Helping Parents of Poverty: R.E.S.P.E.C.T and Training

These workshops are specifically designed for the low-income parents of 10- to 12-year-old students.

by L. Robert Furman

Parents are a child’s first teachers. They teach their children to walk, talk, ride their bikes, and a myriad of other skills, yet many parents don’t believe they are capable of helping their children when it comes to academics. They struggle with how to best get involved with their child’s learning both at home and at school. While parents from all levels of our society have this struggle, it is the parent of the student living in a disadvantaged, low-income home that is most likely to feel incapable (Cotton and Wikelund 2001).

According to Bandura et al. (2001), “the higher the family’s socioeconomic status, the stronger the parents’ beliefs in their efficacy to promote their children’s academic development and the higher the educational aspirations they have for them.” Social learning theorists define perceived self-efficacy as a sense of confidence regarding the performance of a specific task. Bandura (1986), the most frequently cited self-efficacy theorist, defines the construct as “people’s judgments of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances.” He goes on to say that “it is concerned not with the skills one has but with the judgments of what one can do with whatever skills one possesses.” Therefore, parents who lack confidence in their ability to help their children learn have low self-efficacy in this ability and they will be reluctant to get involved.

The importance of parental involvement in their child’s schoolwork is proved by empirical evidence during the past three decades that has repeatedly suggested that increasing family involvement with the academic work of their children produces measurable gains in student achievement.

Designing the Workshops

It was with this in mind that I developed the Parents Feeling Capable (Pfc) Workshops last fall, which are specifically targeted at the low socioeconomic parent and the preadolescent child (10 to 12 years old). Targeting the workshops to this specific audience brought critical considerations when designing the various workshop activities. After a review of adult learning theory and the research on adults of low socioeconomic status, I identified seven criteria to guide the planning and structuring of the parent workshops. The acronym R.E.S.P.E.C.T creates the framework:

R – Respect the capabilities of the parents. You may have to read everything aloud so as not to embarrass parents who can’t read (Robinson 1994).
E – Engage parents in the learning by using manipulatives and active learning devices (Cotton and Wikelund 2001).
S – Simplify the content by breaking it down into small, meaningful chunks (Ruzic and O’Connell 2001).
P – Payoff is required at first. You need to offer incentives to parents who fulfill obligations (Kelly 1996).
E – Environment needs to be totally nonthreatening (Knowles 1984).
C – Choices are critical to maintain a feeling of flexibility and for the parents to feel somewhat in control (Robinson 1994).
T – Time needs to be short and concentrated (Cotton and Wikelund 2001).

Focus of Workshops

The Pfc Workshops consist of 10 hours of activities spread over five weeks. It is recommended that the workshops be held in a school facility to get the participants
comfortable with the school environment. At the first meeting, have participants choose a parent-partner with whom they will be talking and sharing throughout the workshops. Participants also will have opportunities to work in small groups of four.

The first component of the Pfc Program embraces the need for parents to understand the importance of expectations for their children. According to Bandura et al. (2001), “The aspirations parents hold for their children also have a strong impact on their children’s academic aspirations and level of academic achievement.” The parents are asked to create a collage depicting their children in passages of 10-year increments. This hands-on experience then leads to a goal-setting discussion.

As suggested in *Turning Points* (1989), the Pfc Workshops describe the unique qualities of the preadolescent child and share knowledge, skills, and organizational strategies necessary to support this child at home. Parents have the opportunity to view a video specifically designed to underscore the developmental age characteristics of the preadolescent.

Homework organization and study strategies are emphasized to develop consistency and accommodate learning (Canter 1987). Research supports the need for parents to consider key elements when setting up their child’s homework area (Mau 1997).

Pfc Workshops arm parents with simple teaching tools to enable them to better work with their children on homework activities (Pellino 2004). We are not asking parents to become teachers, but rather giving them simple skills to allow them to support their children’s learning. These teaching tools are in the form of simple mnemonic devices and graphic organizers.

Mnemonic devices, such as formulas or rhymes, are used as an aid in storing information into one’s memory. Mastriopieri and Scruggs (1998) claim that these tools allow students to find a way to relate the information they are learning to information already in their long-term memory. Using music as an instructional tool is another means of developing mnemonics. Carney and Levin (2000) have found that the use of mnemonics can significantly increase the memory of content. Lombardi and Butera (1998) supported that same claim, but found it to be especially true for students with special needs. Hardiman (2001) listed mnemonic devices as a best practice in extending and refining knowledge.

There is also solid evidence for the effectiveness of graphic organizers in facilitating learning. Ruzic and O’Connell’s (2001) research shares that emerging patterns and relationships create opportunities for decision-making and the sharing of information: 10 out of 12 studies investigating the effects of graphic organizers reported some positive learning outcome(s).

The last component of the Pfc Program is to help develop parent-student positive interactions. Time is made available for free discussion evolving around the needs of the participants. Parents need to feel that the workshops have been shaped according to their needs (Chaika 2000).

Parents are asked to keep a journal during the participation weeks outlining the effectiveness of their learning as well as stumbling blocks encountered while working with their children.

**Projected Outcomes**

The first group to participate in the Pfc Workshops began the sessions on Feb. 1, 2006. Results and outcomes are expected to be finalized by the end of May. The expected short-term outcome of this project is to improve parental self-efficacy as it relates to working with their child on schoolwork. The long-term expected outcomes are parental support followed by student academic success, followed by further parental support and heightened parental expectations.

**References**


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