

TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE

Parent Involvement as a Process of Identity Development

Joyce F. Long

During the past 3 years, Stuart Greene and I have interviewed dozens of urban parents in research for the parents' workshop mentioned in Chapter 1. Almost every individual easily answered the question, "As a child, what did you want to be when you grew up?" Collectively, their answers represent a wide variety of careers, including dancers, football players, pediatricians, and lawyers. Their responses indicated that they all had a dream predicated upon acquiring a specific identity. Essentially, their dreams helped shape the person they wanted to become.

A secondary influence on the scope and direction of who we want to become is what we learn; indeed, learning both shapes and is shaped by identity. When children dream of becoming pediatricians, they must successfully learn the content of their biology, chemistry, or anatomy courses in order to achieve that identity. Yet learning, defined as experiences that cause "a relatively permanent change in an individual's knowledge or behavior," can be "deliberate or unintentional, for better or for worse" (Woolfolk, 2005, p. 190), and accurate or incorrect (Hill, 2002). Every academic challenge we successfully overcome reflects our ability to link new information with existing knowledge in meaningful ways (American Psychological Association, 1995), thus securely establishing our identity as learners.

But how are our identities as learners affected when we encounter academic problems that are neither consistently nor successfully resolved? Because forming an identity is neither automatic nor permanently accomplished (Marcia, 1999), students who define themselves as "poor readers" or "lousy in spelling" negatively influence their evolving identity and severely limit what they might accomplish in the future. This is true whether the struggling learners are in high school remedial reading

classes, preservice teacher training courses, or parent-involvement workshops. Thus, the purpose of this chapter is to explore how parents may need strategic, interactive opportunities to tear down prior malformed school identities in order to rebuild new self-images that are associated with academic learning, before they can identify themselves as involved parents. Indeed, one recent graduate of NPLB workshops described the program as first helping you to "change yourself" and then to "change what you do."

COMPLICATING COMMONSENSE VIEWS OF URBAN PARENTS' INVOLVEMENT

In a provocatively rich and powerful review of the parent-involvement literature, Pomerantz, Moorman, and Litwack (2007) suggest that future research should direct its attention to interventions that are autonomy-supportive, process-focused, emotionally positive, and associated with constructive beliefs about children's potential. Although some research focuses exclusively upon parent involvement's effect on student achievement (Fan & Chen, 2001), other research highlights the importance of supporting children's autonomy and positive affect as well as healthy identity development (Erikson, 1963).

When parents are given adequate support for effectively navigating through learning crises, they develop autonomy within academic contexts to not only build effective involvement styles, but also reconstruct their own academic identities. In the right environment, parents who previously may have been unsuccessful in specific subjects (e.g., math, reading) can begin to forge new internal descriptions of themselves (e.g., intelligent rather than stupid). Thus parents whose early experiences of formal schooling may have included low-track courses (Oakes, 2005), less interactive pedagogy (Anyon, 1988), seriously diminished motivation levels (Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000), and savagely high dropout rates (Indiana Department of Education, 2009) may be able to utilize involvement interventions to reformulate their own negative academic self-images acquired through numerous hours and years of failure in school.

APPROACHES TO IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

Psychological theories of identity development postulate that "internal traits and dispositions" (Smagorinsky, Cook, Moore, Jackson, & Fry, 2004, p. 14) emerge over time as individuals resolve specific conflicts. More

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specifically, Erikson's (1959) theory of psychosocial development includes eight unique stages: basic trust, autonomy, initiative, industry, identity, intimacy, generativity, and integrity. Within Erikson's model, these concepts are acquired in progressive stages that correspond with chronological ages or grade levels. Although his theory was developed 5 decades ago, its tenets are still emphasized in educational psychology textbooks today. Moreover, it is not unusual for preservice teachers to regularly complete assignments that require applying Erikson's concepts and principles to experiences in their field placements. Thus teachers in training learn that a first-grade student who self-selects a book and loudly expresses the desire to read the book without any help is demonstrating initiative and independence, as well as reading readiness.

Parents likewise might benefit from similar opportunities to successfully solve these same challenges. Whether a person processes them in a linear fashion or concurrently—as described in sociocultural approaches—Erikson (1963) suggests that successfully resolving each crisis heightens one's sense of inner unity, good judgment, and the capacity to succeed in accordance with social and cultural expectations. According to his theory, parents who judge themselves to be trustworthy and capable of accurately assessing another's ability to be trusted have acquired basic trust. In contrast, autonomy emerges in individuals who have experienced environments where independence and rightful dignity are emphasized and shame is minimized during the exercise of free choice. When a third characteristic, initiative, is present in individuals, they can create possibilities, formulate goals, and achieve pleasure through conquests.

Whereas initiative reflects a person's ability to imagine possibilities, industry is formed in individuals as they watch "how things are done" and subsequently try to do them (Erikson, 1959, p. 82). In schools, students can acquire industry whenever they have appropriate opportunities to work and play and learn to be useful. As individuals experience pride in exerting effort, enjoy working, and feel a sense of adequacy rather than inferiority from "doing things beside and with others," they acquire understanding about "division of labor and equality of opportunity" (p. 88). They also become convinced they are "learning effective steps toward a tangible future" (p. 89).

Becoming industrious naturally helps one to define and operate in roles that society and/or culture judges to be meaningful, which in turn builds intimacy by sharing one's likes, dislikes, "plans, wishes, and expectations" (Erikson, 1959, p. 95) with others. Achieving intimacy thus leads to developing a concern for securely guiding and establishing the next generation (generativity) and gaining personal fulfillment through accepting oneself (ego integrity). If identity development does occur in a linear fashion during childhood, trusting kindergarten children who re-

peatedly experience academic failures by second grade may be stalled and incapable of regarding themselves as industrious academic learners until those processes are successfully renavigated.

Fortunately, sociocultural approaches confirm that identity development can also occur continuously in the midst of contextual interactions (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998) through "engagement with others in cultural practice" (Smagorinsky et al., 2004, p. 14). This is particularly good news because parents must regard themselves as competent academic learners and informal teachers, if involvement fundamentally includes facilitating student learning at home and in school (Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2001). The literature on teacher identity suggests that ideal environments for identity construction acknowledge the constraints of personal histories and ability beliefs (Olsen, 2008). These environments also provide opportunities for individuals to participate in "new communities of practice" (Freedman & Appleman, 2008, p. 111), which in teacher-training settings include individuals reflectively interacting with the content, their peers, the schools where they work, and new professional networks.

A NOTE ON METHODS

Since our participants and the research setting have already been described thoroughly in Chapter 1, this methods section begins by briefly explaining how the contents of this chapter relate to the larger study and concludes with a more specific focus on how our workshops facilitated identity development. In general, the presurvey and focus group data cited in Chapter 1 informed us that our parents generally did not regard themselves as academic instructors. Instead, they unanimously regarded the schools as doing a good job and viewed their role primarily as getting children to school and monitoring whether homework was completed. Moreover, initial interviews suggested that the majority of parents had not graduated from traditional high school settings. The one participant who attended a 4-year college later dropped out.

In addition to the data sources already mentioned, every parent ($n = 11$) wrote reflections at the end of each workshop. The parents also wrote reports on completing interactive homework assignments with their children. I scrutinized those written documents for factors associated with the literature on both psychosocial and sociocultural approaches to identity development. Another source of contextualized evidence was provided by videotapes at each session; these were triangulated with the written reflective reports and a follow-up focus group transcript to explore identity development over time.

BECOMING ACADEMIC LEARNERS AND FACILITATORS OF LEARNING

From the onset, the NPLB program intentionally designed a context in which trust, autonomy, and initiative operated in every workshop. Additionally, the university instructors frequently asked parents for their input on nearly every part of the curriculum (e.g., topics, field trip locations, resources). As a result of these proactive efforts, all participants' evaluations of the program referenced feeling accepted, respected, and valued, because, as one parent reported, no one "ever pulled rank with us." Thus parents had the opportunity to develop as learners and informal teachers in a supportive environment throughout the workshops.

Parents as Academic Learner

During our initial interviews with each parent, ~~parents either~~ spoke of liking school or shed tears as they described their school struggles and dashed career dreams. In comparison to those diverse affective experiences, written reflections showed a rich array of positive emotional responses to the curriculum. After reading chapters in a published autobiography of a Black man who had overcome considerable financial and educational handicaps (e.g., single-parent family, low SES, ridiculed by teacher and peers) to become a famous surgeon (Carson, 1990), they wrote of loving the book's contents and really enjoying the read-aloud process. In the second session, after viewing a documentary about the surgeon's life, parents expressed positive regard for the role of reading in the surgeon's development.

Similarly, every parent responded positively to the movie *Akeelah and the Bee* (Burns & Atchison, 2006). Many called the movie "impressive," "touching," or "inspirational." They described themselves as being "sorry" for a boy whose father intensely pressured him, and "sad" as well as "mad" that Akeelah's mother had not been supportive of her desire to participate in the spelling bee. They were also "proud" of Akeelah's spelling ability as it surpassed what most adults could accomplish. One remarked, "I thought the movie would be boring but I enjoyed it. I liked the part that Akeelah reached her dreams even though her father died. She found her talents. I hope that I could find my son's talents."

For some, the curriculum also evoked negative emotions that needed to be resolved. After a session on the role of interests in learning, one mother remarked, "I was saddened because for most of the last 20 years, I've made almost every decision for what was best for someone else—husband, children—so their interests have become mine." Following a discussion about the role emotions play in learning and watching a docu-

mentary on Erin Gruwell and her high school students, who cried openly about their experiences in her language arts classroom, parents intensely discussed their experiences with teachers who truly cared and compared them with teachers who did not appear to care.

These examples highlight the growth of parents' positive identities as they successfully navigated through academic content and addressed affective dimensions of their academic identities. We encouraged laughter and fun in our classroom during expressive reading sessions and mathematics games, and provided healthy opportunities to process painful prior school experiences. More specifically, these new successful learning encounters rekindled their desire to be academic learners.

Parents' investments in learning also became visible when they expanded their initial two-sentence reflections into lengthy paragraphs that extended across multiple pages. They often expressed heartfelt appreciation for each evening's events and demonstrated high levels of motivation and engagement. In addition to these affective and motivational findings, parents acquired knowledge and skills in two important areas: subject matter knowledge (e.g., reading/writing) and knowledge about themselves as learners. They learned, for example, the value of observing and creating art, how reading can have more positive outcomes than watching television, and how single mothers can positively influence children's success in school.

They also discovered that "the library has a lot of interesting things to do and read about that [neither] I nor my son knew about," that a "child's emotions can affect schoolwork and learning," and that "corn pops aren't very good nutrition. If they eat it, they also need toast and juice." Similarly, their knowledge about themselves as learners increased exponentially. After visiting the art museum, one parent declared, "Before when I looked at pictures, I never really took the time to really think about the art of it or the artist's reflection." At a superficial level, one could dismiss these simple statements as merely reflecting low-level knowledge acquisition, yet the extent and frequency of such remarks suggested that new identities were being constructed.

All of these comments are consistent with building a sense of efficacy and industry. Parents practiced academic processes in class and through homework assignments that helped them to develop roles valued by our school-oriented society. Moreover, they continually voiced their preferences and developed intimate relations with both parent-peers and instructors. Over time, their emerging identities as successful academic learners became more established and secure, and parents began earnestly and consistently expressing their desire to gain more expertise in helping their children academically.

Parents as Facilitators of Academic Lessons

Throughout the NPLB workshops, parents acquired content and skills. Every time they participated in interactive lessons with their children, such as tasting different foods, cooking, and playing math games, they began developing new identities as facilitators of their child(ren)'s academic learning. After visiting an art museum where they jointly learned how to examine art and make evaluative judgments about the paintings, parents lavished praise on the visit. One parent was pleasurably surprised and enjoyed "talking with [my son] about the picture he was looking at and helping him see more than just the picture." Another "thought it was an exciting trip because my kids and I have never been to a museum before. They thought it was great." These remarks indicated how much parents appreciated interacting with their children in settings that promoted learning.

Parents experienced this same pride and emotional satisfaction during literacy lessons. In one workshop, the instructors focused on identifying one-, two-, and three-syllable words as well as antonyms/synonyms in the dictionary. We began the lesson by modeling the process of identifying and recording our responses on an accompanying sheet. Then we encouraged the parents to complete each step of the process independently; finally, we observed them practicing with a parent-partner prior to leading their children through the same procedures later in the evening. In this manner, parents had ample opportunities to comfortably learn tasks with supportive, noncritical guidance before they assumed responsibility for instructing their children. Our classroom environment provided multiple opportunities to experience positive emotion, effortful labor, and enhanced understanding as they negotiated stages in building academic identity.

Parents also learned to navigate instructional challenges by applying a three-part strategy to their children's lessons and homework assignments: observe, discuss, and do. One mother helped her second grader learn spelling words. First, she directed her son to visually examine the words, then they discussed the meaning of each word together, and finally she asked him to write the words independently. Another parent designed a lesson for learning fractions, and a third family used these steps to read books. Together they looked at all the pictures, then discussed possible storylines based on the pictures, and finally the child read the book aloud while comparing the hypothesized storyline with the actual text.

Parents also extended their instructional influence to other children in their family. They even practiced newly acquired skills with preschoolers and children above 4th grade. Some created spelling lessons for the

entire family from words used in their day-to-day conversations. Others used a phonics text with all family members, inspiring older children to help their younger siblings. In this way, they were securely guiding and establishing literate patterns for the next generation.

Parents' growing competence and confidence in reinforcing and building their children's literacy and numeracy skills began influencing other actions. For example, one mother described previously throwing away all of her children's papers from their backpacks—regardless of the grades they earned. After attending our workshops, she proudly displayed their papers on her refrigerator and encouraged them to work harder by competing for weekly prizes that she awarded for the highest grade. Although she had not received instruction on those specific strategies, her actions reflected dispositional improvement that positively supported her children's academic outcomes.

Examples of changed perception and action related to children's learning also emerged in other, nonacademic areas. For example, after learning about nutrition, sampling healthier foods, and cooking with their children, parents began buying whole grain products and fresh fruits/vegetables, and gave their children toast and juice for breakfast instead of sugar-rich treats. They soon concluded that cooking together builds "independence and measurement skills," even as it "helps with math, reading, teamwork, following directions, and social skills," and building "self-esteem and confidence." Moreover, they consistently demonstrated to their children that learning could be "fun" and could bring families "closer together."

These actions confirmed to both parents and children that they reaped benefits from practicing academic skills together (e.g., phonics, math, reading). Over time, parents described their children as making progress. For instance, a 3rd grader no longer needed his mother's help because "he understands what he's doing." Another parent became more aware of her child's academic challenges: "The first time we did the drill book, I must admit, I was scared and concerned. My son only scored a 55 and stumbled over four of the words. [It was an] eye opener!" After reaching these conclusions, many parents independently crafted instructional goals: "in order for me to keep it up, I am going to keep working with him, and not let him watch so much television." Another optimistically suggested, "We'll keep working over the summer and hopefully by next year, she'll be doing a lot better."

Their instructional plans often included accessing existing community resources, especially the public library. After visiting the public library as a field trip (e.g., attending story hour, taking a tour, finding books related to personal interests), parents were enthusiastic. "We really enjoyed the

trip because it gave us time together . . . and it has gotten my son a lot more interested in reading. I am very proud of him in that aspect." One parent attentively noted that her son "likes the children's section of the library. First he played on the computer; then he looked around for a couple of books. He picked out two that he liked and we checked them out. He likes many types of books." Another remarked, "As we toured the grounds from top to bottom, an idea came into my head that this is a great place to have a summer activity at least once a week." They concluded that visiting the library more often would expose their children to "a lot more things."

Over time, they redefined their initial descriptions of teachers being solely responsible for children's academic learning. They began portraying themselves in roles that involved more than correcting behavior. At the last workshop, they listed the following activities to illustrate the many changes they had implemented through their participation in the program: limiting children's television and computer use, requiring children to read two books per week, discussing topics of interest with their children, listening to them read, taking more time with them, feeding them healthier foods, working together, checking homework more thoroughly, working equally hard with all their children, and devoting time to other activities besides school. As they learned from their own mastery experiences and vicariously acquired knowledge from their peers and workshop leaders, they even began questioning their children's principals and teachers in meaningful ways: "Where are the directions on these homework pages?" "How can our children be doing so poorly on standardized test scores but getting As and Bs on their report cards?"

In sum, parents acquired roles as academic learners and informal academic instructors. Three months later at a follow-up focus group, the extent of their growth was still evident when one mother of a single-parent household presented a problem she was having with her son and asked for help. Immediately, the room was charged with passionate remarks from other parents at the table. They encouraged her to take responsibility: "He's your child and he needs you." They also suggested that she start "taking him to church." This exchange not only contrasted strongly with their previous isolation, but indicated they had become more secure in their own identities and could intimately share expertise with others in a like-minded supportive community of practice (Freedman & Appleman, 2008).

These outcomes are especially important for two reasons: First, members of some segments of society have tended erroneously to classify poor individuals with a history of academic struggles as beyond hope and resistant to change (Kozol, 2005); and second, schools that are failing to

single-handedly produce verifiable levels of academic improvement desperately need parents who believe they can help their children learn academic skills and content. When parents are empowered to reforge new academic identities, they have an opportunity to intervene on their children's behalf before unhealthy identities take hold.

POSSIBILITIES FOR YOUR CLASSROOM, SCHOOL, AND COMMUNITY

Unfortunately, school administrators tend to narrowly define parent involvement as mimicking the role of teachers (e.g., monitoring the completion of curricular sheets done in school). To singularly limit parents' roles to school-like activities such as getting children to school and completing homework is myopic. A more enlightened approach empowers parents to extend existing lessons and freely construct lessons that enrich formal schooling. Helping parents redefine their academic roles *can* be accomplished. But it requires schools to offer concrete learning experiences that facilitate the attainment of successful outcomes for parents.

The following suggestions are practical ways to begin to support this process. As a classroom teacher, it is important to ask parents whether the directions on homework sheets are clear. Sometimes textbook publishers' instructions are unintelligible to parents who are unfamiliar with content knowledge. Instructions should incorporate language that even a novice reader can interpret correctly. In addition, parents appreciate having access to the standards teachers cover as well as supplemental suggestions for simple home activities or free community field trips that reinforce corresponding requisite skills/content.

We also suggest that schools regularly offer workshops for parents in every core subject. These workshops should provide opportunities for parents to collaborate with one another and practice skills that they can teach their children.

Finally, school administrators can hire parents as part-time helpers in classrooms. A similar program currently is operating in our city, and preliminary results indicate that parents appreciate actually witnessing what teachers do, so that they understand the purpose behind specific homework assignments and pedagogical practices. Moreover, as teachers and parents spend more time together, they develop mutual respect for their respective skills and expertise. In the end, it is imperative that we stop undermining and devaluing this unique role of urban parents, and begin investing resources into reformulating their academic identities as competent learners and informal instructors.

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A RESPONSE TO CHAPTER 3

Catherine Compton-Lilly

Chapter 3, Long draws on the same study reported on in Chapter 1 and focuses on the academic identities of parents and the role they play as informal educators in their children's lives. In doing so, she challenges the assumption that some parents are less prepared than others to support their children in school. As parents told stories of themselves as academic learners, viewed films depicting the academic stories of others, and participated in a series of workshops designed to meet their interests as learners, they reflected on memorable and problematic learning experiences in their own lives and made decisions about how they wanted to work with their own children. Collectively they designed learning experiences for their children and shared the learning practices that occurred in their own homes—each parent drawing on the experiences and knowledge of the others.

Long reminds us that celebrating the differences that children bring to school is essential but not enough. We also need to support parents who choose to redefine themselves as agents capable of helping their children. As Long explains, "It is imperative that we stop undermining and devaluing the unique role of urban parents, and begin investing resources into reformulating their academic identities as competent learners and informal instructors."

Long's chapter highlights the academic abilities of parents and invites them to act as agents in their own children's learning. The final chapter in Part I also addresses the agency of parents, this time as community activists working for the welfare of children.

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