them in order to avoid assumptions that could lead to conflict or personality differences between teachers and parents.

8. Avoid confrontation and giving advice. One important issue for teachers is to avoid giving advice. It is important to help people find resources. However, giving advice or confronting them about decisions can create barriers in working with parents. Teachers may be viewed as bossy or parents may try to blame teachers for failed advice.

9. Be available. Try to make yourself available. Parents often have jobs that hinder their availability at convenient teaching times.

10. Be a good listener, even when parents are angry and venting. You should not tolerate personal attacks. You can say, “This conversation is over. Please discuss any further concern with my administrator.” Walk away or hang up the phone. It may sound rude, but you must protect yourself. Something regrettable may be
said when trying to defend yourself. Being unaware of when to stop a parent can lead to major trouble down the line.

11. Remember the underlying factors. As a teacher, we need to place ourselves in the “shoes” of others in order to understand the gravity, desperation, or differences in communication styles and messages trying to be conveyed. Remembering to think outside of the school day can help bring perspective that can lead to more empathetic conversations.

The most important issue of all is to understand what you as a teacher are comfortable with doing and to always push yourself to help parents and students in order to create long lasting positive relationships. Even with the barriers and difficulties, it is the teacher’s job to create lasting and positive relationships with the parents and families. A positive relationship is the key to unlocking every student’s ability to achieve. It is also important to remember that it is not the fault of anyone when the barriers to communication cause burn out. They are life’s circumstances and may never be overcome.
REFERENCES


Website: http://www.intelihealth.com/IH/ih/IH/WSIHW000/8271/8849.html

