Parents Home School Communication Book

Introduction

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The Bridge London
Parents Home School Communication Book

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Empirical research has consistently demonstrated a link between the quality of parent teacher relationships and positive student outcomes across a range of areas including, academic skills, social-emotional skills, and behaviour regulation (Iruka, Winn, Kingsely, & Orthodoxou, 2011; Powell, Son, File & San Juan, 2010; Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta, Cox, & Bradley, 2003; Serpell & Mashburn, 2011). Pupil progress and outcomes are so tightly intertwined with family engagement, that it is imperative for schools to identify ways to create strong home school partnerships. A best practice, family-centred focus emphasises increasing family competency and capacity through active engagement with their child’s education (Brookman-Frazee, 2004), facilitated by excellent communication. Furthermore, the presence of high-quality, two-way home-school communication has been shown to significantly impact upon parental satisfaction. Specifically, “dissatisfied” parents cite poor communication as a major concern whereas “satisfied” parents noted good communication as a source of support from the school (Whitaker, 2007).

Collaborative parent-professional relationships are highlighted across the research literature as a crucial component for all students’ education, though this is particularly true for pupils with additional needs (Lines, Miller, and Arthur-Stanley, 2011; Stanley, 2011). Research looking at parent involvement with pupils with needs similar to some pupils at The Bridge echoes this point. The two-way partnership is the single biggest predictor of satisfaction with a school for parents of children with autism (Renty & Roeyers, 2006), and parent–professional collaboration is strongly and consistently related to parents’ sense of self-efficacy in supporting their child outside of school (Decker & Decker, 2003; Reich, Bickman, & Heflinger, 2004).

The positive impact upon self-efficacy that close partnerships have highlights the importance of fostering frequent communication between home and school in order to break a potential negative, cyclical process.

Parents are less likely to initiate communication with their child’s teacher when they feel uncomfortable at their child’s school (Fuller, 2005). A lower sense of self-efficacy can lead to a greater sense of alienation from their child’s school, indeed, parents of children with additional needs are particularly susceptible to poor self-efficacy (Stanley, 2008). In part due to a history of discrimination against families of children with additional needs, these parents frequently feel inadequate, incompetent, and intimidated in schools (Stanley, 2008).
Perhaps as a result of the potentially lower sense of self-efficacy, families consistently express a desire for interactions with teaching staff and other professionals to be more responsive and collaborative (Renty & Roeyers, 2006; Stoner & Angell, 2006). Therefore, in order to meet this need a highly responsive and collaborative form of communication must be put in place in school, particularly specialist schools. The collaborative nature of the communication (a shared document, for example) is central to the drive towards a perception of parity in terms of contribution to a pupil’s school life. When examining the historic difficulties with home school engagement Gasgoine (1995) points out that the problem lay “not in the role that each professional plays, but in the assumption that the professionals form one group, and parents another” (p. 45). Improving communication can help to break down this false dichotomy and enhancing the recognition that mutual support, joint problem solving, and communication involved in home school partnerships are a positive vehicle for a transforming vision of school culture (Epstein, 2001). Open channels of regular communication can counter the sense of being undervalued and ignored in schools that parents of children with additional needs, particularly autism, report feeling, as their expertise about their child is not acknowledged or encouraged by the school (Cheatham & Ostrosky, 2011; Stanley, 2008).

**Home and School Communication Books (HSCB)**

The main methods of maintaining home-school communication are through (a) informal contacts and social events, (b) telephone contacts, (c) written communications, (d) parent-teacher meetings, and (e) home visits (Hornby, 2000). In the limited research pertaining to home school communication methods, parents have identified a preference for more informal and frequent forms of communication such as written communications (Turnbull and Turnbull, 2001).

The use of HSCBs for pupils with additional needs has received a relatively limited amount of research (Davern, 2004; Fonteine, Zijlstra, & Vlaskamp, 2008; Hall, Wolfe, & Bollig, 2003; Williams & Cartledge, 1997). Fonteine, Zijlstra, and Vlaskamp (2008) examined the use of communication books for pupils with profound and multiple learning difficulties. They noted that a key benefits was that they made teachers aware of factors outside of school that may be impacting on a pupil’s school life.

When redesigning the HSCB at The Bridge part of the focus in terms of information provided from home was seeking any information regarding factors that could impact on school behaviour (such as changes to routine at home or poor sleep the night before). By focusing on key areas of information, both in terms of what home communicates to school and what school communicates to home the redesigned Bridge HSCB aimed to mitigate one of the primary barriers to their use, time constraint. Teachers have voiced their concerns about the amount of time necessary to fully engage in HSCBs and this may lead to lower engagement with them (Busby, Ingram, Bowron, Olive, & Lyons, 2012). Similarly parents have cited a lack of time as being one of the main reasons for low engagement with home school communication (Margaritou & Eftimie, 2011).

The simplified, yet more focused layout of the new HSCBs also sought to address one of the other primary barriers to their use, language. Previous versions of the HSCB simply contained a lined page that would need to be filled it with text. It also did not give the impression of being a collaborative document that sought contributions from both home and school. Parents could imply that they primary function of the HSCB was oneway communication. The over reliance on text and written language could have proved a significant barrier to accessing the HSCB. Whilst a range of language factors can contribute to a family having difficulty communicating with a school and subsequently feeling alienated and incompetent, when parents have a different dominant language and culture from that of the teacher, communication and collaboration are particularly hindered (Christenson &
Sheridan, 2001; Lines, Miller, & Arthur-Stanley, 2011). Differences in culture need not simply refer to heritage but also occupational cultures. Parents who possess a language difference (be that in terms of their mother tongue or knowledge of education terminology) from teachers are less likely to initiate contact with their child’s school (Fuller, 2005). Teachers’ use of language, especially in written communication may use unexplained technical jargon or acronyms that may lack clarity (Hall, Wolfe, & Bollig, 2003; Epstein, 2001; Simpson, 1995). The resigned HSCB therefore sought to minimise the impact that language differences may have by incorporating visual representations within the book alongside opportunities to write further text.

Further clarification, in terms of guiding teaching staff on what to include in the HSCB entries were included in the new Bridge HSCBs as a result of research evidence that highlighted how difficult it is for parents to read negative news everyday without a balance of good news and progress (Davern, 2004). The Bridge HSCB, therefore, provides a space for teachers to include information on what a student particularly enjoyed as well as what they might have found tricky.

The new Bridge HSCBs were designed based on a fundamental premise of the school, that the close home school relationship that The Bridge fosters is central to our success. The current evidence base regarding HSCBs alongside anecdotal information from our own parents helped inform the design. We are now currently looking to gain the views of our parents as to how effective they feel the new HSCBs to be.
References


