

A Broader Definition of Home-School Collaboration

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In her essay, “Constructions of Parents and Languages of Parenting,” Judith Suissa examines how education policy documents, as well as academic and popular literature on both childrearing and home-school relations, all contribute to reductive notions of both parenting and education. She argues that all too often these various sources conflate education with formal schooling and fail to appreciate how “parents are *already*, by virtue of being parents, facing questions, dilemmas and situations, in their daily interaction with their children, that are *educational*” (emphasis added). In other words, these sources define education narrowly, as something that “goes on at school,” as opposed to something broader that also takes place in the sphere of the home. According to what Suissa calls “the dominance of the logic and language of schooling,” policy makers, curriculum planners, school administrators, and teachers are the ones who are charged with developing and implementing the educational agenda, while parents are reduced to mere “adjuncts” of this agenda. Parents are thought to contribute to their children’s education only insofar as they support the plans established by these other parties.

There is, I think, merit to the argument that policy discourse, as well as academic and popular literature, sometimes conflate education with formal schooling, thereby failing to acknowledge not only the unique and powerful contributions parents make to the education of their children, but also the “ethical and conceptual complexity of the parent-child relationship.” Suissa provides some telling examples of this unfortunate tendency. Yet there are also places in the essay where Suissa exaggerates the hegemony of the school and its agents. Her depiction of “home-school collaboration” — and the discourse surrounding it — is a case in point.

In the thought-provoking example at the center of her essay, Suissa describes her misgivings about a particular homework assignment that her son brings home from school — a religious education assignment asking him to explain “why it is important to control your anger.” Suissa is understandably concerned about the lessons her son stands to take away from this assignment. She does not want him to accept the assignment’s premise as a matter of course. Nor does she want him to simply generate a response that is likely to earn a high grade. Yet her son resists her efforts to lead him to question the assignment and its underlying message about the importance of anger management. As she describes it, what had the potential to be an illuminating and educationally rich discussion — an object lesson in the value of rational argument — instead devolves into a stressful and unproductive squabble. And Suissa comes away feeling like her educational role as a parent has been coöpted by the “omnipotent presence of School.”

This frustrating episode reinforces Suissa’s belief that home-school collaboration, as defined in the policy literature, reduces parents to mere adjuncts of the educational aims established by school officials. In the “official discourse,” Suissa

argues, “support[ing] your child’s learning” means accepting and conforming to the preestablished curriculum and enjoining your child to complete homework assignments without questioning their validity. Ultimately, she concludes, any attempt to lead her son to challenge the underlying message of his homework assignment will be at odds with her defined role as a parent. The parent’s “job” is to follow the directives of the school, and to encourage one’s children to do the same.

Is it true that under the banner of “home-school collaboration,” parents are expected to be mere pawns, carrying out the educational aims and agenda of the school and marching in lockstep with school officials? Has the parental role, in the “official discourse,” been so eviscerated that parents are no longer supposed to raise questions about potentially problematic homework assignments, much less have any voice in the design and implementation of the curriculum?

Thankfully, I do not think we have arrived at this Orwellian state of affairs. The phrases “home-school collaboration” and “parental involvement” (the term that features prominently in the No Child Left Behind Act) are generally used in policy and academic literature to describe a range of different activities. On the parents’ side, communicating with teachers, volunteering at the school, attending Parent Teacher Association meetings, running for the school board, and, yes, helping with homework are some of the activities that fall under the rubric of home-school collaboration. Likewise, on the school’s side, communicating with parents, soliciting their feedback and input, and providing information that is clear, straightforward, and accurate so that parents can make knowledgeable decisions about their children’s education also fall within the category of home-school collaboration. Notice that “home-school collaboration,” under this broader definition of the term, involves a give-and-take between parents and the school. It does not denote a one-sided relationship in which parents merely serve the school and its pre-established aims. Rather it denotes a relationship that is more genuinely *collaborative*. Perhaps I am being overly sanguine here, but I would venture to say that this broader definition of home-school collaboration is the one that pervades much of the policy and academic literature, and not the narrower, one-sided definition that Suissa outlines in her essay.

The United Kingdom policy document that Suissa cites at the beginning of her essay, in addition to calling on parents to support their children’s schooling by, among other things, being vigilant about homework, also calls for “measures to create a school system *shaped by parents*.”²¹ The document describes how, as a condition of passing state inspection, schools must “capture how they gather the views of parents” and “give examples of action taken based on the views of parents and other stakeholders.”²² It also calls for the establishment of “Parent Councils” as a way to “give many more parents a voice about the issues that matter.”²³ What such passages reveal is an attempt to frame home-school collaboration in terms of a partnership between parents and the school, rather than as a unidirectional relationship in which parents are merely doing the bidding of the school and its officials.

I do not want the preceding analysis to be mistaken for an unqualified embrace of the policy rhetoric on parent involvement in schools. Many policy makers take it

as a matter of faith that parent involvement leads to improvements in academic achievement, attendance, and student and parent attitudes toward school. Yet recent research into the effectiveness of parent involvement does not seem to bear this out.⁴ Furthermore, policy makers often fail to account for how parent involvement varies by race, class, and marital status, which, as one group of researchers points out, is particularly troubling “given that the rationale for many [parent involvement] programs is the improvement of conditions for ‘at-risk’ students.”⁵

What I have tried to argue in this response is that Suissa overstates the case in arguing that the language of home-school collaboration reduces parents to mere “adjuncts to the aims of education determined at the national level and implemented by public schooling.” But even if I am right here, this counts as a relatively minor blemish on an otherwise thoughtful and effectively argued essay. Ultimately, Suissa’s work serves as an important corrective to our tendency to view education too narrowly, as something that takes place only within the sphere of formal schooling, as well as to our tendency to underestimate the complexity of the parent-child relationship.

1. Department for Education and Skills, “Every Parent Matters” (2007), 23, http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/_doc/11184/6937_DFES_Every_Parent_Matters_FINAL_PDF_as_published_130307.pdf (emphasis added).

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. See Doreen J. Mattingly et al., “Evaluating Evaluations: The Case of Parent Involvement Programs,” *Review of Educational Research* 72, no. 4 (2002): 549–576; and Thurston Domina, “Leveling the Home Advantage: Assessing the Effectiveness of Parental Involvement in Elementary School,” *Sociology of Education* 78, no. 3 (2005): 233–249.

5. Mattingly et al., “Evaluating Evaluations,” 571.