TEACHERS INVOLVING PARENTS

Teachers Involving Parents (TIP): Results of an in-service teacher education program for enhancing parental involvement

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Abstract

Despite considerable theoretical and empirical work supporting the critical role of parents in students’ school success, pre-service teachers generally receive little preparation for involving parents. Responding to a need for in-service preparation, this paper reports a program designed to enhance practicing teachers’ beliefs, skills, and strategies related to parental involvement. Results of an initial test of the program in two U.S. public schools serving predominantly high-risk populations suggested that participation increased teachers’ sense of efficacy, and enhanced beliefs about parents’ efficacy for helping children learn as well as invitations to involvement. Results are discussed with reference to links between teacher beliefs and practices, diffusion of intervention effects within schools, directions for future research, and implications for the design and implementation of effective professional development programs.

Keywords: Parental involvement, teacher invitations to involvement, teacher efficacy, teacher beliefs about parent efficacy, belief-behavior links, teacher education, in-service education.
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A growing body of evidence supports the importance of parental involvement in education across varied cultural contexts (e.g., Bermudez, 1993; Chen & Stevenson, 1989; Constantino, Cui, & Faltis, 1991; Davies, 1993; Huss-Keeler, 1997; Moles, 1993; Okagaki, Frensch, & Gordon, 1995; Peng & Wright, 1994; Vincent, 1996). Parental involvement has been associated with stronger academic achievement by children and adolescents, as well as increases in student attributes conducive to academic success, including improved school attendance and behavior, more positive perceptions of classroom and school climate, stronger self-regulatory skills, stronger work orientation, and higher educational aspirations (e.g., Eccles & Harold, 1993; Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994; Haynes, Comer, & Hamilton-Lee, 1989; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Paulson, 1994; Siu-Chu & Willms, 1996; Steinberg, Elman, & Mounts, 1989; Zellman & Waterman, 1998).

In addition to enhancing student outcomes, effective parental engagement in children’s education also benefits parents and teachers. Numerous studies have suggested that when teachers invite them, parents from very diverse backgrounds can become productively involved in their children’s education (e.g., Epstein, 1992; Dauber & Epstein, 1993; Harry, 1992; Grolnick, Benjet, Kurowski, & Apostoleris, 1997; Krasnow, 1990; Pratt, Green, MacVicar, & Bountrogianni, 1992). For example, parents appreciate teacher guidance and may experience increased efficacy for helping their children learn when teachers offer specific suggestions for involvement (e.g., Epstein, 1986; Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Brissie, 1992; Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Burow, 1995). Further, teachers who invite parents’ involvement tend to report relatively high levels of teaching efficacy and support from parents, and tend to be perceived by parents as better teachers (e.g., Epstein, 1986; Greenwood & Hickman, 1991; Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Brissie, 1987).

Despite the benefits of parental involvement, parents and teachers alike have reported barriers to effective involvement, across varied cultures and groups within cultures (e.g., Bermudez, 1993; Comer & Haynes, 1991; Davies, 1993; Epstein, 1986; Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Harry, 1992; Huss-Keeler, 1997; Lightfoot, 1981; Moles, 1993; Reed-Danahay, 1996; Vincent, 1996; Yao, 1993). These barriers include
differences between parents’ and schools’ goals for children’s education, language differences, and varied structural constraints (e.g., school accessibility limited to workday hours). Parents may also experience barriers due to intervening family commitments (e.g., infant or elder care) or practical and personal issues (e.g., access to transportation, limited skills for helping in specific learning areas, a legacy of low efficacy for school tasks derived from personal educational history).

Teachers, too, may contend with pragmatic, psychological, and cultural barriers to parental involvement (e.g., Davies, 1993; Gestwicki, 1992; Griffith, 1996; Hoover-Dempsey, et al., 1992; Huss-Keeler, 1997; Lightfoot, 1981; Midkiff & Lawler-Prince, 1992; Reed-Danahay & Anderson-Levitt, 1991). Teachers may avoid involving parents because they lack practical support for the extra activities implied by active parental involvement programs. Teachers with limited experience or skills may reach out only to give up if initial efforts are not immediately successful. Experienced teachers may be reluctant to invite parents if negative encounters have cast a pall over the perceived likelihood of successful involvement. Further complicating prospects for effective parental involvement, teachers who feel uncertain of their skills in dealing with ‘traditional’ families may struggle even more as they consider trying to work productively with families perceived as ‘different’ from envisioned norms on a number of dimensions.

Given these barriers to regular positive interactions between home and school, communications between teacher and parent may emerge primarily in situations motivated by dissatisfaction, frustration, mistrust or anger from one or both parties. Unfortunately, interactions in such cases may work to create further separation and distance between parents and teachers rather than effective parental involvement. This perpetuates a quandary: teachers may not know how to invite or sustain involvement efforts; parents whose involvement is not invited may perceive intentional exclusion or low regard for their involvement.

Recognizing this dilemma, teacher educators have developed programs to increase teacher commitment to inviting and sustaining parental involvement. In general, such programs at the undergraduate and graduate levels have focused on pre-service teachers’ attitudes, experiences, and preparation for parental involvement (e.g., Evans-Schilling, 1999; Jones & Blendinger, 1994; Morris, Taylor, Knight, & Wasson, 1996; Noordhoff & Kleinfeld, 1993; Tichenor, 1997). Unfortunately, these
programs appear to reach a very small proportion of the pre-service teaching population (e.g., Chavkin & Williams, 1988; de Acosta, 1996; Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Greenwood & Hickman, 1991).

Because pre-service opportunities designed specifically to develop teachers’ parental involvement skills are few in number, in-service approaches seem a potentially critical tool for constructing more comprehensive and effective parental involvement. For this reason, we developed a short-term in-service education program designed to enhance practicing teachers’ beliefs, skills, and strategies related to parental involvement. The program was grounded in a theoretical understanding of the parental involvement process (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995, 1997) and principles of effective in-service education (e.g., Jaervinen, Kohonen, Niemi, & Ojanen, 1995; Wilson & Berne, 1999). Although implemented in the U.S., the program’s foundation in this broader literature supports its relevance to schools and family-community populations across a range of groups and cultures.

The work reported here focused on two primary goals: (1) the development and implementation of a school-based intervention designed to increase teachers’ invitations to parent involvement and, ultimately, parents’ involvement in their children’s education; (2) the development of an effective in-service education program whose principles might be applied broadly across a variety of specific content and contexts. Immediately below, we consider specific variables theorized to enhance teachers’ invitations to parental involvement, and we identify principles guiding the design and delivery of the in-service program. We then describe a study which examined the program’s effectiveness in enhancing teacher beliefs and behaviors related to parent involvement. Study results are described quantitatively in relation to program influences on targeted outcomes and qualitatively in relation to participant learning throughout the program. Finally, we consider why the design and implementation of the program facilitated increases in targeted teacher beliefs and behaviors and how both the findings and program principles might be applied to future research.

The Teachers Involving Parents (TIP) program

Program foundations and goals

Drawing on literature underscoring causal links between beliefs and behavior (e.g., Bandura, 1997; Goodnow, 1988; McGillicuddy-DeLisi, 1992; Miller, 1988; see also Datnow & Castellano, 2000;
Fullan, 1991; Wilson & Berne, 1999), the TIP program was designed to enhance teacher beliefs considered critical to the development of teacher behaviors inviting parental involvement (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995, 1997).

Personal beliefs shape behavior because they influence individual perceptions and understandings of events in the environment, orient individuals toward particular tasks and action alternatives in varied situations, influence multiple individual decisions related to goal-setting and goal attainment (e.g., effort, persistence), and influence personal development of commitment and skills related to goals and activities at issue (e.g., Bandura, 1997; Goodnow, 1988; McGillicuddy-DeLisi, 1992; Miller, 1988; Schunk & Zimmerman, 1997). In designing and evaluating the in-service education program reported here, we assumed that teachers’ beliefs in four specific areas would influence their perceptions of parent involvement, their orientation toward inviting parent involvement, and their goals, commitments, and skills related to inviting parental involvement. These belief systems included personal sense of teaching efficacy, beliefs about parents’ efficacy for helping their children learn, beliefs about parent involvement in general, and beliefs about the importance of specific parent involvement practices (e.g., Bandura, 1997; Dauber & Epstein, 1993; Hoover-Dempsey, et al., 1992).

Personal sense of teaching efficacy has been related to stronger confidence in one’s efforts, greater goal-related behavior, and greater persistence in overcoming obstacles (e.g., Bandura, 1993, 1997; Guskey, 1988; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 1992; Woolfolk, Rosoff, & Hoy, 1990). These links suggest that stronger sense of teaching efficacy will support higher levels of teacher invitations to involvement. Teacher beliefs about parents’ efficacy for helping children learn were included because teachers who believe that parents are capable of contributing to their children’s educational success are more likely than those holding less positive views to act in ways that will secure parents’ involvement (e.g., Bandura, 1997; Hoover-Dempsey, et al., 1992). Positive teacher beliefs about parental involvement in general were included because teachers who believe more strongly that parental involvement is an important contributor to children’s educational success are more likely than those holding less positive beliefs to act in ways that enable or increase parental involvement (e.g., Epstein, 1986, 1992). Teachers’ beliefs about the importance of specific involvement strategies were included because teachers who know of and are
committed to a wide range of involvement strategies have more options available for implementation—across a variety of circumstances, contexts, and parent preferences—once the decision to invite involvement has been made.

In sum, the objectives of the in-service program included the strengthening of specific teacher belief systems hypothesized to be necessary to teacher decisions to invite parental involvement. The ultimate goal of the program, of course, was to increase parents’ engagement in their children’s schooling through its positive influence on teachers’ invitations to parental involvement.

Program design and implementation

Program design and implementation were grounded in specific principles underlying successful professional development programs (e.g., Chester & Beaudin, 1996; Datnow & Castellano, 2000; Jaervinen, et al., 1995; Leach & Conto, 1999; Lord, 1994; Neff, 1990; Schwartz, Lin, Brophy, & Bransford, 1999; Wilson & Berne, 1999). Such a design was expected to facilitate participants’ collective identification and development of effective, school-specific strategies for inviting parental involvement. Among critical principles employed were the following.

Respect for the expertise and perspectives of participants. Program facilitators were committed to understanding and respecting teachers’ expertise—about the school as well as the school’s children, families and educational processes (e.g., see Datnow & Castellano, 2000; Wilson & Berne, 1999). These commitments meant that the program in general, and the content of specific sessions in particular, were grounded in the questions, ideas and expertise of participants as well as the theoretical and empirical resources identified by the facilitators. In general, facilitators worked to serve as guides and resources, consultants to the process, rather than ‘experts from the outside’ (e.g., Jaervinen, et al., 1995; Wilson & Berne, 1999).

Two specific steps were taken to promote the central role of participants’ expertise and contributions. First, facilitators recorded all ideas, concerns, and suggestions generated in discussion (sometimes as an explicit part of the group’s activities, sometimes in notes taken by one facilitator). All notes were word-processed, duplicated, and returned to participants in the following session; in most circumstances they were also used explicitly as part of the next session’s activities. Similarly, anonymous
ratings and comments on evaluation forms at the end of each session were word-processed and returned to participants at the beginning of the following session. As appropriate, facilitators commented on suggestions for change or improvement and discussed how the suggestions would be integrated into subsequent sessions.

Second, the value of participants’ expertise and commitment was acknowledged by a modest honorarium for participation. Although in-service program participation is often assumed to be an implicit component of professional commitment, the generally negative reputation of in-service education (e.g., Wilson & Berne, 1999) and the reality that teachers’ time is often undervalued, suggested that a modest honorarium would underscore the value of participants’ time and energy committed to the program. The honorarium amount ($25 for each of 6 sessions) was identified after consultation with practicing teachers at other schools as conveying professional respect without suggesting coercive inducement. To ensure equal access to the program and associated honorarium, all teachers in each school were invited to participate; all who elected to do so were included in the program.

Collegial interaction and a community of learners. Consistent with program goals and literature on successful professional development (e.g., Datnow & Castellano, 2000; Fullan, 1991; Sarason, 1996; Wilson & Berne, 1999), the program also assumed that learning and behavioral change were most likely to emerge from substantive collegial interaction related to the material and issues at hand. The program sought to create a learning community both safe and challenging, a setting within which participants could trust others, offer ideas, examine experiences and beliefs, and generate improved alternatives based on thoughtful critique of current belief and practice. The creation of such an active learning community, it was assumed, would support a) participants’ access to sources of increased efficacy (mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and affective arousal: Bandura, 1997; Goddard, et al., 2000; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997), b) participants’ construction of knowledge (rather than passive receipt of knowledge delivered; e.g., Schwartz, 1999; Wilson & Berne, 1999), and c) participants’ ownership of emergent change processes (e.g., Helsby, 1999).

Learning processes: content, reflection, feedback, and planning. Also consistent with program goals and suggestions in the literature (e.g., Goddard, et al., 2000; Jaervinen, et al., 1995; Leach & Conto,
individual sessions included: a) integration of theoretical and empirical content pertinent to the issues
considered, b) opportunities for individual and group reflection on knowledge, problems, and suggested
strategies presented by varied group members, c) on-line feedback from colleagues and facilitators
regarding benefits and concerns implicit in varied suggestions, and d) use of content, reflection and
feedback to plan improved invitations for parental involvement within the particular school community.
By focusing attention on group-defined issues, problems, and solutions—and on participants’ power to
use program-based learning to influence parent, student, and school outcomes—these components of the
program supported participants’ motivation for developing increasingly effective invitations to
involvement.

Logistics supporting program goals and processes. Facilitators used several specific techniques or
approaches within each session to underscore the educational values implicit in the processes above.
Participants’ and facilitators’ names were treated as important information: permanent, program-logo
name tags were worn by all, and all were encouraged strongly to address others by name. (In one school,
participants remarked often in the first two sessions how helpful it was to put colleagues’ names together
with faces—a comment, perhaps, on the extent to which the daily lives of teachers in mid- to large-size
urban schools may fail to include opportunities for significant personal or professional interaction with
colleagues). Substantial refreshments were provided by the program and made available throughout each
session. Participants’ time was explicitly valued and honored by beginning and ending all sessions
precisely on time. Finally, acknowledging that weariness may set in at the end of many teachers’ days
with students, each session began with an ‘icebreaker’ activity designed for movement and enjoyment
within a task illustrating content to be considered in the session.

In sum. The fundamental goal of the program was to offer groups of knowledgeable professionals
a forum for building and sustaining personal and interpersonal or organizational frameworks essential to
creating more effective parental involvement in the school. The program focused on creating
opportunities for collegial interaction among peers, assuming that learning is best fostered in contexts that
enhance both trust and critique. The program was also grounded in support for participants’ construction
of new knowledge and belief systems, processes that require active personal exploration of belief-behavior systems. Finally, the program was explicitly grounded in the assumption that collective generation and evaluation of ideas underlie a group’s ability to continue the development of beliefs, skills, and practices beyond the confines of a time-limited intervention.

Building on these principles as well as theory and research identifying specific teacher belief systems central to increased teacher invitations and increased parental involvement, the program was designed in six modules. Designed in advance of program implementation, the modules—consistent with principles outlined above—were flexible so as to allow participants’ experiences, questions and goals to guide program content and method. Basic information about the modules is summarized in Figure; they are

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Insert Figure 1 about here

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described in more detail in the Results section as reflecting structural elements of program design, participants’ adaptations of the design, and participant responses to the unfolding program.

Method

Subjects

The program was implemented within the context of a network of social service programs focused on improving high-risk children’s school outcomes in a large, mid-south urban area in the United States. The two public schools included in the study, Randolph Elementary and Johnson Middle School (pseudonyms), were located in neighborhoods targeted for a variety of interventions.

After receiving permission from the principal of each school, program facilitators solicited volunteer participants from each school. Teachers in each school were told of the program’s purpose and structure in a general staff meeting. At Randolph Elementary, 13 teachers and support staff chose to participate; 10 non-participating teachers volunteered to serve as the school’s comparison group. Randolph participants chose to spread the six TIP modules over an eight-week period and to hold all sessions at school. At Johnson Middle, 17 teachers and support staff, including the principal, chose to
participate; 12 teachers volunteered to serve as a comparison group. Johnson teachers chose a more
intensive program format, asking that the six sessions be held in three two-hour meetings spread over two
weeks. As at Randolph, Johnson teachers chose to hold all sessions at the school. General characteristics
of the 30 participants and 22 comparison group members in the two schools are summarized in Table 1.

Randolph Elementary, serving grades K - 4, was built in 1952. It was located in an urban area that
includes a large public housing project, many single-family and duplex residences, and some commercial
development. Thirty-eight total faculty members served 412 students (75% of whom were African
American, 21% white, 2% Asian, 2% Hispanic). Ninety-eight percent of the students received free or
reduced-cost lunch. Approximately 73% walked to school from adjoining neighborhoods; the remainder
were transported in day care vans, public bus or private car. A three-year average (1996-1999)
standardized test score performance, combining test scores and gain scores, placed Randolph in the
district’s third quadrant, far below national averages for absolute scores but slightly above national
averages for gains (P. Changas, personal communication, April 1999).

Johnson Middle School served children in pre-K, K, 5th, and 6th grades. Built in 1954, the school
was located in an inner city area including a large public housing project, many single family homes, and
a few commercial establishments. Thirty-nine faculty members served 473 students (67% of whom were
African-American, 27% white, 3% Asian, 3% Hispanic). Eighty-one percent of the students received free
or reduced cost lunches. Approximately 70% walked to school from the adjoining neighborhoods and the
remainder were bussed. A three-year average (1996-1999) standardized test score performance,
combining test scores and gain scores, placed Johnson in the district’s lowest quadrant, below national
averages for absolute scores and slightly below national averages for gain scores (P. Changas, personal
communication, April 1999).

Procedures
Program sessions were scheduled following each group’s preference in the school library immediately after school hours. Each library was reasonably sized, allowing for a refreshments area, a sizeable area for large group presentation and discussion, and more distant ‘corners’ for small group work.

Before the program began, participating and comparison teachers were given instrument packages (see Note 1) with self-explanatory directions; they were asked to complete the questionnaires independently and return them to the investigators before the program began. Post-program instrument packages were given to participating and comparison teachers after the program was completed; all were asked again to complete the questionnaires independently and leave them in sealed envelopes for the investigators in a designated collection box at the school. In appreciation of all respondents’ time and participation, the program contributed a nominal sum ($5.00) for each completed Teacher Questionnaire to a fund to be used for parental involvement efforts identified by participants at each school.

Measures

Teacher efficacy. The Teacher Efficacy Questionnaire (Hoover-Dempsey, et al., 1987) was used; the measure contains 12 items answered on a 6-point scale (1 = disagree very strongly to 6 = agree very strongly). The questionnaire includes such items as “I feel that I am making a significant educational difference in the lives of my students.” Negatively worded items were reverse scored. Total possible scores ranged from 12 to 84; higher scores indicated greater teaching efficacy. Previously reported reliabilities range from .83 to .87 (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 1987, 1992); standardized alpha for the pre-TIP administration was .81; post-TIP was .86.

Teacher beliefs about parent efficacy for helping children succeed in school. Hoover-Dempsey, et al.’s (1992) scale was used. The measure incorporates seven items answered on a 6-point scale (1 = disagree very strongly to 6 = agree very strongly). It includes such items as “If my students’ parents try really hard, they can help their children learn even when the children are unmotivated.” Total possible scores ranged from seven to 42; higher scores indicated more positive teacher beliefs about parent efficacy. Previously reported alpha reliability was .79 (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 1992); pre- and post-TIP administrations yielded alphas of .80 and .69, respectively.
Teacher beliefs about parent involvement. This measure was adapted from Epstein, Salinas, and Horsey (1994). Eight items from the original 17-item scale were used. Items were answered on a 6-point scale, including three points of disagreement (disagree just a little, disagree, disagree very strongly) and three of agreement (agree very strongly, agree, agree just a little). Sample items included: “Parent involvement can help teachers be more effective with more students;” “Parent involvement is important for a good school.” Total possible score for the scale was 48; higher scores indicated more positive beliefs about parent involvement. Standardized alpha reliability in the pre-TIP administration was .65; post-TIP was .75.

Teacher beliefs about the importance of specific involvement practices. This 16-item scale was derived from the work of several investigators. Ten were drawn from Epstein, et al. (1994; e.g., “Having a conference with each of my students’ parents at least once a year”). Four were developed on the basis of Epstein’s (1986) 12 types of learning activities teachers ask parents to do with their children at home (e.g., “Asking my students’ parents to help the child with homework”). One was adapted from Stipek (D. Stipek, personal communication, December 1998): “Giving parents ideas to help them become effective advocates for their children”); one was drawn from a local, program-wide evaluation effort (“Sending home ‘letters’ telling parents what the children have been learning and doing in class”). Teachers were asked to respond to each item on a 6-point scale (1 = this is not at all important to me; 6 = this is very important to me). Total possible score for the scale was 96; higher scores indicated stronger beliefs in the importance of the involvement practices. Standardized alpha reliability for pre-TIP administration was .90; post-TIP, .94.

Teacher invitations to parental involvement. The scale contained 16 items identical to the measure of teacher beliefs about the importance of specific strategies (above). The response format was changed from “How important do you think these practices and strategies are?” to “How often have you done each of the following this year?” Teachers responded to each item on a 6-point scale (1 = never, 2 = once this year, 3 = once each semester, 4 = once a month, 5 = once every 1-2 weeks, 6 = 1 + time[s] each week). Total possible score for the scale was 96; higher scores indicated more frequent parental involvement invitations. Standardized alpha reliability for pre- and post-TIP administrations was .89.
Teacher reports of parental involvement. This scale was included to gain an estimate of parents’ levels of involvement. The scale included 14 items drawn from the previous two measures. Teachers were asked to respond to the question “How many of your students’ parents have participated in the following activities this year?” offering their best estimate for each on a 6-point scale (1 = none, 2 = 10-25%, 3 = 30-45%, 4 = 55-70%, 5 = 75-90%, 6 = all). Sample items included: “Contact me when their children are having a problem with learning,” “Help the child with homework.” Total possible score for the scale ranged from 14 to 84; higher scores reflected higher teacher reports of parents’ involvement. Standardized alpha reliability for the scale pre-TIP was .89, post-TIP, .92.

Demographic data. Teachers were also asked to provide specific demographic data: grade level taught, position (classroom or support), years of teaching experience, years in the school, degree level, ethnicity, and gender.

Qualitative data. At the end of each session, TIP teachers were asked to complete anonymously a brief “two-minute” evaluation. These evaluations asked participants to identify the best or most valuable feature of the session, to describe what could have been improved about the session, and to offer any other general comments about the session. At the end of the full program, teachers were asked to complete a “ten-minute” evaluation, which asked participants to rate the quality of the entire program in terms of content, materials, and effectiveness. Themes and comments from these evaluations are discussed below.

Results

Results are presented in two sections. The first includes quantitative examination of the program’s influence on the four targeted teacher belief systems (teacher efficacy, beliefs about parent efficacy, beliefs about parental involvement, and beliefs about the importance of specific involvement practices), teachers’ invitations to involvement, and teachers’ reports of parent involvement. The second section uses qualitative data taken throughout the program to examine in more depth participants’ experiences of the program, their engagement in shaping its content and processes, and their learning.

Comparing TIP participants and non-participants
Analyses revealed no significant differences between TIP and comparison teachers in demographic characteristics. As reported in Table 2, there were also no significant differences between groups in study variables prior to the program. Examination of pre-program correlations among study variables, however, suggested the possibility of somewhat different patterns for the two groups (see Table 3; e.g., teacher efficacy was linked to several other study variables in the comparison group but not in the TIP group).

Results of a principal components factor analysis on study variables, however, suggested that the groups were characterized primarily by two similar factors, teacher efficacy (TIP group eigen value = 2.09, 35% of the cumulative factor; comparison group = 2.97, 50% of the cumulative factor) and teacher beliefs about parents’ efficacy (TIP group = 1.14, an additional 19%; comparison group = 1.37, an additional 23%). These results underscored the two groups’ similarity prior to the program.

Between-group differences in study variables were examined by repeated measures analysis of variance (see Table 2). Results suggested a relatively strong program influence on teacher efficacy. The interaction effect indicated that TIP teachers, but not comparison teachers, recorded a significant increase in efficacy across the course of the program (Figure 2). Results also suggested increases among TIP participants in teacher beliefs about parent efficacy and invitations to involvement. Comparison teachers also recorded gains in these areas, however, and the interaction effects were not significant (see Figures 2, 3, and 4).

Surprisingly, there were no gains within or between groups in teacher beliefs about parent involvement or teacher beliefs about the importance of specific involvement practices. Subsequent examination of group means revealed that TIP and comparison groups both recorded relatively high
scores prior to the program (in the top quartile of each measure’s range; beliefs about parental involvement: TIP x = 39.14, comparison x = 38.35 [range: 6 to 48]; beliefs about the importance of specific involvement practices: TIP x = 85.49, comparison x = 85.43 [range: 16 to 96]). These high initial means suggested that both groups held relatively strong, positive beliefs about parental involvement prior to the intervention, leaving little ‘room’ for the program to effect notable change. Gains in teacher reports of parental involvement were also not significant; as noted further in the Discussion, it seems likely that the issues of timing may have may have limited potential change in observed parental behavior. These findings are considered further in the Discussion below.

Examining TIP teachers’ experience of the program

In this section we describe the program as structured from the outset and as adapted to the needs and requests of participating teachers. We present this information as related to the program’s six modules; each includes discussion of basic module content, educational principles and processes employed, and observations about participants’ responses to program content and participant learning.

Module 1: Teachers’ experiences of parent involvement. This first meeting was designed to set the tone for the full program as facilitators worked to create a respectful, open atmosphere. After a brief round of introductions to acquaint teachers and facilitators with one another, facilitators offered a general overview of the program’s goals and content and gave each participant a personal copy of a large loose-leaf notebook of resource materials on parental involvement for use throughout the program (see Note 1). After these preliminary events, teachers were asked to help generate a set of ground rules to guide participants’ and facilitators’ conduct (e.g., “No idea is out of bounds,” “Our conversations are confidential,” “Participate,” “Be a good listener”).

Facilitators then presented research-based information on the role of parental involvement in children’s development and educational success. After some discussion, participants were asked to write out their own definitions of parent involvement. Individual ideas were shared with the group and recorded on large flipcharts; these contributions included both simple and more complex definitions (e.g., “coming to conferences;” “collaboration between teachers and parents, school staff and community”).
Consideration of these definitions were followed by discussion of the reality that involvement, whatever its potential or actual benefits, can be very difficult to create.

Participants were then invited to reflect on and record their own “best” and “worst” experiences with parent involvement. Shared “best” experiences included examples of notable parental help and support, often related to class events (e.g., “I took a trip with third graders . . . I had parents put together learning packets for the trip, scrapbooks after the trip, and many went along!”) or parents’ responsiveness to a child’s learning needs (e.g., “[Parents] understood their child’s problems at school and supported me and him; they didn’t overreact and were always available”). “Best” experiences also included numerous examples of parents’ small expressions of appreciation (e.g., “Once I got a . . . card with a handwritten message from a step-mom”).

Sharing of “worst” experiences was accompanied by notable affect as participants described difficult interactions and long-standing memories. Many of these contributions seemed grounded in teachers’ feeling threatened or disliked by parents; quite salient in several these examples was the fact that the interactions were public (e.g., “A parent accused me of being unfair with no basis; she told me she never liked me from the first day . . . she said all of this in front of my class and used many obscenities;” “One of my children’s parents told her child, ‘The next time someone hits [you], . . . slap the sh__ out of them;’ she said this in front of my other children and my room mother!”). Also quite salient was the theme of feeling unsupported by colleagues in the face of difficult interactions (e.g., “A parent threatened me verbally, verbally abused me, in the hallway, in front of other teachers [and] no one came to my aid;” “The principal didn’t allow me to talk during a heated parent conference; when I was allowed to speak, the differences were cleared up!”).

Facilitators and participants focused attention on identifying specific obstacles—in the classroom, school, or community—that seemed to promote such “worst” experiences and preclude “best” experiences (e.g., Different expectations,” “Parents don’t feel welcome or invited by the school”). The full list produced by the group was recorded for use in the next program session.

Feedback from teachers on this first session underscored appreciation for the discussion (e.g., “It’s good to have time to talk”) and relief in hearing others’ experiences (e.g., “I’m not alone!”).
Anticipating future sessions, some feedback also conveyed eagerness for problem-solving in this sometimes frustrating and emotionally-charged area of school life (e.g., “I’m anxious to learn how to honestly be more effective with parents”).

**Module 2: Coping with barriers to involvement.** Building on the list of specific obstacles identified in the first session, the second module focused on developing tools for dismantling barriers to involvement. Participants first selected specific barriers as among the most important they face (e.g., “Parents don’t feel welcome in the school;” “Parents don’t see themselves as key in their children’s education”). These were then categorized by the group as involving a) short-term issues with fairly accessible solutions or b) more long-term issues with more complex causes and solutions.

Material on strategies for coping with obstacles was then introduced. Problem-focused coping (e.g., doing something about the problem itself) and emotion-focused coping (e.g., doing something about my feelings or reactions to the problem) in particular were discussed. Participants were asked to categorize specific obstacles as appropriate for solutions incorporating problem-focused (i.e., “Is this a problem situation that I [or we] can change?”) or emotion-focused strategies (i.e., “Is this a problem that’s beyond my [or our] control?”).

Working with obstacles amenable to problem-focused coping, small groups of teachers generated suggestions for dealing with these barriers (e.g., for the obstacle “Parents don’t feel welcome in the school,” suggested solutions included “Individual teachers should make contact with individual parents;” “[Have more] friendly office staff;” “Hold community-based events in the school year-round”). For somewhat more complex obstacles (e.g., “Teachers don’t know how to support one another [in relation to parents]”), the group’s ideas included suggestions focused on significant increases in communication among colleagues (e.g., “Be honest with each other;” “Keep others informed about problems;” “Come up with ‘signals’ to let other know you need help”). Small groups presented their suggestions for comment and critique; the suggestions, enhanced by group feedback, were recorded for return to teachers and use in subsequent modules.

Participants’ evaluation of the session reflected continuing development of varied insights about personal responses to parents (e.g., “[Overall] I’ve had good parents; why do I still focus on those scary
as well as emerging use of content on coping with obstacles to involvement (e.g., “It’s important to formulate specific goals and learn to focus on the ones I can control or influence”). Still other comments reflected what would become a theme throughout the program: appreciation of colleagues’ ideas and insights on the problems at issue (e.g., “[The day’s most valuable experience was] getting more ideas from each other about others’ goals for parent involvement – we all have good ideas!”).

Module 3: Perceptions of parents. The third module introduced parents’ voices into the discussion. Intended to support the development of more positive views of parents’ efficacy for helping children learn, the session began with theoretical and empirical material underscoring the power of beliefs in influencing attitudes, perceptions of others, and behaviors.

Participants were then ‘introduced’ to a real parent. Basic information, as might be perceived by school personnel in limited contact with the parent, was presented first (e.g., child talks a lot in class, appears to have a learning disability of some kind; parent hasn’t been to school, sent cupcakes once in response to request, says she’ll try to get to a parent-teacher conference at the end of the year). Participants were asked to record short descriptors of the parent based on inferences derived from the information; responses included such perceptions as “busy,” “tired,” “indifferent,” “little follow-through.”

A first person interview with the parent was then read; this more detailed information included the parent’s thinking about her goals, activities, efforts, and frustrations in helping her child succeed in school. When the full interview was completed, participants were asked again to record short descriptors capturing their current impressions of the parent. A markedly different set of perceptions emerged: for example, “motivated,” “resourceful,” “lives too far away,” “dedicated.” Participants were very quick to recognize that more information about the parent—more ‘listening to her story’—yielded considerably more complex and positive impressions of her interests, activities, and commitment to this child’s success.

The group turned then to developing strategies for obtaining more complete information about students’ parents. They also focused on strategies for approaching parents with positive expectations about their interest (e.g., ask parents for brief information on their perceptions of the child’s academic
strengths, ask parents about their expectations for the teacher). Participants’ emerging ownership of the program was underscored when several offered personal materials they had developed in previous years pertinent to these tasks.

Session evaluations identified the day’s most valuable experiences as including awareness of the power of perceptions and the drawbacks of limited information (e.g., “The story of Ms. Harrison was very enlightening; I learned not to judge too quickly based on what little information we have;” “My perceptions of parents do not come even close to what the parent may actually be like”). Others’ comments underscored the importance of understanding parents’ lives (e.g., “[It’s really important to] ‘walk a mile in our parents’ shoes’ for better understanding”) and teachers’ critical role in “[helping] parents feel like they should be involved.”

Module 4: Communicating with parents. Building on ideas generated in previous sessions, the fourth program module began by asking participants to describe their current successful strategies for communicating with parents. All strategies offered were recorded and placed in one of three broad categories that seemed to incorporate all suggestions: parent-teacher conferences, casual communications, and meetings regarding specific problems.

Participants separated into three groups, each of which focused on discussing successes, problems, and strategies for improved communications within the particular category. For example, the group working with the category “parent conferences” identified over a dozen strategies for improving their effectiveness, including “Prepare a profile sheet for the conference,” “Follow up with phone calls,” “Schedule a home visit conference,” “Find a place for the children to stay while conferencing.”

The three working groups presented their ideas to all participants and asked them to rate each strategy along two dimensions: a) how often the strategy used in the school now (“Many of us use this now;” “Some of us use this now;” “This is pretty much a new idea here”) and b) how successful the strategy is likely to be in this school. Most strategies presented were used by at least some teachers in the school (e.g., “Offer a reward to the class if parents come to conferences;” “Follow up with a letter or note”); a few were used by most all teachers (e.g., “Be accommodating to parents’ schedules;” “Involve everyone [present] in the conversation”). A very small number represented ideas that had not been tried
by anyone present (e.g., “Have a ‘professional area’ in the school [where impromptu conferences can take place];” “Have a ‘conference party’”).

Feedback on the session underscored the value of reflecting on current practice and considering new ideas (e.g., “[I really liked] brainstorming ideas about parent/teacher communication. Sometimes we forget to even TRY to come up with improvements! [It’s as if we say] ‘It’s the way we’ve always done it – so what if it doesn’t work well?!’” “I learned a lot about how to create and take advantage of situations and opportunities to talk to parents”). Comments pointed again to the value participants placed on talking with and learning from their colleagues (e.g., “I gained many important ideas when we broke into groups to answer questions;” “Scheduling conferences: I like several of the things my group came up with;” “We all communicate differently, but we should all communicate positively!”). Growing ease with the group and an emerging view of participants as leaders of the effort emerged in other observations (e.g., “The best thing was brainstorming in groups (shouldn’t be putting Pat and Marie together in groups, though :)!” “The best experience was watching our group’s presenter”).

Module 5: Working with hard-to-reach parents. Although many strategies emerged in the previous session, a few participants suggested explicitly that facilitators might offer more new ideas ‘from the outside’ (e.g., “The presenters could have offered more helpful suggestions about how to create opportunities to talk with parents;” some comments were more direct: “Show me something new! I don’t see anything new here!” “Where’s the magic bullet?!””).

This session thus began with guided group review of the full set of resources included in participants’ binders (distributed at the first module; see Note 1). Participants were asked to be free in offering their ideas about which among these resources might really be helpful in the school. The set included five categories of resources: 1) publications on parent involvement from the U.S. Department of Education and the ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education; 2) information on exemplary national programs of support for parental involvement in homework (e.g., from Rutgers University Center for Families Involved in Schoolwork, the Teachers Involving Parents in Schoolwork at Johns Hopkins University, the American Federation of Teachers Learning Line); 3) local resources, including a Lesson Line, a Public Education Foundation program of grants and mini-grants to support
parent involvement in the schools, a local university’s Teacher-in-Residence program; 4) selected empirical and conceptual articles on parent involvement, and 5) related resources from the National Education Association (Ideas and Tips for Parent Involvement), the National Parent-Teacher Association (Teachers’ Guide to Parent and Family Involvement), and the National Network for Partnership Schools.

Following this review of varied external resources, participants were asked to identify examples of recent interactions with parents that felt at least somewhat successful. Numerous experiences were offered (e.g., “Having lots of contact with parents through a weekly planner [and having] parents sign off on specific activities;” “Using a [business] mentor of one of the children to have three-way communication: I talk with the mentor, he talks with the family of the child having problems;” “Having hallway conversations”). Facilitators highlighted these successes and re-introduced (accompanied by handout summaries) the many goals, plans and strategies generated by the group over the course of previous sessions.

Participants were then asked to identify one continuing problem in parent involvement they would like to solve. These problems were recorded for use as the focus of the group’s work in the final TIP session. Facilitators then shared the outline of a process designed to ‘create magic solutions’ (see Appendix A). The steps were reviewed as preface to active engagement with this process in the final session.

Participants’ evaluations of this session highlighted the usefulness of the decision to collectively review resources distributed at the first TIP session. Consistent with one teacher’s response (“Reviewing resources was very good; I may not have looked at them if we had not gone over them here!”), several comments underscored the importance of this review (e.g., the ‘most valuable experience of the day’ was “stepping through the available resources,” “learning that all of those helpful resources are included in our notebooks!”). Participants also continued to offer explicit praise for what they learned from each other; for example, ‘best experiences’ included: “Ms. S’s ideas about the weekly planner,” “Listening to the strategies from the other teachers;” “Hearing the successes of other teachers in dealing with parents.”

Module 6: Planning and enacting. This final session began with facilitators’ observations about the strengths of the participating group based on interactions across the previous weeks (e.g., “You
manifest a strong sense of caring about the children, teaching well, and connecting in positive ways with families;” “You each seem to be able to be active in both leadership and ‘listener’ roles”). Links between these qualities and the group’s ability to continue functioning after the program were identified and discussed.

Facilitators then presented clusters of parent involvement problems that seemed to emerge in many of the group’s discussions over the previous session. These clusters included: creating feelings of partnership (examples of specific problems or questions: “How to involve the reluctant parent;” “How to get parents interested in monitoring their child’s academic and social progress”); enacting partnership (e.g., “How to get a parent to help correct a student’s behavior;” “Getting a parent to help with homework or at least make sure work is finished”); and communicating with hard-to-reach parents (e.g., “How to get important contact information from parents reluctant to give it;” “[What to do when] a parent refuses to have contact with school”).

Participants were asked to select one cluster. Using processes outlined in “How to make magic” (Appendix A), each of the three groups was asked to work as “a committee that’s going to solve this problem,” addressing these issues in particular: 1) articulating how the problem is related to our goals (why is it worth our time and energy?); 2) generating a list of all strategies participants had tried before to solve the problem, and then a list of other strategies that might (also) work; 3) selecting the two or three ‘best’ strategies from the lists, and planning then for specific next steps needed to enact these problem-solving strategies. As these plans were developed in each group, roles and assignments related to specific strategies were identified and accepted as working groups created plans to be carried out subsequently. Using large posters summarizing the group’s work, representatives from each group presented plans for addressing the problem(s) identified.

After discussion of these plans, the program was brought to a close with ceremonial recognition of each participant’s contributions to the group’s work, and celebration of the learning and planning enabled by the group’s collective and focused commitment to inviting parent involvement. Participants’ evaluative comments continued to emphasize the value of talking and sharing ideas with colleagues (e.g., “I appreciate the unity that’s formed with the TIP group, the feeling of camaraderie among teachers;” “I
thought I was the only one so stressed out, because I’ve never been in a school like this one. I thought I was doing something wrong. [But] there are answers; we just have to figure them out.”). Teachers also focused on the value of even small amounts of time given to explicit thinking about parents’ roles in students’ school success (e.g., “I appreciate the time to stop and remember why I’m here. Reaching out to parents is important—it’s not just another thing on my list of things that are hard to do.”).

Discussion

Consistent with expectations, the TIP program succeeded in supporting significant increases in participants’ sense of teaching efficacy; the data also suggested increases in participants’ beliefs about parents’ efficacy for helping children learn and invitations to involvement. Contrary to expectations, however, the TIP program did not appear to strengthen teacher beliefs about parent involvement in general, teacher beliefs about the importance of specific involvement practices, or teacher reports of parent involvement. Also somewhat surprisingly, comparison teachers appeared to gain in some areas. Following discussion of possible reasons for these findings, we consider specifically how principles guiding the design and implementation of the TIP program may have facilitated predicted gains.

What variables supported increased teacher invitations to parental involvement?

Teacher efficacy. Results suggested that participation in the TIP program led to increases in sense of teaching efficacy. The finding is encouraging because teacher efficacy has been linked to stronger professional functioning in several domains (e.g., Bandura, 1997; Dembo & Gibson, 1985; Goddard, et al., 2000; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 1987, 1992). Stronger personal beliefs in one’s teaching efficacy—especially if combined with commitment to the importance of parental involvement—are likely to support (re)new(ed) invitations to parents, persistence in efforts to involve parents, persistence in overcoming the obstacles encountered, and the possibility of increasingly productive parent-child-teacher relationships. Increases in participants’ efficacy were manifested in many of their evaluative comments (e.g., “We [teachers] need to develop a new approach; we can make a difference!”). Increased comfort with the risks associated with increased invitations to parental involvement—and increased commitment to treating involvement obstacles as problems to be solved rather than barriers to action—are theoretically among the consequences of increases in sense of teaching efficacy (Bandura, 1997). Increases in both areas were
evident in participants’ observations about their learning experiences during the TIP program (e.g.,
“Many parents do want to be involved but are inhibited by fear, addiction, schedules; we need to help
them feel familiar and comfortable;” “Never give up; there is always a way to get hold of a parent!”). Many participants appeared then to build on an increasing sense of efficacy in developing specific plans, especially in the late TIP sessions, for enhanced invitations to parental involvement (e.g., “I will be friendlier from the beginning;” “I will try to have regular contact with all parents, not just to discuss students’ grades;” “[I’m looking forward to] being more persistent with parents–using my team to help in coming up with strategies”). Direct participation in the TIP program appeared necessary to these increases in sense of teaching efficacy; comparison teachers’ sense of efficacy did not increase across the course of the program.  

Teacher perceptions of parent efficacy for helping children learn. Another variable hypothesized as necessary for teachers’ use of increased personal efficacy in developing more effective invitations to parental involvement is teacher beliefs about parents’ efficacy for helping children learn. Consistent with expectations, the data suggested that participation in the TIP program was associated with gains in beliefs about parents’ efficacy. Theoretically, these beliefs appear important to increased invitations to involvement because teachers who assume that parents are capable of helping their children seem more likely than those holding less positive views of parents’ efficacy to act in ways that will secure parents’ involvement (e.g., Bandura, 1997; Hoover-Dempsey, et al., 1992). The strengthening of teacher beliefs about parents’ efficacy was reflected in several participants’ identification of important learning’s during the TIP program. Across the board, these comments reflected increased understanding of parents’ interest in their children’s educational success (e.g., “Parents are really trying, they just aren’t always sure what to do;” “Parents love their children too, and, like us, need encouragement”). Participants recorded awareness of their own role in supporting parents’ involvement, and that seemed to underscore an increasingly partnership-focused view of family-school relationships among participants (e.g., “[TIP] remind[ed] us of the good things that can happen when we see parents–and parents see themselves–as important;” “Parents have as many negative/wary reactions and feelings about us as we have about them. [We] need to recognize this as a partnership. We are not adversaries, but too many times we put ourselves in that position; we should work together for our children”).
Why did comparison teachers gain in beliefs about parents’ efficacy for helping children learn?

As true of TIP teachers, comparison teachers also recorded increases in beliefs about parents’ efficacy for helping children learn. One explanation for this unexpected finding might lie in intervening events at both schools (e.g., a major community effort to bring parents into the school; new funding for innovative parental involvement efforts). Careful observation of contextual variables throughout the program and conversations with school personnel, however, suggested no such intervening events at either site. Consistent with the observations of school personnel, a more viable explanation suggested that through processes of observation and interaction, some program effects appeared to be diffused among the broader group of teachers in each school.

Diffusion may have begun in initial meetings with the full staff of each school when the TIP program was described and volunteer participants solicited; it may have continued as TIP and comparison teachers completed pre-program questionnaires. Both events may have primed all teachers to begin thinking about parental involvement as a more salient component of school efforts. Once underway, the program itself created a fairly notable presence in each school (e.g., the ‘ice-breaker’ activity introducing each session usually produced laughter and enjoyment that spilled over into adjoining hallways). Participants also commented often on the opportunities the sessions afforded for productive brainstorming on solutions to difficult problems. Goddard and colleagues’ (2000) examination of teacher efficacy suggested that collective efficacy in a school facilitates the establishment of school-wide norms and the purposeful pursuit of educational goals. Social norms also offer school staff opportunities for vicarious learning, a critical factor in organizational functioning. Post-program conversations with staff members in both schools suggested that TIP and non-TIP teachers often “exchanged expertise,” and did so specifically with regard to parent involvement. Such exchanges among teachers may well have offered multiple opportunities for vicarious learning about parents and parental involvement, thus supporting the diffusion of positively regarded innovations beyond the confines of direct participation.

What program design and implementation issues should be addressed in future work?

While offering valuable information, findings for the program are set within the context of specific limitations, several of which should be addressed in future work. For example, this initial study
did not explicitly consider or monitor the links between program duration and program influence on outcome variables, nor did the study include longer-term assessments of program impact. Thus, the finding that teachers reported no notable increases in parents’ involvement over the course of the program itself seemed sensible in retrospect given that program-generated increases in teacher invitations were likely to have evolved gradually across the course of the program. Such gradual changes by program’s end might not yet have been noted by parents as an observable difference in teacher or school behaviors, thus reducing the likelihood of notable differences in parents’ involvement activities. The fact that the program was offered in both schools near the end of the school year may also have depressed parental responses by program’s end, as families prepared for completing involvement in the current grade (in one school, over half of the families also prepared to transition to another school for the coming year). Future studies should include planned variations in program timing, duration and intensity, and should continue to monitor teacher and parent outcome variables across several months following the program.

Future studies of TIP and similar in-service programs should also take into account the unanticipated finding that participating and comparison teachers appeared to hold two of the four belief systems hypothesized as necessary to increased teacher invitations to involvement. Specifically, both groups’ scores on attitudes toward parental involvement and beliefs about specific parental involvement practices were quite high before the program began. This suggests that professional development efforts to increase teachers’ invitations to involvement might well assume that many teachers already hold relatively positive beliefs about parental involvement and the importance of specific involvement practices. They should instead focus most strongly on increasing a complex of belief systems including personal (and collective) teaching efficacy and beliefs about parents’ efficacy for helping their children learn. Such development efforts should focus on transforming existing and enhanced belief systems into actions.

Future studies should also include systematic attention to contextual variables characterizing a range of participating schools. Given evidence that parent involvement, and teacher commitment to parent involvement, often varies across the elementary, middle, and high school years, ages of students should be varied and studied for links with program effects. Similarly, careful attention should be given to local
history and context such as student turnover rates. Such contextual circumstances are likely to exert
differential influences on in-service program effects.

Finally, replications of the program should include the ‘next step’ of examining systematically
other variables also hypothesized to influence parents’ involvement decisions (e.g., role construction,
efficacy for helping the child learn, invitations from students: Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). They
should also, particularly in schools serving middle school and high school children, include student
perceptions of program goals, target outcomes, and parental involvement. The importance of including
such assessments in future studies is underscored by work highlighting the importance of teacher and
student invitations to parents’ involvement decisions (e.g., Balli, Demo, & Wedman, 1998; Reed,

How might principles guiding TIP program design and implementation have influenced program
outcomes?

The TIP program was characterized by its commitment to principles of effective in-service
education, in particular, respect for the perspectives and expertise of participant, the value of collegial
interaction in crafting effective solutions to familiar problems, and learning processes focused on content,
reflection, feedback and planning (e.g., Chester & Beaudin, 1996; Datnow & Castellano, 2000; Harry,
1992; Jaervinen, et al., 1995; Leach & Conto, 1999; Lord, 1994; Neff, 1990; Bransford & Schwartz,
1999; Wilson & Berne, 1999). Drawing again on comments and observations from participants
throughout the course program, we consider how three fundamental principles may have worked to
influence teachers’ belief-behavior systems related to parental involvement.

Respect for the perspectives and expertise of participants. In soliciting and respecting
participants’ experiences and expertise in the life of the school, program facilitators worked to allow and
support participants’ discussion of successes, failures, fears and concerns related to parental involvement.
These discussions allowed all—participants and facilitators alike—to understand ‘where teachers were’ in
their thinking and experiences at the beginning of the program. Awareness of participants’ cognitions and
affect related to parental involvement allowed facilitators to use these understandings as ‘preparation for
future learning’ (e.g., Bransford & Schwartz, 1999). Marked by disclosure and respect, these discussions
supported developments in areas critical to increased sense of teaching efficacy among participants (mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, social persuasion, and affective states: e.g., Bandura, 1993, 1997; Goddard, et al., 2000). For example, in openly sharing positive and negative personal experiences of parental involvement, participants underscored the affective salience of the topic and supported each other’s emotional investment in developing more positive parent-teacher experiences. In gathering across several sessions to focus explicit attention on parental involvement, participants experienced increased opportunities for social persuasion—from colleagues and facilitators—that positive parental involvement enhances students’ (and therefore teachers’) success (e.g., “[This was] incredibly motivating—I want more information and am anxious to check out the materials”).

**Collegial interaction.** As participants listened to and learned from each other, they experienced what was perhaps the most important means of increasing relevant belief systems: the program’s provision of well-supported opportunities for collegial interaction among peers. In sharing personal involvement experiences both positive and negative, participants developed an appreciation for one another (e.g., “There is a lot of knowledge and skill in this group and this workshop allowed us to share [it]!”). This interaction and appreciation appeared critical to changes in teacher beliefs about personal ability to ‘make a difference.’ In fact, participants’ final program evaluations identified the most valuable components of the program as including several aspects of collegial interaction (“group discussion,” “group identification and analysis of obstacles,” “the development of group goals,” “brainstorming with colleagues”). These collective experiences served as a foundation for the development of new ideas for solving important problems. In many ways, participants appeared to become a “community of learners redefining teaching practice” (Wilson & Berne, 1999, p. 194); in the words of one participant, “I thoroughly enjoyed working with the group . . . it gave us a sense of community.”

**Learning processes emphasizing content, reflection, feedback, and planning.** As facilitators introduced new, theoretically and empirically grounded content that complemented participants’ own experiences and observations, teachers were able to weave their own ideas and concerns into a broader tapestry of work supporting the educational ‘sense’ of involving parents in children’s learning. The program essentially helped participants examine “the barriers created by their own assumptions” (Harry,
As teachers began to look at parents from different perspectives, they also began to reach out more affirmatively, directly, and effectively (Huss-Keeler, 1997). Small working groups developed specific plans for increasing teacher invitations to involvement; these plans included activities, sequence, resources, roles, and expected outcomes. In so planning, participants initiated actions to solve identified problems and, perhaps just as importantly, experienced themselves as productive, collaborative, problem-solvers, capable of creating more effective invitations to parental involvement and responding well to increased parental engagement in children’s schooling.

The program also appeared to succeed because it offered a model of partnership and collaboration among peers that promised viability beyond the intervention itself. Facilitators’ knowledge, combined with respect for participants and their expertise in school matters and in the wisdom of varied parent involvement practices, exemplified the basic structure of potentially productive relationships between teachers and parents. By highlighting teachers’ collective expertise, the program encouraged participants to engage in a process modeling the viability and usefulness of teachers’ own leadership in inviting effective involvement. In this process, the program also encouraged teachers’ active engagement in preparing for their own future learning (e.g., Bransford & Schwartz, 1999). As one participant observed near the program’s conclusion: “I know what this is about: we’re already doing just what we should keep doing when the program is over!”

**Conclusion**

A critical component of successful teacher education is preparing teachers for parental involvement. The success of the TIP program underscores the importance of in-service programs as a means of strengthening the motivation and skills teachers already have for involving parents in their children’s education. The in-service program supported the development of teachers’ sense of efficacy and teachers’ beliefs about parents’ efficacy for helping children learn. In combination with beliefs already in place (concerning the value of parental involvement and the importance of specific involvement practices), these program-enhanced gains supported increased teacher invitations to parental involvement. The program also demonstrated the value of encouraging participants to reflect on and identify personal and collective beliefs as one means of enabling effective action. Most important in this process appeared to be the program’s provision of well-supported opportunities for collegial interaction focused on group generation of solutions to important educational problems. In this area as in many other areas of teachers’ professional tasks, the success of such in-service programs is likely grounded in deep respect for participants’ knowledge, professionalism, creativity, commitment, and ability to work collectively in generating solutions to identified problems.
References


Appendix A

Teachers Involving Parents (TIP)

“How to Make Magic: Creating Solutions for Parent Involvement Problems”

Points to ponder before creating solutions

- ‘Magic’ solutions (much like good magic shows themselves) are usually created on the basis of hard work, practice, evaluation, and more hard work.
- In creating ‘magic’ solutions, it’s important to think about your successes—not just to feel good or dwell in the past, but to analyze what has worked, why it has worked, and how those lessons might be useful in solving the present problem.

Steps in creating ‘magic solutions’

1. What’s the problem? State it and define it!

2. How is the problem related to our goals (is it worth time and energy)?

3. What kind of problem-solving strategies can we use on this problem?
   - Problem-focused (get in there and work on the problem itself)?
   - Emotion-focused (change our reactions to the problem)?
   - What can I/we do? What do I/we want to do?
   - Which of the approaches is best, given the problem, our goals, and available resources?

4. What are alternative specific strategies for solving the problem? Good ones need to get us closer to our goals, and good brainstorming is key here! After brainstorming:
   - What are our priorities among these strategies?
   - Are these strategies for the short run? For the long run?

5. What strategy(ies) do we choose and how are we going to put them into action? Steps for developing and implementing the plan:
   - Do we want to take these on one at a time or work with several simultaneously?
   - Who needs to be involved in making the plan work?
   - What are the specific steps in the plan?
   - Who’s going to do what tasks, when?
   - When will we ‘put it all together’ and try it out?

6. How will we know if our solution works? Developing a plan for evaluating outcomes, including assessment of:
   - What worked and why?
   - What didn’t work and why?

7. Making the solution even better: gather evaluation and outcome information to use in improving on good beginnings.

8. Celebrate successes, and return to the process when new or revitalized ‘magic’ solutions are needed!
Notes

1. Program documents available from the authors include a list of resources received by TIP participants, the TIP Teacher Questionnaire, the TIP Program Evaluation form, and a verbatim summary of participating teachers’ program evaluation responses.
### Demographic characteristics: TIP teachers, comparison teachers, and total group

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<td>11-15</td>
<td>4 31% - -</td>
<td>1 6% 2 17%</td>
<td>5 17% 2 9%</td>
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<tr>
<td>16-20</td>
<td>1 8% 1 10%</td>
<td>4 24% 2 17%</td>
<td>5 17% 3 14%</td>
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<tr>
<td>21+</td>
<td>3 23% 2 20%</td>
<td>2 12% - -</td>
<td>5 17% 2 9%</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>1-5</td>
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<td>12 71% 5 42%</td>
<td>18 60% 10 45%</td>
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<tr>
<td>6-10</td>
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<td>4 24% 5 42%</td>
<td>6 20% 8 36%</td>
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<tr>
<td>16-20</td>
<td>2 15% 2 20%</td>
<td>- - - -</td>
<td>2 7% 2 9%</td>
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<tr>
<td>BA/BS</td>
<td>5 38% 4 40%</td>
<td>12 71% 5 42%</td>
<td>17 57% 9 41%</td>
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<tr>
<td>MA/MS/MEd.</td>
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<td>3 18% 4 33%</td>
<td>10 33% 7 32%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Master’s +30</td>
<td>1 8% 3 30%</td>
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<td>3 10% 6 27%</td>
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<tr>
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<td>3 23% 1 10%</td>
<td>10 59% 4 33%</td>
<td>13 43% 5 23%</td>
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<td>White, non-Hispanic</td>
<td>10 77% 9 90%</td>
<td>7 41% 8 67%</td>
<td>17 57% 17 77%</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>13 100% 8 80%</td>
<td>11 65% 10 83%</td>
<td>24 80% 18 82%</td>
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<tr>
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<td>- - 2 20%</td>
<td>6 35% 2 17%</td>
<td>6 20% 4 18%</td>
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