

Education is a Partnership

As the year of the family draws to a close, it is proper that educators take stock of the role families play in the education of their children. Involvement, and participation used to be the words one used for it in the past, but today many consider them weak, and not spurring enough for action. Partnership, perhaps, is a more apt expression.

Family and school are the two termini between which students shuttle back and forth all their student-life. Naturally, any interaction between the two is considered important enough, but not always urgent. As a result people will wax eloquent about its need, but little may follow by way of action. After all we do not always do what we say is important, but what is urgent and commands immediate attention. Consequently, in the opinion of several persons, the relationship between family and school today, is characterized by disconnectedness.

What is Partnership?

Partnership is not used here in the sense of a business enterprise, in which case one would be concerned about turnovers, profits and tax returns. Instead here by the word we refer to the concern, loving care, enthusiasm, as well as the responsibility that the school and the family share together for the student.

A child is at the same time functioning under two fundamental curricula viz. that of the school and of the family. His day is spent meeting the requirements put forward by these two agencies. In the final analysis, his/her educated ness results from how he/she integrates these demands. If they conflict, his/her task becomes that much more complex.

A school can only work with the child that the family brings to it. To a large extent the family sets the programme of development that the child will ultimately follow. The school for its part helps to hasten/smoothen this process.

It behoves upon the family and school to play their respective roles as well as they can, without trying to impinge upon each other's functions. A family serves the cause of education not by becoming a school on its own, but by playing its own 'family' part, and vice-versa.

Of course, it is not as if partnership cannot be fruitful except in a perfect home or school. Limited as they are, partnership can succeed if the school and the family set out willingly to make the necessary adjustments to each other's shortcomings.

Partnership rings fearsome bells for some. But it needn't if we remember that in partnership each side brings forward the best they have to enrich each other's' efforts.

Research Findings

Recent researches have shown up significant findings in favour of partnerships:

- Programmes for curriculum reform and professional development yield better results when set against the backdrop of strong partnerships.

- Researches on excellent schools consistently show the schools having effective connectedness with its parent community.
- Michael Fullan, a researcher claims that: there is higher difference (for the better) in students' lives when the school and family work together"...

Partnership Today

A preliminary survey among some students and teachers, showed up several ways in which school-family partnerships function in different places.

Parent-Teacher Meetings

Though there are differences in the way they are conducted, many schools today have regular parent-teacher meetings on their calendar.

Family Follow up

Parents follow up children on their homework assignments, regular attendance and other duties.

Provide reinforcement

When parents concur with the principles that the school inculcates and encourage adherence to them, there is an implicit partnership at work between the school and the home. In its own gentler style, the family can reactivate the same principles.

Communication Networks

Some schools send out regular newsletters to the homes. While others have small parent groups that meet and discuss student progress.

What do we do when they come?

It is a usual practice to call parents to the school to check on their children's performance. But the crucial question is, what do we do when they come?

Marketing literature is very clear that it is one thing to get people to try you product once, but quite another to get them to make a habit of it. So it is with parent programs at the school. Parents often report that teachers who are so professionally trained in teaching and learning, throw all the basic principles about adult learning out of the window when parents come the school. They will sit a group of parent's hours? Worse still the school then asks why don't they come back?"

Ruby, 23, narrates two contrasting incidents from her own school days. She observed a conversation between a teacher and the father of a school friend. After the teacher had stated the case, the father said, "Perhaps my child is not yet grown up". But the teacher wouldn't buy it and stuck to her view that the child was grown up enough. Result: that parent never went back for another session, and her friend hasn't improved on that fault.

Quite the contrary happened when her own parents were called. There was a mutuality in the talk, and the teacher gave much credit to what they had to say. "Her parents were always eager to go back for more, and it helped me too", claims Ruby.

'Families!! Provide quality family life!'

Family does best help their children's education, not by playing teachers but by providing good family life. Quality of family life depends on several factors:

- ❖ **The way the parents treat each other:** It has been found that unresolved conflicts in the home affects the competence of primary school children's reading ability, self-esteem, skills and knowledge. The quality of the parents' intimate relationship is the source from which the children absorb the values and attitudes towards self and others that guide them later on in life.
- ❖ **The way parents treat their children:** If parents are accepting, involved and emotionally responsive, good academic performance can be expected from children. Through the caring love they experience in the home, children are drawn into the meaning systems of their parents.
- ❖ **Healthy balance between control and freedom:** This probably is the skill that most parents fail in some time or other. To know how to maintain this balance according to the growth needs of the child would be the litmus test for health parenting.

Restructuring and Reculturing

Partnership requires a collaborative culture where school and family encourage each other's growth, share power and support each other with trust. But some of our families may not be in a position to collaborate thus with the school, for limitations of various kinds. This might call for education of the families themselves. Nevertheless, we could assert that offering a type of education to a child, in which his own family cannot collaborate could, in the final analysis, make it unmanageable for the student. To the extent that the school and family are able to level with one another, experiences can become educative for their children.

It also helps parents to bear in mind that despite all they know or have learnt, parenting leaves much to be known, and that interaction with their child's school will accrue to their own betterment as parents.

In the School

Exercising partnership in the school calls for a cooperative culture within the school itself. The authorities by themselves may not be able to do very much since they encounter many obstacles like time involvement, overload from multiple demands, the much insecurity involved, and not being sure about what exactly to do. Many school executives find it hard to be both good administrators and transformative leaders. Bifurcations of these roles, as tried out in certain quarters, have helped only minimally to offset the problems.

Studies have shown that good programs of parent's partnerships have a very positive impact on the parents' attitudes towards the school. When a school encourages their involvement parents rate the interpersonal skills and abilities of teachers and management as high and express appreciation for their efforts.

How do Parents feel drawn in Partnership?

Small things: It is not big programmes that make parents feel welcome, but the small attitudinal things. Schools thus, make themselves into welcoming, friendly places.

Parent Development Programmes: Several schools that have regularly held different personal development programmes for their parents claim that the parents become much more responsive to the needs of their children and the school.

Communication: Not communicating makes the atmosphere dense and there is the danger of people imputing motives to the other person that are not true-the “he-who-is-not-with-me-is-against-me” way. On the other hand communicating makes it all lighter, and attitudes change with surprising speed. “We need periodic exchange of views” says Mrs. U. Ramachandran, a parent.

Invent new Ways: The traditional ways of asking parents to be involved are not working very well. Parents will get involved if they see that by doing so it will help their children. Parent programmes, while transmitting new knowledge should also provide new skills to implement it. Encourage parents to interact among themselves, so that in course of time, this can give rise to parent-networks, a very effective organ for school-improvement.