

Engaging families after Covid: reconnecting in the classroom

Natalie Tye

*Early Childhood, Elementary, Middle School and Physical Education,
University of Central Missouri, Warrensburg, Missouri, USA*

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Abstract

Purpose – Prior to Covid, family involvement was on a forward movement of becoming a more involved, collaborative relationship between teachers and families of students. Just as family involvement was beginning to gain momentum with student-led conferences, in and out of school volunteer opportunities and families being seen as a valued perspective regarding student learning, Covid happened. This one event changed how families were seen within the school system. Through reflection with clinical candidates experiencing the effects of Covid and engagement experiences with families in the classroom, two different themes emerged regarding how schools have moved forward since Covid. Some schools found families to be a valued partner in student learning where other districts chose to use Covid as a reason for shutting the doors to family involvement. This article aims to address the family engagement timeline beginning prior to Covid, the perceptions of clinical candidates based on their experiences in classrooms, and innovative strategies for supporting future engagement with families.

Design/methodology/approach – The work provides a summary of family involvement pre-existent to Covid, during the pandemic and post-Covid through a review of the literature and emerging from teacher candidate experiences in the school setting.

Findings – After a careful review of literature and reflection of current teacher candidate experiences in the school system, two clear movements have emerged as Covid restrictions have been lowered. Where some districts are relieved by a lowering of visitor restrictions with the increased involvement of families in the building, other schools have tightened restrictions on families, causing increased tension on parent-teacher relationships. These schools are left caught in the pandemic, unaware or unsure of how to proceed in a post-pandemic world. This article provides key aspects to include in creating a plan for engaging with families and creating strong reciprocal relationships.

Originality/value – Valuing families in the school setting is crucial for developing strong relationships among teachers, students, student supports and the families who are raising these children. With increased social emotional needs in students, post-Covid, allowing families to contribute to discussion and planning regarding their children is mutually beneficial. Including families in school learning, planning and opportunities leads to positive family engagement and overall increased success in students, extending to the value educators place on involving these families. In addition, modeling how to positively engage families in school learning supports clinical partnerships with area universities. Where schools and classrooms are developing intergrated plans to include families in school learning experiences, future educators are able to better see and value the role of the family in education. When clinical candidates are not able to observe positive interactions between schools and families, there is a disconnect between school learning and home life that may never be explored.

Keywords Involvement, Partnership, Family engagement, Covid, Clinical Preparation

Paper type Research paper

Received 17 January 2023
Revised 19 January 2023
Accepted 19 January 2023

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This article was accepted under the previous editorial team.

The following Nine Essentials are highlighted in this article:

Essential 1: A Comprehensive Mission

Essential 2: Clinical Preparation

Essential 4: Reflection and Innovation



PDS Partners: Bridging Research
to Practice
Vol. 18 No. 1, 2023
pp. 61-69
Emerald Publishing Limited
e-ISSN: 2833-2059
p-ISSN: 2833-2040
DOI 10.1108/PDSP-01-2023-0003

Introduction

Is family involvement a thing of the past or has the value of the family increased when parents rose to the occasion during the season of Covid? Prior to the pandemic, family involvement was at the brink of becoming a more engaged experience where families could be viewed as an equal partner in the learning process. As Covid changed our world and the way schools functioned, it changed the role of families in the school as well. Through an unprecedented time, families stepped up to new roles and responsibilities in order to support virtual instruction. When safety measures decreased and schools began to open, some families continued on this path to a truly reciprocal partnership in the classroom. Other families found themselves pushed out of the classroom and school completely, not at all in line with their experience as a partner in teaching their children as they were during Covid. This article addresses the family engagement timeline and provides a path to embracing families in the school system through meaningful, reciprocal relationships to better support student learning and future educational success through the sharing of resources, innovative approaches, and building on the already established traditions within the school system to support current teachers and prepare clinical candidates for the teaching profession (NAPDS Essential 2: Clinical Preparation, 4: Reflection and Innovation, 9: Resources and recognition). By enhancing involvement opportunities and encouraging schools to establish a district-wide mission aimed to advance equity among families within the school system and larger community, families and educators will become partners in planning for student success (NAPDS Essential 1: A comprehensive mission).

Traditional family involvement

What is family involvement? The concept of involving families in school learning has evolved over time (Hiatt-Michael, 2003). Where involvement originated as notification of upcoming events at school and volunteering time in the classroom, involvement has become more engaged with purpose (Funkhouser & Gonzales, n.d; Hiatt-Michael, 2010). Some may still consider involvement to be providing information related to school routines, experiences, learning and events. Others may view involvement as the engaged partnership between families and school staff. It is through this partnership that families feel valued for their own culture and experiences, as well as their role as the first teacher of their children. It is through the evolution of valuing families, their culture and their experiences that involvement has transformed into engagement. Involvement is so much more than setting up for a class party or bringing snacks to teachers after a long week of testing. To truly provide an engaging experience for families, a mutual partnership must be established within the school and expanding into the home.

By addressing what is at the heart of involvement, we find that engagement may be a more fitting word for the actions that are present in a unified district where families are valued for their role in their child's life. Family engagement is the inclusion and participation of families within the realm of education, including opportunities and experiences to partake in meaningful interactions with their own children in and out of the school setting (Wilder, 2014). It is through these engaging experiences that educators, families and administration have realized the power families have on their children's educational success. No matter what form of engagement that takes place, children will have noticeable gains in their learning (Nisbet, 2021).

Family involvement has taken many forms through our educational timeline and these changes have come to the forefront of many districts agendas with recent radical changes through a pandemic. From a traditional standpoint, family involvement has sometimes been misinterpreted or underestimated within the school system and in society. Involvement has sometimes been viewed as volunteering for field trips and donating baked goods for fundraisers. In addition, by limiting families' interactions to volunteer work and monetary

donations, schools have created barriers to participation and a lack of care regarding what happens within the walls of the classroom on a daily basis. Many families are unable to be present during the school day due to work schedules and a quick solution for some school staff has been to offer these parents the opportunity to donate materials, gifts or money as a substitute for not being physically present. It is from this very perception, that the value of the family has been downplayed in the school setting and limited in scope.

Within the university setting, it can often be challenging to prepare clinical candidates for family involvement experiences. This is sometimes attributed to their own understanding of what family involvement looks like as reflected in their own educational background as a student going through the school system. Often candidates share stories of one parent who was able to take off work and attend classroom activities or another parent struggling to find opportunities to ever attend school functions. Traditional family involvement experiences have an impact on the value placed on including families and on the role universities play in encouraging involvement. It is through these unique experiences that a foundation for valuing families in the classroom is laid.

Even with a clear understanding of what family involvement is, clinical candidates can struggle with experiencing the act of involving families in classroom learning when cooperating teachers are not being observed implementing strategies to actively include families. Even observing minimal traditional family involvement strategies supports clinical candidate understanding and provides some desire for candidates to consider involving families in their future classroom. For these clinical candidates, it can be disheartening to see a lack of inclusion from within their preparation program.

Why is it important to include families?

When discussing family engagement, it's important to note that generally, parents want to be included in their children's learning at school. When families are embraced and welcomed in the school learning environment children are more connected with school and better able to develop positive relationships with their peers, teachers and thinking regarding learning (Comer & Haynes, 1997). With over thirty years of research to support how essential family involvement is for student success, districts and individual school buildings should already have involvement efforts at the forefront of year-long planning (Nisbet, 2021). Increased participation from family members in the school setting impacts students' desire to be in school, raising attendance and grades (Paul, 2020). It is through shared goal setting, collaboration and communication that relationships are built and sustained in the school setting. By creating a culture of collaboration and community with families through strategic experiences and opportunities, families desire to become engaged in their child's learning as well as advocate for district needs (Funkhouser & Gonzales, n.d.).

For clinical preparation programs, clinical candidates often lack confidence and understanding of the importance of valuing families in learning experiences (de Bruine *et al.*, 2014) This can be attributed to their own experiences as a child with family members included or not included in their education, their ability to observe and experience family involvement activities as a candidate in the school, or even perceptions of current educators in the field being shared. When clinical candidates are able to observe and plan for family involvement experiences in their educator preparation programs, there is a deeper appreciation for including families. Those candidates who have positive experiences and discussions surrounding them about families are more apt to appreciate families in their own future classrooms. It is through observations and interactions in the classroom with families, and the ability to observe how and why to interact with families that shapes clinical candidate perceptions of family involvement (Hindin, 2010).

When considering families and students, family involvement can make a significant difference in student outcomes (Castro *et al.*, 2015). Simply informing families can increase family understanding of class work and provide clarity regarding teaching goals. The more involved families are in school-based learning, the better the outcomes are for students (Hindin, 2010). Some of the more traditional roles parents play, include volunteering in classrooms, being present for conferences, attending field trips and planning class parties. Some efforts schools provide to welcome families include classroom or school open house events, all school assemblies with families welcome, and invitations to school awards ceremonies. Allowing families to feel welcome in the school is essential to developing strong relationships that last but the collaboration does not stop there. There is no reason for families to not be included in conversations and discussions at the district, school and classroom level. More in-depth and relationship centered approaches to involving families include goal setting discussions and invitations to contribute to current and ongoing school-related topics.

How COVID reframed family involvement

Just when schools were finding new ways to involve families in their children's learning during the school day, COVID hit. Just prior to Covid, schools had open door experiences and events to support relationship building with families, encouraging participation in the classroom through a variety of experiences. And then there was COVID. Overnight, families became the bridge between home and school, delivering and supporting instruction, communicating with teachers, and assisting students in homework completion, being labeled as critical to alternative methods to instructional learning (Rivera-Vargas, 2021). Many educators found creative ways to include families in the learning process while school doors were closed and learning was placed in the hands of family members (Carrión-Martínez, Pinel-Martínez, Pérez-Esteban, & Román-Sánchez, 2021). Teachers relied on families to supply technology support, materials and additional time assisting with school work completion. Many teachers took the time to communicate often with families, showing appreciation for the work being done at home as well as offering support and understanding for what families were going through (Paul, 2020). Further, families were able to have a window to classroom learning by participating in virtual class instruction, online resources and educational platforms increasing appreciation for teachers and understanding the teacher's role in their child's education.

After Covid research has revealed an increase in family involvement and overall communication between parents and teachers during the pandemic (Klein, 2021). Schools were able to see the increased communication with families as well as opportunities to engage with families through meaningful interactions. Rather than whole class reporting and generic curriculum maps being shared with families weekly or monthly to show progress or planning, there was a shift in focus for communication, including families in focused conversations regarding their child's individual learning (Klein, 2021). Family involvement was able to transform into truly reciprocal engagement and relationship building opportunities due to a forced need to include families in new and more relevant ways through and due to the pandemic.

Where are we now?

Two different movements have occurred regarding family involvement with the lowered restrictions regarding Covid. Where some districts found a renewed opportunity to engage families in school learning, other schools opened the doors for students but created tighter restrictions for families. In these schools, families moved from having a central role as a teacher of their child's learning during the pandemic to being closed out of the classroom completely. Families found themselves receiving weekly notifications of learning happening in the school, a traditional notification strategy not a modern involvement experience.

This rapid change in roles for families has caused tension on parent-teacher relationships. For these families, frustration has taken over and relationships within the schools have been

further strained, decreasing engagement and desire to support the district (Winthrop, 2022). While families were confided in and included in planning for learning experiences as recent as months earlier, parents are now finding themselves on the outside looking in.

Preparing future educators for quality involvement

Even when working with future educators at a local university to develop a deeper understanding of family engagement, it has become clear that few quality examples exist to model the relationship building required to adequately engage and include families. Teacher candidates were assigned the task of creating a family engagement experience that supports classroom learning focusing on project topics and raises positive awareness of how to meaningfully engage families. In order to plan, candidates first gained insight on relationship building through different forms of interaction. Once a firm foundation was established, candidates were able to focus on engaging families. The created plan must be relevant to in-class learning, extend learning from the classroom and allow for families to extend learning through their own culture and experiences (see Figure 1). Candidates were expected to later implement the approved plan in assigned field placements.

Parameters set for the experience included an activity that is based on current topic work with students in the classroom, utilization of family experiences and background knowledge of the topic, hands-on learning, with an emphasis on play. Candidates were not allowed to ask families to purchase items or make special trips as a part of the activity.

When these teacher candidates were given the assignment, they met the project with hesitation and concern that families would not want to participate in school learning experiences. With much convincing, these junior level teacher candidates were willing to create a plan that supports classroom learning and engages families in quality experiences with their children. Initial ideas generated from the candidates included purchasing items for the classroom or suggesting families should take their children out into the community to

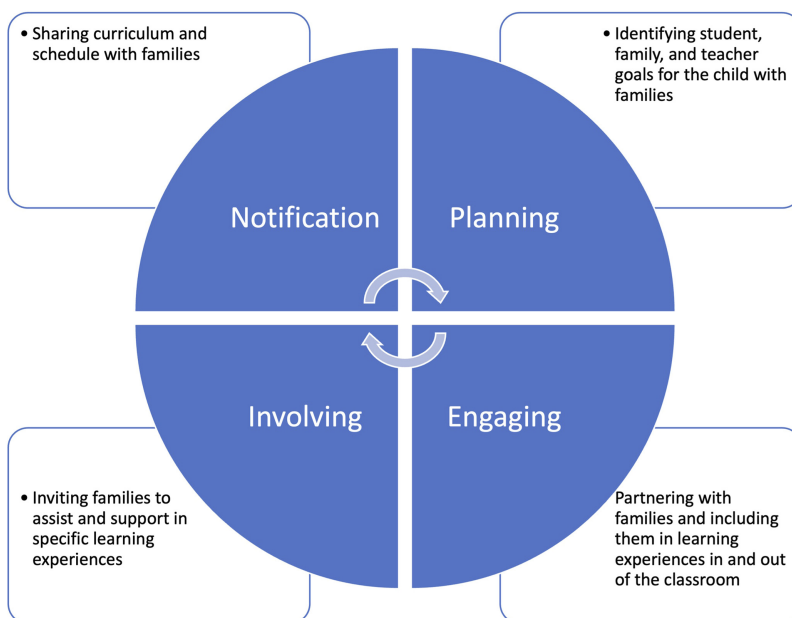


Figure 1. Successful progression for family involvement experiences

extend learning through supporting local business or by creating background knowledge for classroom work. Few of the ideas identified collaboration or communication between families and teachers suggesting that these future educators have not experienced family engagement as a student in the public school system or strategies to support family engagement were not evident to students in the classroom. In addition, some classroom teachers even discouraged the teacher candidates from completing the experience, “The teacher responded by informing me (the teacher candidate) that it was a 50/50 chance that the parents would even read the letter.”

After implementing the planned experiences with families, the candidates discovered that parents did work with their children to complete the project, as well as return feedback to the school about the engaging experience. Upon reflection, one candidate said, “In the future I think in order for my students to get all the opportunities in their learning, family involvement is key.” Other candidates had similar experiences with the project. Many reflected with a positive view regarding the involvement of families in school learning experiences. This candidate shared, “This involving families project was also a great way to get the students more engaged in their learning experience. Both children seemed to have a great time, and I am glad that their families were able to see their child’s excitement in the learning process as well.” Another candidate echoed similarly by adding, “When children feel supported and encouraged by their families, they are more likely to succeed in the classroom, and it is our job as educators to continuously provide and present the opportunity for these scenarios to take place – both at home and at school.” And lastly, another teacher candidate found the experience to be empowering by sharing “this activity gave me a chance to see what it would be like in the future [to implement family involvement experiences] and know what I can do to better get families involved [in the classroom].”

It is through this revelation that we must try to involve families rather than assume families do not want to be involved that we begin to realize that without careful planning, the cycle will repeat with a new generation of educators on the horizon. It is imperative to teach educators, future and current, what true family engagement looks like and how we can shift our focus to engaging families rather than seeing them as an additional support for our teaching in the classroom or as a resource to create funding for the school.

Not all districts have reverted back to pre-Covid parent involvement plans with little to no efforts taking place to include families in school learning experiences. Some schools have re-envisioned family engagement, recognizing the value of families in the learning process and not wanting to turn back time to pre-Covid family involvement strategies and experiences. For these schools, it took living through a pandemic to truly realize the role families hold in the learning process and value the strengthened relationships that formed due to new opportunities to involve families (Klein, 2021). Districts choosing to embrace a new model of family engagement find it is essential to create and support relationships with families and provide new opportunities for families to feel included in decision making for their students (GFRP, 2021; Winthrop, 2022). District and building staff has reimagined engagement with families through Covid and have continued to push the boundaries of traditional family involvement through development of new practices and supports to include a more inclusive voice for students. These strategies include virtual family conferences, teacher-parent partnerships, family and school goal setting, virtual student performances, data sessions, and listening to families sessions to name a few. It is through varied experiences and involvement opportunities that families find flexibility in how and when they are able to contribute to discussion and learning experiences.

Planning for family engagement

When setting out to create a new, re-envisioned plan for engaging families, there are key aspects to include in the process. It is through a commitment to a more collaborative community that planning becomes purposeful (NAPDS Essential 1). Careful planning requires relationship building, inclusion, equity and valuable contribution to learning experiences. Families want to be valued and respected within their role as their child's first teacher. It is through the family that we are truly able to know about the child. By creating a plan that accepts and supports this view of the family, schools will be able to grow through mutual respect and trust. Planning can happen within the classroom, a grade level, a school or even within a district. At all levels of planning, university partners and clinical candidates can be sources of knowledge to assist in generating innovative ideas to move beyond notifying families of events and experiences, and instead support relationship building through planning, involving, and engaging. Clinical candidates come with knowledge, personal experience, and a desire to collaborate. It is through the school-university partnership that educators and administration can reenvision family engagement. Schools that take their planning to the district level are more successful in implementation and maintenance due to a stronger support structure. Creating a district-wide plan for engaging families in reciprocal experiences and opportunities on-boards families, staff and educational partners within the community quickly creating a positive outlook regarding the inclusion of families within learning opportunities and events.

Relationship building is at the heart of this planning. This includes leading with positivity, being transparent in interactions and setting a plan for communication that is mutually beneficial for all families and stakeholders which includes identifying how families are most comfortable and able to communicate with school and district staff. This can be accomplished through a beginning of the year survey where communication preferences are collected for each family. This is a simple, yet effective strategy for building relationships that breaks down barriers to equal access of knowledge and experiences within the school. This also diminishes a persona that families are not interested in their child's education but instead sheds light on subtle injustices that occur naturally within a traditional family involvement plan.

Seeing and valuing families as an asset is crucial to developing strong relationships in the school. Families want and desire to be included. Parents are knowledgeable when it comes to their children and their children's experiences. Allowing families to contribute to discussion and planning is mutually beneficial. The family may not have all the answers, but they have a piece of the puzzle that the teacher does not have. Asking families about goals they have for their child, or asking about aspirations for their children are the starting point in honing in on educational plans for students. When families are a part of the goal setting process for their child they feel invested in the learning process and are better prepared to support students in goal attainment through the year.

Creating experiences where families can meaningfully contribute to the learning process allows families to become equal partners in teaching experiences. Within traditional models for involvement invisible barriers exist that prohibit families from being involved to the extent that they would prefer. These barriers create resentment from both the school staff and the families; staff thinking the family does not want to be involved and families feeling helpless in communicating about their child's success. Simple strategies to support community partnership that involves families, staff and community partners include sharing knowledge on a topic being discussed in the classroom, bringing in artifacts that contribute to learning experiences and engaging in projects at home that allow families to add aspects of their culture and knowledge. To further support this relationship, community partners can provide additional support to the model by contributing knowledge and artifacts to classroom learning experiences.

Diversifying engagement opportunities allows families to contribute and participate more freely based on their own schedules. Not all families can stop everything and come into the classroom and not all families want to come into the classroom to participate. By including opportunities that exist within the classroom and also outside the classroom, families can self-select their own comfort level of interaction, as well as feel valued in their role. These experiences are more relevant than sending in materials or monetary donations that go towards teaching and keep parents out of the classroom. The opportunities created to include families are investments in their children's learning.

Involving university partners in planning

By modeling opportunities for involvement within the classroom, school and district, future teacher educators see the value placed on families and the possibilities to engage with families in new and innovative ways: Removing stigmas to involving families and being open to new opportunities and strategies to an inclusive plan that leads to positive family engagement and overall student success which extends to the value future teacher educators place on involving families. Creating and implementing a new re-envisioned plan for involving families does not have to rest on the shoulders of the school or district alone. University partners can contribute to plan development, implementation and reflection on the process. Including future teacher educators in planning allows for practice and stronger understanding of the value for including families, considering equity and social justice in thinking about the family. An additional layer of planning including stakeholders provides support to strengthen collaborative work within the community and among educators and families (NAPDS Essential 1 and 9).

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Corresponding author

Natalie Tye can be contacted at: nty@ucmo.edu