Enhancing Home-School Collaboration through Children's Expression

Abstract

There is a growing concern within the early childhood education sector to empower parents to support the education of young children. Research has shown the importance of home support in early childhood learning and development. Working within the context of a school improvement project, the researcher responded to parents' concern towards children's learning and parent-child communication, and conducted a case study of a school-based initiative to engage parents in supporting children's learning. The kindergarten used the child-centered teaching approach, in which children were asked to seek relevant information and materials based on their daily interests and exploration. Children were encouraged to integrate drawing and writing daily newsletters to communicate to their parents what they needed and how their parents could help them. The aims of this paper were to study how parents and teachers evaluated the project; their thought on home-school collaboration and their children's learning.

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Parent Involvement in Early Childhood Education

A great deal of research in Western countries supports the notion that parental involvement has a positive effect on children's achievement. Parents who are more involved with their children's schooling become knowledgeable about school goals and procedures (Hill & Taylor, 2004), communicate the importance of education to children (Lareau, 2000), help children learn strategies to enhance their perceptions of competence and control over achievement outcomes (Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994), and structure learning experiences that result in skill development (Keith et al., 1993). In addition, a number of studies of early childhood years have demonstrated that parental involvement has beneficial and lasting affects on both children and their parents (Fantuzzo, Perry & Childs, 2006).

Parents who are involved in their children's schooling exhibit increased self-confidence in their parenting and a more thorough knowledge of child development (Epstein, 2001). Researcher have also claimed that parent involvement in their children's early education increase parents' understanding of appropriate educational practices that it improves children's educational outcomes, especially literacy (Dickinson, Cote, & Smith, 1993); and that it improves parental commitment to schooling (Strickland & Taylor, 1989).

Parental involvement also leads to good relationships between children and between staff and children, and good communication between staff and parents is thought to be a prerequisite for high-quality care and education of young children (Hughes & MacNaughton, 2000). Parent involvement in early years has been associated with higher achievement levels in elementary and high school, lower high school dropout rates (Miedel & Reynolds, 1999), and greater social competence (Kohl, Lengua, et al, 2000).

The value of having strong parent involvement in early childhood education programs is supported by considerable research and study (Swick, 2004). The challenge in many cases is how to achieve high quality parent involvement efforts. Too often the reality of parent involvement is lacking, especially in relation to the meaningful engagement of parents and families (Olson & Fuller, 2003). How can we understand the various contexts in which families live and gain insights related to building

partnerships that are more meaningful with families?

Families Have Changed: What this Mean for Parent Involvement

Family changes include: smaller families, more role-sharing among family members, increased need for education, increased societal changes, and much more diversity in family arrangements (Swick, 2004). Today's families face challenges and change not experienced by previous generations. Some of these changes include: families are more diverse in structure and style, spend less time together, need more schooling than ever in history, are more likely to be single, and have shifted their values base to be more protective of their children (Bronfenbrenner, 2005).

The changes in society have created a conflicting situation for parents: how to respond to the heavy work stress while also maintaining a balance of time with children and family (Garbarino, 1992). Whatever parents do they are likely to have a sense of guilty in what they have neglected to do. Everyone wants parents to be involved (work, church, community) but as Bronfenbrenner (2005) suggests, no one has provided the "time" or resources for parents to negotiate these many requests. Nor have we helped parents keep their parent connections strong (Pappano, 2001).

Early childhood professional need to be cognizant of these changes in the lives of families and respond with empowering perspectives and strategies to support a more viable and enhancing family-school relationship system (Swick, 2004). Three impacts are evident in the changing needs of families: early childhood programs need to offer more parenting education, provide essential supports for parents that enable them to be a part of quality involvement efforts, and seek and create more diverse pathways for parent involvement to occur (Dunst, 2002, Swick, 2004). In effect, we need to be more family-centered in all aspects of our early childhood thinking.

This paper identifies way that how early childhood teachers learn about their parents, and uses this information to develop new strategy to encourage parent involvement. It also examines how do parents and teachers evaluated the projects; their thought on home-school collaboration and their children learning. The answer to these questions can capitalize on parent strengths in developing positive and empowering relations with families.

Facilitating Children's Expression through Drawing and Writing

Children learn how to think symbolically and how to use pictorial and written symbols to represent their ideas. Particularly for young children, drawing and writing

go together, because both are ways of expressing ideas and feelings. The drawings of young children usually emphasized "the communication of thoughts rather than the production of pleasing visual images" (Hipple, 1985, p.255), so many experts look at both drawing and writing as composing processes (Dyson, 1990).

Teachers of young children play an important role in introducing children to the communicative power of pictures and words. Teachers must resist the "right/wrong" mentality that prevents young children from trying out their ideas. Classrooms create an open-ended environment in which children are encouraged to experiment with drawing and writing. Their work is a fascinating documentary of their interests, skills and hypotheses about how language works. A community that values children's drawing and writing will find teachers and children using symbols together – making lists, creating posters, designing a mural, writing a story on a chart, creating an original song picture book, corresponding with others, and so forth (Armington, 1997). The audience for children's work should be varies as well. Instead of children drawing and writing only for the teacher, they need opportunities to share their work with classmates, parents, other children or school personnel, and visitors. If teachers make those early experiences challenging, stimulating, and satisfying, we will contribute greatly to the child's ability to master the multiple symbols of modern society.

The Background of the Project

Working within the context of a school improvement project in kindergarten, the researcher responded to the parents' and teachers' concerns about the children's growth and learning, as well as conducted a case study of a school-based initiative to engage parents in supporting their children's learning. In the past, the kindergarten used a thematic approach in which the teachers planned the curriculum, and the teaching process was more teacher-directed. As a result of a discussion between parents and teachers, it was determined that the teachers hoped to strengthen the children's motivation in learning and their abilities to solve problems, whereas the parents wanted their children to share their school lives with them. Thus, both parents and teachers agreed to try a project-based learning approach (PBL) wherein the children would direct their learning based on their daily interests and where they might need to search for relevant information and materials based on their daily interests and exploration. In addition, the children were encouraged to integrate drawing and writing daily newsletters to communicate to their parents what they need and how their parents could help them. Thus, the classroom activities shifted away from teacher-centered lessons towards an emphasis on learning activities that were interdisciplinary, student-centered, and integrated with real-world issues and practices.

The children who worked on this project belonged to two classes of four to five years of age in kindergarten.

Purcell-Gates and Dahl (1991) emphasize the importance of print-rich environments that provide varied, meaningful and functional opportunities for literacy engagement, as well as teacher expectations that children will be active co-constructors of literacy knowledge not the passive recipient of teacher-led direct instruction. As part of this process of co-construction, parent promised to commit themselves to being involved in their children's learning and discussing with children what they have collected and would like to share. Moreover, children would share their home experience within a small group in class. We believe that children's learning can be greatly enhanced if parents and teachers have a shared understanding of how children organize and go about their learning at home and at school. As such, this project set up important opportunities for the development of a genuine dialogue and collaboration between home and school.

The Implementation Process

The six participating teachers teamed up to discuss the curriculum, learning activities and evaluation of the project in six group sessions. Three learning sessions were conducted during the Christmas holidays since they planned to start PBL in January. The teachers had the initial plan and activity design, but they needed to actively listen to the children's response and to help the children determine their common interests, so they could then focus on one area to study. They needed to create an environment wherein adults and children learn together and where children's knowledge and skills can be extended by encouraging critical reflection and offering feedback. The teachers' role is complex and includes adopting the role of a listener, prompter, information giver, and asker of questions interesting to the communication process. The conversations focused on stimulating inquiry and helping children who were trying to write or draw something they had in mind, and then reading back their ideas and searching with them for insights that would motivate further questions and group activity. The teachers also played an important role by communicating with the parents about the project and encouraging them to become involved in the activities of their children by finding the necessary materials. Thus, the first three sessions focused on the change in the teacher's role and communications skills. They met every two weeks during the project. A review time was held that enabled the teaching team to conduct a process recall, reflect on their experience, and plan for the coming session. Such discussions also engendered a knowledge-creation process. Thus, they had three

sessions on sharing and reflection.

A total of sixty families (100 percent of the families) participated in the project. The first Parent-Teacher Meeting was held during Christmas. The teaching team briefed the participating parents on the learning activities that they and their children would go through and what they would learn from these activities. This helped the parents understand their children's development, their roles and the aims of the project. The second and third Parent-Teacher Meetings were held every two months after the project started. The themes of the meetings included (a) teachers being informed about the children's progress, (b) parents sharing information on parent-child daily communication, and (c) exchanging of parents' and teachers' observation and concern. At the end of the project, a review meeting was held to allow the parents to discuss their experiences with their children and what they perceived as children's way of learned.

Methods of Inquiry

The project had two phases. In the first semester (from September to January), researcher worked with teachers and parents to develop the framework for working together. The actual project ran from February to June and, at the end of July, the researcher conducted one focus group with twelve parents and an interview with six participating teachers to gather their learning and feedback for improvement.

To investigate the parents' and teachers' reflections on the project, the study included multiple sources of qualitative data from a cross-section stakeholder. The data collection methods included focus group interviews, records of observation, and minutes of the meeting.

The researcher conducted one focus group with twelve parents (six parents were invited in each class) and an interview with six participating teachers to gather their comments on the project. The parent and teacher interviews were conducted two weeks after the project. All the interviews were conducted in Chinese. The interviews were tape-recorded, and the transcribed data were analyzed using both open and axial coding. In addition, supplementation by the researcher and the minutes of the meeting were the other data sources for this investigation. Thus, the researcher played various roles by coordinating and evaluating the project, organizing the parents' and teachers' learning activities, observing the classroom, and conducting the interviews with the parents and teachers.

Results

How did Parents view the Project? What did Parents Learn?

The project experience would have been new to the parents. In the past, parents often received formal newsletters from school, which clearly informed what children were doing in school and how did parent help or enhance their children's experience. Our Parent-Teacher Meeting provided a forum for collecting process observation data. In the first two sessions, parents were anxious and lacked confidence in children's abilities. A parent stated, "I worry my son since he is a passive child. He has never talked about what goes on in school." Another parent remarked, "If a child sends the wrong message to us [parents] and child must bring the wrong material to school, will he or she lose the learning opportunities or activities? Will he or she feel failure?"

At the end of the project, parents agreed the project enhanced their understanding in children's learning, and that daily communication with their children improved their parent-child interaction. One parent became aware that his son's writing developed over time and as a result of opportunities and interaction with him, as seen below:

> At the very beginning, we doubted about children's abilities… Parents need to take the time and feel confident that what the school is doing with the children and why they are doing it, and then they will be reassured… Parents also need to learn to see the world through the eyes of the children, and praise child's representation by offering constructive feedback…Once my son told us that they (the children in class) discussed where they came from. A classmate mentioned he has an ultra-sound photo. Most children were very interested in it, they decided to write or draw a newsletter to their parent to ask them to find their ultra-sound photo. A drawing and words that expand and enrich its meaning can provide an outlet for my child's concerns. Look at [Figure 1]. It shows what my son had knowledge of an ultra-sound photo of him and he established a connection between the picture and the words…Now my son is really interested in writing & drawing. Sometimes we sit with him while he draws, but most of the time he gets on with it himself. He asks when he gets stuck though… He can express himself by a number of ways, much better than some of the other children.

Figure 1
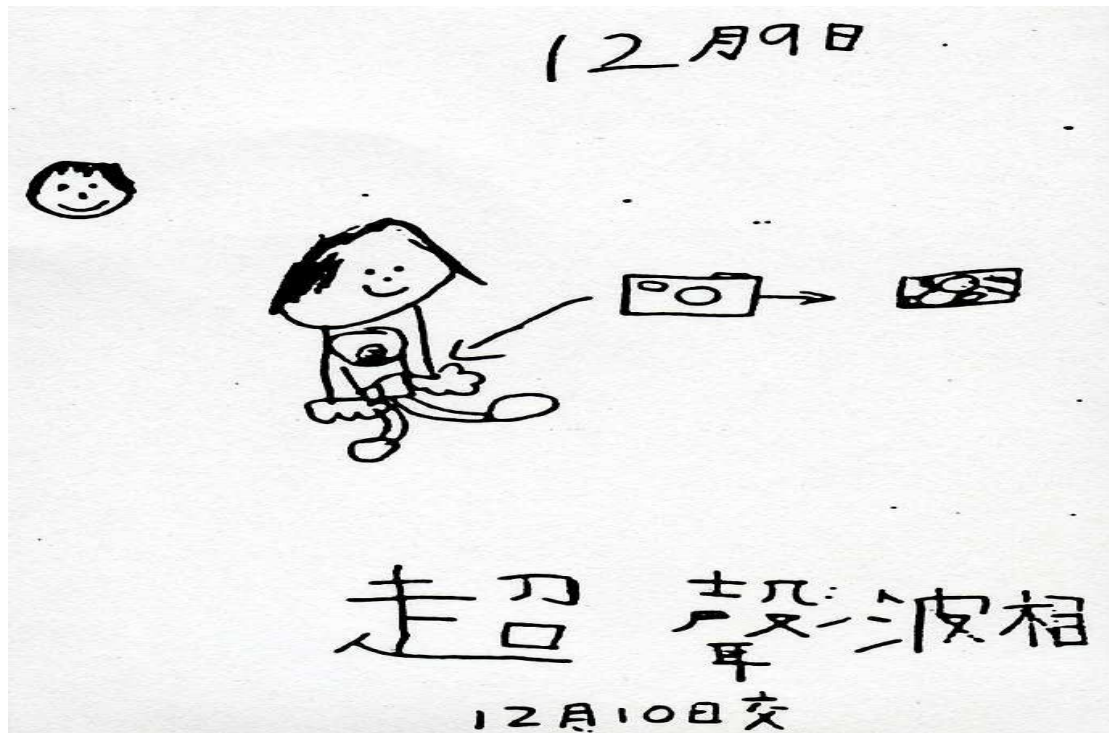
All parents believed children had benefited from the project. They mentioned benefits such as an enhanced development of literacy in general and, specifically, improvements in learning motivation and specific skills and knowledge in reading, writing or environmental print. The parents clearly valued the project, and indicated that it made them aware of things that they could do with children. They made comments such as:

It's made him (child) more willing to learn, and more confidence with other adults. He's interested in books and want to read signs. He takes notice more.

It's been a big help actually, I do think my son has learned a lot. I've loved being able to spend quality time to do those things with him, like painting, drawing and playing games.

Another parent reflected the project helped her learned more about her child's learning:

The learning process is valuable, both for my child and me. My daughter used her representations to explore, to make sense of the world. She tried to represent her growth in [Figure 2] and asked us to help collect her photos from birth to four years

old. In talking with her about the pictures, my husband and I learned that she had really understood the concept of time and growth. By communicating my daughter expressions I could find out what she knew about their world, what she considered important, and how she chose to represent... The project encouraged a dialogue between children and parents, and parents made significant contributions to the child's growth. Now I have learnt to enter her imagination and see the world through her eyes.

Figure 2
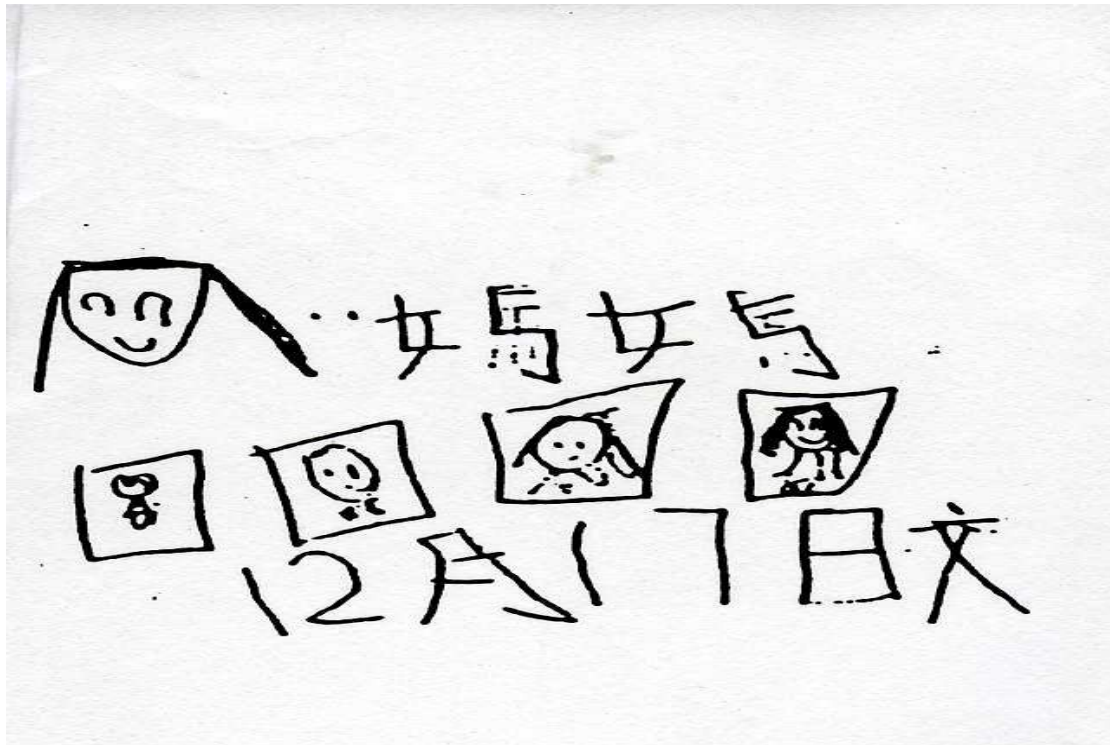
Lastly, all parents stated that they had more confidence in dealing with teachers because of the good relationship they had developed with them. They also have positive comments about school's curriculum. Parents used the words of 'a friend', 'brilliant, and 'very caring' to describe their relations with teachers. A parent said: The project's given me that closer link with school and it made my daughter happy." Only one parent felt being in the project was a pressure, but that was for understandable reasons: "Because I was a single mother, sometimes it felt a bit difficulty for me, I still enjoyed doing it." Another parent commented on the project as follows:

At the Parent-Teacher Meeting, I learned my roles and how my participation influence my child's learning. There has been a continuous growth, both from the point of view of the child's learning and from our point of view as parents. Because of

this attention to my child, I became involved immediately, and came to look at my child's education as involving my participation. This experience is useful for me, but school also needs other parents. It gave me more knowledge about how young children lean and the rationale for the school curriculum. By now I support the new curriculum and its teaching aspect. My child is curious and interested in what has been happening at the school and in his life. And I am learning to help my child to find some interesting aspects and encounter new things.

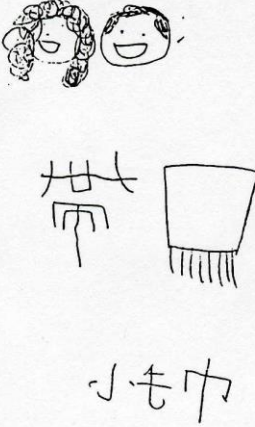The feedbacks of parent supported on Parker's (2002, pp.92-3) notion that:

> The parents learned from observing their children and developed an appreciation of their children's high levels of involvement, discussing their children's achievements at home with confidence, clarity and joy…The children have been the primary beneficiaries of the collaboration between parents and practitioners. We all had valuable knowledge and understanding to share. This was a group which enjoyed mutual respect, shared understandings, political awareness and a commitment to extending learning opportunities for young children.

How did Teachers view the Project? What did Teachers Learn?

Both teachers agreed the project would affect children's growth as thinkers and communicators. Children were motivated to learn and express their ideas, which also benefits their children's social and emotional development

In the past, we underestimated young children's thinking powers and the role of the educator. Children are able to perceive and understand the world through their senses…Children were encouraged to speak about their own pictures and invite children to express whole thoughts in a relax atmosphere. I saw they were confident with communicating and handwriting. In [Figure 3], a child used correct words and complete sentences to express himself as time went on. …Through a curriculum rich in creative and imaginative opportunities, children have the opportunity to develop skills, attitudes and knowledge that will benefit all areas of their learning and development.

Figure 3

4 years 3 months (Does everyone has navel ?)	4 years 6 months (Bring a towel back to school)	4 years 9 months (Bring my baby clothes, toys and using materials)

Consistent with the parents, some teachers were not support the project and having some worries at the start of the project. A teacher expressed, "It's frustrating. There's not enough time. And I really don't know how to scaffold children's thinking." All teachers agreed that the collaborative learning and building up mutual professional trust among teaching team were important factors of their professional development. Teachers also valued the opportunity to meet, work, think and solve problems together, "It was not just the sharing and learning among each others, it's also the support all the way through."

Both teachers agreed the project enhanced their professional growths. They felt that the opportunity to work and grow as a team contributed to the success for their teaching and home-school collaboration. As two teachers said:

Sound subject knowledge is helpful in giving the teacher confidence to clarify children's questions and develop their ideas. The teacher professional development should raise the quality of talk and understanding in the classroom…Brainstorming is an effective strategy for initiating discussion, with additional potential as an assessment tool. It enables the teacher to find out more about the children's learning as work progresses. Some children may need the support of sharing ideas with

another child or adult. Others can work individually. Teacher needs to know her children well before deciding on one particular technique or combination of strategies.

Through the learning and sharing sessions, I aware and believe that parents have an important role in the process of education. Not only is this belief essential but we also need to understand why we are attempting to learn about parents and what information we need to effectively provide meaningful experiences for the children with whom we work. Before we can begin to establish meaningful relationship with parents, we must make sure to establish an inviting classroom climate that implicitly and explicitly communicates that a place where parents are valued.

Two teachers reported parent involvement in children's learning and positive relationships with families were two successful factors of the project:

At first, I doubted about children's abilities and parents' involvement. I saw children could connect between the picture and the words as mean to present their understanding and experience. The children also knew that words convey meaningful aspects of experience; they were motivated to learn...Parents' involvement gave much support to me. It was true that, parent-child interaction and discussion established children's curiosity; promoting searching, questioning minds. I felt children picked up much what they learned at home... At the meetings, I shared and compared my observation with parents, we would understand better.

The quality parent-child interactions developed the children's literacy abilities and self-confidence... And the culture of collaboration is effectively communicated to parents through the implicit message sent by teachers through formal and informal ways, and perhaps most importantly, the frequency and consistency of active and positive communication between parents and school.

Consistency to my classroom observation data, I saw the children had shown considerable interest in the discussion, writing, drawing and sharing their ideas. When children collected the information and materials back to school they showed evidence of parents having helped children to search, discuss and record. This gave teachers enormous pleasure, as it moved the project on in a very positive way.

Another teacher shared her experience in the Parent-Teacher Meeting:

I have found my involvement in this project both exciting and challenging. As times passed I felt more secure about what I have to offer. In this project, it was obviously extremely important to gain the respect and trust of the school and parents. I was aware that the enthusiasm and their involvement of the parents encouraged me to walk forward.

Teachers had a clear sense of what they brought to the collaboration with parents - the attitudes, knowledge and skills which they judged to be crucial for such work. They presented a consistent message about: the importance of a positive attitude towards parent's roles in children's learning and development; and teamwork as factors contributing to their increased professional confidence.

Using Our Insights to Strengthen Home-School Collaboration

Parents and teachers valued the project benefits for children. The project has been successful in promoting children's learning motivation, self-expression and parent-child communication. Family interactions during activities involved both the quality and quantity of communication, parent and teachers worked together to give children to gain communicating skills and to keep children's interest alive and personally rewarding. Through home school collaboration, it has been promoted children's language arts skills – listening, speaking, reading, and printscript – into successful experience.

These experiences also provided opportunities for teachers and parents to develop an appreciation for each others perspectives on children's learning. This would lead for families bringing more of the literacy interactions that occur at school into their homes. Equally important, it might lead teachers to provide opportunities and interactions that more closely matched those that children are comfortable with form their home environments.

Both parents and teachers felt that participating in the project had enhanced their relationships among each other. Overall, the impact of the project was considered to be significant, and increasing the provision for home school collaboration.

From our experience, we conclude that we can move to be more family-centered in all aspects of this project. In order to increase the ability and tendency to establish meaningful relationships with parents and ultimately increase active parent involvement and collaboration between schools, we possessed an understanding of parents' perceptions of their roles in the process of education, their related interest in

developing a relationship with school, and interaction style. As we knew the expectations of the parents, we integrated the new strategies into the school curriculum that might be effectives in enhancing fruitful collaboration. Integral to this process was seeking parent input, being responsive to parent requests, and showing parents how we used their suggestions and ideas. Thus, we successfully used parent input in shaping our involvement programs and school activities (Patrikakou et al. 2005).

This project provided active support from educationalists through collaborative workshops and seminars which enabled parents and teachers to gain the confidence to take risks and share insights gained from their experimentation with new forms. The parenting education included input from parents as related to the substance and style of the process. Parents had open dialogue with teachers--establishing a shared-learning philosophy where we helped each other strengthen our caring and nurturing skills (Swick et al., 2001). On the other hand, teachers reviewed their attitudes and practices as related to better understanding family needs, strengths, and talents (Swick, 2004). Teachers became to see themselves as partners with both the parents and the child in each child's growth and development. They were willing to open the door for meaningful interactions as they sought opportunities to engage in dialogue with the parents that they served.

Lastly, a teamwork approach to home school collaboration should be a dynamic, relevant opportunity for families and teachers to care together informally and exchange ideas information, and feedbacks and comments.

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