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Promoting Parent Involvement

An Action Research Report
by Erin A. Hlavaty

Promoting Parent Involvement

Submitted on May 21, 2015

in fulfillment of final requirements for the MAED degree
St. Catherine University
St. Paul, Minnesota

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Date: _____

Abstract

The purpose of this action research project was to find out parents' attitudes and desires to increase involvement opportunities through the home and/or school setting in order to improve the home-school relationship. Parents of students in a 3-6 year old Montessori classroom at a private school were asked to complete a parent involvement survey, attitude scale, and a parent involvement log in order to analyze current parent involvement. Data showed that the parents desire specific information as events and parent involvement opportunities occur, given verbally, in writing, and electronically, rather than an overview of the whole school year given in September. Infusing the Montessori philosophy of the classroom and school into the home was sought after by all families who participated in this action research project. Further research could center on different modes of involvement such as the use of photographs and video, and increased resources for parents.

A teacher in a Montessori classroom is responsible for preparing the environment in a manner that children can explore life on a level of their own understanding. Included in this preparation, a Montessori teacher must also develop a healthy relationship with parents to serve the whole child. Parent involvement in a child's education is a topic of discussion and research that has varying definitions. According to the article *Parent Involvement in Education: Toward an Understanding of Parents' Decision Making*, "Parents take a more community-centric view that includes keeping their children safe and getting them to school, whereas teachers define involvement primarily as parental presence at school" (Anderson & Minke, 2007, p. 311). Olmstead explained the difference between reactive and proactive involvement as "Reactive involvement in schooling includes activities such as attending meetings, family activities, or volunteering. Proactive involvement in children's learning includes activities such as helping with homework, staying informed about school events, and following a child's progress" (2013, p. 29). Barnyak and McNelly explained parent involvement as "Teachers play a direct role when parents volunteer in classrooms or are employed as paid paraprofessionals; teachers play an indirect role when they motivate parents to participate in learning activities at home with their children" (2009, p. 34). Brock and Edmunds described parent involvement in the three ways of "(a) creating partnerships between the home and school, sometimes formally (e.g., when parents share in the decision-making); (b) the educational role parents provide such as when they serve as volunteers or instructional aides and (c) parents who attend school events" (2010, p.49). Epstein described six types of parent involvement: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community

(2011). Parents, teachers, administrators and researchers alike continue to define parent involvement in varying ways yet one factor remains the same and that is the high level of importance parent involvement plays in a child's education.

However parent involvement may be defined, two recurrent models are the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler Model, and Epstein's Parent Involvement Model. The Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler Model of parent involvement explains the psychological perspective of parents' decisions to become involved in a series of five levels. Level one contains the parental involvement decision, level two contains the parents' choice of involvement forms, level three contains the mechanisms through which parent involvement influences child/student outcomes, level four contains tempering/mediating variables, and level five contains the child/student outcomes (Tekin, 2011). "There has been a great deal of research and literature on the effect of linkages between parents' self-efficacy and their involvement with their children's education at home and at school" (Barnyak & McNelly, 2009, p. 42). By the same token Olmstead stated "Teachers with higher sense of the importance of family involvement create classroom environments that provide substantial opportunities for family involvement activities. Parents, in turn, are likely to respond to such environments and become more involved in their students' classroom and school" (2013, p. 29).

While the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model of parent involvement focuses on the parents' perspectives, Epstein's model focuses more on the educators' perspectives. Tekin (2011) defines the six types of parent involvement in Epstein's model as:

Parenting is helping all families establish supportive home environments for children as students. Communicating is establishing effective two-way

communication about school programs and children's progress. Volunteering is recruiting and organizing parent help and support at school, home, or other locations. Learning at home is providing information and ideas to families about how to help their children at home with their learning. Decision making is having parents serve as representatives and leaders on school committees. Collaborating with the community is defined as identifying and integrating resources and services from the community to improve school programs. (pp. 10-11)

Barnyak and McNelly's study following Epstein's model of parent involvement found that "Teachers beliefs about the impact they have on parent involvement have been found to be a predictor of teachers' efforts to encourage parent involvement" (2009, p. 52). This same model is also dissected into home, school, and community spheres of influence that increase parent involvement (Olmstead, 2013, p. 29).

Brock and Edmunds defined parental involvement as "the various activities that contribute to (a) Home School Communication (HSC) and/or (b) Learning at Home (LH)" (2010, p. 48). Examples of home school communication may include parent-teacher conferences, work folders, report card pick up days, memos, notices, phone calls, newsletters, and school information (Brock & Edmunds, 2010). Olmstead outlined numerous uses for home school communication using technology including school and classroom websites, voice calling systems, email, parent portals, and social networking (Olmstead, 2013). Anderson and Minke suggested teacher invitations "had the strongest relationship with parents' involvement behaviors" highlighting the importance of home school communication (2007, p. 319).

Examples of learning at home may include families being given information on required skills for students, homework policies, and ways to discuss school work at home, and skill improvement on homework assignments (Brock & Edmunds, 2010). Barnyak and McNelly argued that “schools are not the only institutions in society in which teaching and learning occur. The family is a critical institution in this regard, and parents are teachers of their children (2009, p. 43). When examining the history of parent involvement in the United States, parent involvement began in the early 20th Century but came to the forefront with the introduction of Head Start in the 1960s and 1970s. “The major notion of parent involvement was that parents know what they want for their children and thereby should be involved in the school” (Tekin, 2011, p. 1).

While educators commonly recognize the benefits of parent involvement in schools, many are unable to effectively reach out to families. Parents may be unable to take time away from work to participate in school functions or activities. Parents may feel culturally or economically isolated from their school community, and feel uncomfortable reaching out. Parents may not know how to get involved, or even if they should. The purpose of my research is to involve parents by offering increased opportunities for parent involvement through the home and/or school setting in order to improve the home-school relationship.

Description of Research Process

This action research project was conducted within a 3-6 year old Montessori classroom in a school that offers Parent/Infant, Parent/Toddler, Transition, Early Childhood and an Early Elementary Montessori classroom. In my classroom and as a school overall minimal opportunities for parent involvement are presented but the

encouragement of donations throughout the year is emphasized repeatedly. Increased opportunities for parent involvement and the engagement of parents in considering how that involvement changes their perception of the school, if at all, was the premise for this action research. The purpose of the research is to increase parent involvement opportunities through the home and/or school setting in order to improve the home-school relationship.

My data was collected from multiple sources. To begin my action research, I sent the notification letter (Appendix A) to parents, who returned the letter with their signature stating whether or not their data may be included in the research. Out of the 26 families in my classroom, 20 agreed to be part of the study. One family asked that their data be removed two weeks into the study due to illness so the data collected is based upon the remaining 19 families. All parents were eligible to participate in the various parent involvement opportunities, regardless of their decision on if their data could be included in the research or not. In the first week, parents were asked to complete a survey (Appendix B) to help me understand their current knowledge of available parental involvement opportunities and impacts. The survey helped me to gather information about whether or not parents were aware of involvement opportunities and if they were interested in learning more.

All parents were interested in learning more so I examined their outlooks through a Parent Attitude Scale (Appendix C). In the second week of data collection, current opportunities for parent involvement were shared verbally and in writing: Parent Education Night attendance, Blossom Benefit Planning, Blossom Benefit Volunteer, Blossom Benefit Attendance, Birthday Celebration, Laundry Assistance, Guest Reader,

Line Time sharing of special interest/job/religion/travel, Supply Supporter, Classroom Observer, Verbal Inquiry, and Written Inquiry. Along with sharing opportunities with parents, suggestions from parents were encouraged and documented. Following this action, the Parent Involvement Log (Appendix D) and Popularity of Types of Involvement Tally Chart (Appendix E) were implemented and used for data collection. Through the Parent Involvement Log I was able to track the type of involvement in which parents chose to participate and answer questions as they were raised. An additional week of data collection was added due to severely cold weather causing three days of school closings.

In closing, a semi-structured interview (Appendix F) was conducted with participants in the action research study. This final method of data collection allowed me to analyze parent feedback over the course of the study and offered a final opportunity for collaboration.

Analysis of Data

Overall, parents were happy to be a part of my action research in collaborating to learn and share ways to improve the home-school relationship through increased parent involvement. Of the 26 families in our classroom 19 chose to participate in the study allowing for a sample of 73% of the class.

Based on question one in the initial Parent Involvement Survey, nine of the families were in their first year at our school and ten families have been a member of our community for at least one year. Question two indicated that 100% of the families were aware of parent involvement opportunities in the home and school setting. When asked to list the opportunities, 100% of the families listed our largest fundraising event of the

Blossom Benefit, 26.3% listed the opportunity to share a talent, interest, job, religion, travels, 36.8% listed Parent Education Nights, 5% listed the Garden Committee, and 10.5% listed the opportunity to observe in the classroom. Based on the response of the involvement opportunities that parents were aware of, gaps are noted in the actual number who are able or choose to participate in these opportunities versus awareness of the involvement opportunity (See Figure 1).

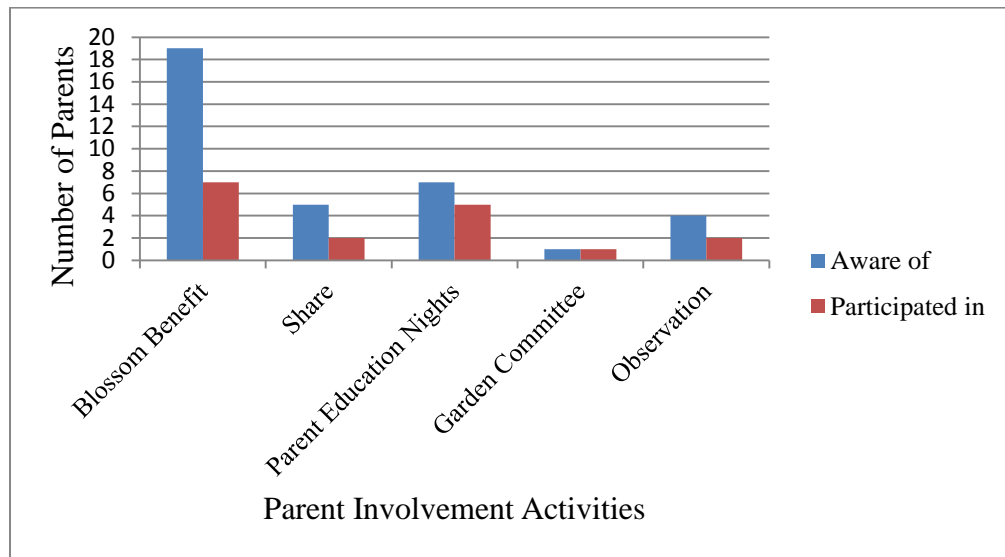


Figure 1. Parent Involvement Survey Results

In order to further examine parent outlooks they were asked to complete a Parent Attitude Scale using a Likert Scale. Parents indicated a degree of agreement or disagreement with a series of statements regarding parent involvement. While certain statements offered clear results of all parents in agreement or all parents in disagreement, there were other statements with results across the scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

For example, the statement “Our school has opportunities for assisting in fundraising activities” elicited the response of ten parents who strongly agree and nine

parents who agree and zero parents with the remaining response of indifferent, disagree, or strongly disagree. On the other end of the scale, the statement “Our school has a parent resource center (a place where parents can get information on parenting and school-related topics)” elicited the response of one parent who strongly agrees, one parent who agrees, four parents who are indifferent, eight parents who disagree, and five parents who strongly disagree. The statement “Parents are allotted time for communication with teachers” elicited responses across the scale. Four parents responded who strongly agree with the statement, five parents agree, one parent is indifferent, five parents disagree, and four parents strongly disagree. The wide array of these responses can be seen in Figure 2.

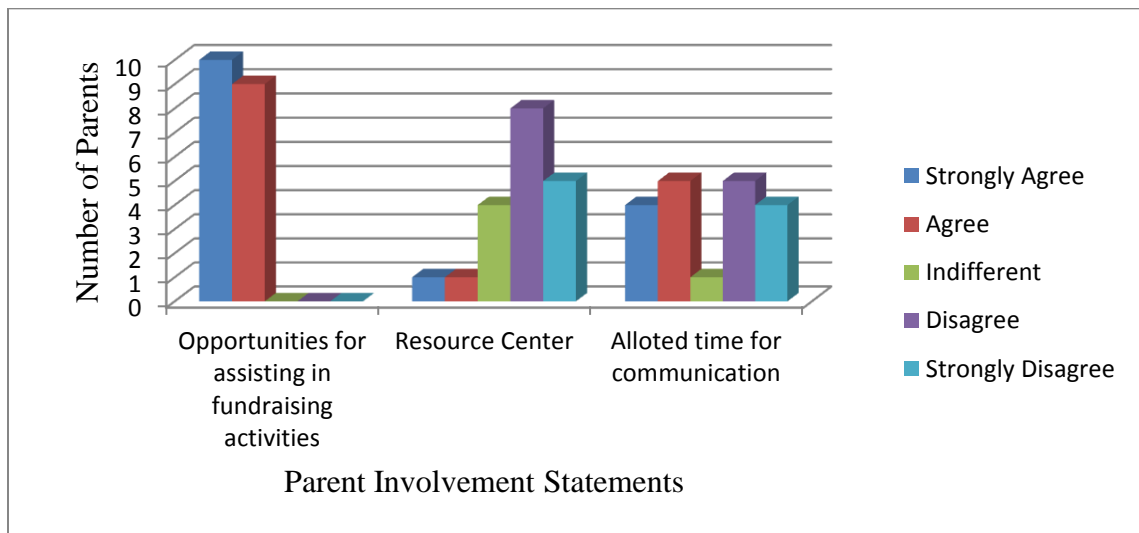


Figure 2. Parent Attitude Scale

While the Parent Attitude Scale elicited a variety of helpful responses it was through further examination of each statement that I was able to receive feedback as to where further conversation with parents was necessary. Following the implementation of the Parent Involvement Survey and the Parent Attitude Scale the next step in my research process was to share opportunities verbally and in writing. Subsequently I began data collection using the Parent Involvement Log (Appendix D) and the Popularity of

Involvement Tally Chart in order to document which opportunities were performed (See Table 1).

Table 1.

Popularity of Involvement

| <u>Type of Involvement</u> | <u>Tally of Parent Involvement Session</u> |
|---|--|
| Parent Orientation Meeting Attendance | //////// (10) |
| Blossom Benefit Planning | /// (3) |
| Blossom Benefit Volunteer | ///// (7) |
| Blossom Benefit Attendance | /////////(11) |
| Birthday Celebration | /// (3) |
| Laundry Assistance | /// (4) |
| Guest Reader | (0) |
| Line time sharing of special talent/interest/job/religion/travels | // (2) |
| Supply supporter | /// (4) |
| Classroom Observer | // (2) |
| Verbal Inquiry | //////////////// (18) |
| Written/Email Inquiry | //////////////// (16) |
| Other: Garden Committee | / (1) |
| Other: | |

Based on the data in Table 1, the primary means for involvement includes verbal inquiry and written/email inquiry. Due to the timing of this project, the Blossom Benefit offered opportunities for involvement. Upon further investigation with parents we noted that the majority of opportunities for parent involvement offered in our classroom and school require the parent's physical presence. The final form of data collection of the Semi-Structured Interview offered an opportunity for further collaboration with parents.

Through the interview, parents were able to express themselves freely following the prepared questions as a guide for conversation. Qualitative data was obtained in

order to serve as a gauge for success with regard to the promotion of parent involvement opportunities. One common theme present in each interviewee was the pleasure expressed for the chance to offer input regarding their involvement in our classroom and their child's education. A challenge that we continue to face is offering more opportunities for involvement in the home. Overall, 100% of the parents felt that participating in this study was a positive experience and felt more connected to the school. While the degree of connection varied amongst parents a foundation of communication has been established.

Action Plan

Impact of the action research

The results of the research conducted for the action research project will change my practice as a teacher. Previously the practice of our school in describing policies including opportunities for parent involvement was to distribute the parent handbook at a beginning of the year meeting, ask parents to read the handbook, and sign and return an insert acknowledging that it has been read. Through the research I have concluded that the parents desire specific information as events and opportunities occur, given verbally, in writing, and electronically, rather than an overview of the whole school year given in September.

Per school policy, communication was to be in writing through a child's communication folder that is transported daily. The amount of time it takes to write a letter to teachers, student absence, and time gap in communication for students who only attend on Monday/Wednesday/Friday or Tuesday/Thursday are a few of the frustrations expressed by parents. This previous method of communication did not meet the needs of

our parents and so a classroom email account has been set up in order to offer an additional method for communication. Administration has acknowledged the fact that our school policy regarding communication was out of date and allows each classroom to make the decision of methods to be used for parent communication. I am thankful for this action research project in being a source of change in support of our parents.

Infusing the Montessori philosophy into the home was sought after by all families who participated in this action research project. Parents also expressed the desire for increased opportunities for involvement both in the classroom and at home. Due to the majority of families having two working parents, the emphasis on opportunities to remain connected was proposed through technology. Offering parents the opportunity to see and experience what the children do each day at school can be conveyed through photographs and videos in the future. All families in the classroom have signed photo releases and so I am currently researching options for various sites, programs, etc. to share the glimpse into our classroom. Until a method is chosen email attachments are being used to share a minimum of one photograph with each family on a weekly basis. Currently a small section of our monthly newsletter focuses on a component of the Montessori philosophy yet some parents expressed the desire for more. Finding a balance of an appropriate amount of information, what type of information and the means to distribute will be ongoing.

Potential future action research investigation

Of the 19 families who participated in my action research project all of them expressed gratitude for the opportunity to express their feelings, thoughts, ideas, and have their involvement documented, analyzed, taken into consideration, and their voices heard.

One particular suggestion from a father whose third child is in her second year in my classroom, was to create a library system of Montessori materials available for “checkout” by the families. He came up with this idea after attending our parent education evening last month when observing a lesson we gave to the parents and connecting with an explanation of the Teens Boards his daughter had recently shared at bedtime. His feeling is that if the resources were available for families to borrow, parents/caregivers would have the opportunity to become more involved in understanding what it is that we do each day with these incredible hands on materials.

Financially and logistically there are certainly many questions that immediately came to my mind such as: Would the children become disinterested in the classroom work period with the additional use of materials at home? How much would this cost to essentially furnish an additional classroom? While I have started a list of my own questions I have also shared this idea with other parents and colleagues for further research.

When exploring all options for future action research investigation such as the suggested use of materials in the home, it is important to consider how authenticity will be maintained for the use of Montessori materials. As Maria Montessori herself observed, studied, and analyzed each child’s use of materials to guide individual growth, Montessori guides are also trained to do the same. Allowing use without the supervision of a trained adult can lead to the loss of each material’s intended purpose.

Creating a video of specific lessons to share with parents in a resource center grew out of a classmate’s suggestion. A parent attitude scale was completed for my project and the particular statement, “CBECC has a parent resource center (a place where

parents can gain information on parenting and school-related issues and can gather informally)” received the response of “indifferent” and “disagree” most frequently in response to having a parent resource center. A resource center does exist in a conference room through our main office and is filled with books, journals, magazines, lectures, reference materials, DVDs, VHS, and cds. As the survey demonstrated that parents do not use the resource center; further research could focus on why parents do not know about or do not choose to access the available resources. With the opportunity to actively participate in research with parents, this project showed that action was necessary to increase parent involvement in the home and school settings. The interests and needs of the participating parents were taken into account and plans of action for improvements are being formulated, reviewed, and will be implemented.

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Appendix ANotification Form

Dear Parents,

As you may know, I am a St. Catherine University student pursuing a Masters of Education degree. An important part of my program is the Action Research project.

As the teacher of your child in Room 105, I have chosen to research the impacts of increased outreach to parents and how this might impact their own understanding and interest in our school. I am very interested in learning more from you about how I can meaningfully and helpfully include parents in school opportunities going forward.

I will be writing about the results that I get from this research; however, none of the writing that I do will include the name of this school, the names of any students, or any references that would make it possible to identify outcomes connected to you. Other people will not know if you are in my study.

When I am done, my work will be electronically available online at the St. Catherine University library in a system called Sophia, which holds published reports written by faculty and graduate students at St. Catherine's. The goal of sharing my final research study report is to help other teachers who are also trying to improve their learning communities.

Previous research has shown that parent involvement can lead to improved communication and relations between the parents, teachers, and administrators. As well as developing parents' understanding of the school curriculum and the teacher's role, it is my hope that I can help all parents feel included in our classroom and our school.

If you decide you want to be included in my study, please note that on this form and return it by February 13, 2015. There is no penalty for not being involved in this study. In my final report, all information will be aggregated, and no names or information that would identify you or your child will be included in that report. If at any time you decide you do not want your data to be included in the study, I will remove included data to the best of my ability.

Should you choose to participate in this study a wide variety of activities will range from event planning, volunteering, and observing in the classroom to attending an event. Participation will vary amongst subjects and can be performed in school and/or at home. Data will be gathered through a Parent Survey, Parent Attitude Scale, Parent Involvement Log, and a Semi-Structured Interview. You can expect each data collection technique to last approximately 5 – 10 minutes to be performed using your preferred method: handout, email, phone, or in person at school.

If you decide you do not want to be included in my study, you do not need to do anything. All children will receive the same treatment in my class, regardless of your decision on this matter.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me, (773)975-6330 you may ask questions now, or if you have any additional questions later, you can ask me or my advisor, Jana Morgan Herman, janamorganherman@gmail.com, who will be happy to answer them. If you have other questions or concerns regarding the study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), you may also contact Dr. John Schmitt, Chair of the St. Catherine University Institutional Review Board, at (651) 690-7739. You may keep a copy of this form for your records.

I **do** want my data to be included in this study. Please respond by February 1, 2015.

Name of Child Date _____

Signature of Parent Date _____

Signature of Researcher Date _____

I have some questions about this before I decide. Please contact me.

Email or phone number _____

Best dates/time to reach me: _____

Appendix B

Parent Involvement Survey

Please note that completing this survey is totally voluntary. You do not need to complete this survey. If you want to answer these questions to help me understand parents' current understanding of available parental involvement opportunities and impacts, you are welcome to do so. I will not know who chose to complete this survey and who did not.

Is this your family's first year at CBECC? YES NO

 If so, has your family been involved in another school community? YES NO

 If not, how many years has your family been a member of the CBECC community? _____

Are you aware of parent involvement opportunities in the home and school setting? YES NO

 If so, what opportunities are you aware of? In which opportunities have you participated in the past?

 If not, are you interested in learning of parent involvement opportunities? YES NO

Appendix CParent Attitude Scale

Please indicate a degree of agreement or disagreement with each statement.

At CBECC, opportunities for parent involvement are offered.

Strongly Agree Agree Indifferent Disagree Strongly Disagree

My child is aware of ways I am involved in his/her educational experience.

Strongly Agree Agree Indifferent Disagree Strongly Disagree

CBECC has a parent resource center (a place where parents can get information on parenting and school-related topics).

Strongly Agree Agree Indifferent Disagree Strongly Disagree

CBECC has opportunities for serving as a volunteer in the classroom.

Strongly Agree Agree Indifferent Disagree Strongly Disagree

CBECC has opportunities for serving as a volunteer outside of the classroom.

Strongly Agree Agree Indifferent Disagree Strongly Disagree

CBECC has opportunities for participating in school wide activities.

Strongly Agree Agree Indifferent Disagree Strongly Disagree

CBECC has opportunities for assisting in fundraising activities.

Strongly Agree Agree Indifferent Disagree Strongly Disagree

CBECC has opportunities for parent education.

Strongly Agree Agree Indifferent Disagree Strongly Disagree

Parents are given **written** information about the goals and objectives of the school's Montessori curriculum.

Strongly Agree Agree Indifferent Disagree Strongly Disagree

Parents are given **verbal** information about the goals and objectives of the school's Montessori curriculum.

Strongly Agree Agree Indifferent Disagree Strongly Disagree

Parents are allotted time for communication with teachers.

Strongly Agree Agree Indifferent Disagree Strongly Disagree

Parents are given adequate methods for communication with teachers.

Strongly Agree Agree Indifferent Disagree Strongly Disagree

Appendix D

Parent Involvement Log

Date: _____

Type of involvement:

Please share any thoughts/feelings/comments about your involvement:

Do you have any questions in relation to your experience today?

Appendix E

Popularity of Types of Involvement Tally Chart

| <u>Type of Involvement</u> | <u>Tally of Parent Involvement Session</u> |
|---|--|
| Parent Orientation Meeting Attendance | |
| Blossom Benefit Planning | |
| Blossom Benefit Volunteer | |
| Blossom Benefit Attendance | |
| Birthday Celebration | |
| Laundry Assistance | |
| Guest Reader | |
| Line time sharing of special talent/interest/job/religion/travels | |
| Supply supporter | |
| Classroom Observer | |
| Verbal Inquiry | |
| Written Inquiry | |
| Other: | |
| Other: | |

Appendix F

Semi-structured Interview

What are some ways that the school and/or teacher has tried to involve you in your child's education at home? At school?

What was that experience like for you?

Does the school provide enough information and help for you to know how to be involved with your child? (If not, what kinds of things would you like to know more about?)

What are some of the things you do at home to support your child's education? What makes you do these things? (values, beliefs, request from teacher)

Do you have any suggestions for how the school could be more welcoming for parents? How could the school be more helpful to families or help more parents get involved?