CHAPTER 6
PARENTS: THE PRIMARY AND PRINCIPAL EDUCATORS
JAMES M. FRABUTT

INTRODUCTION

Parents are the primary and principal educators of their children. The church has upheld this fundamental parental right and duty as primordial and inalienable (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988; John Paul II, 1982; National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1994). The daily lives of parents and children contain countless instances that allow for the development of the person and therein the vitality of the whole church. In the words of Pope John Paul II, "The future of humanity passes by way of the family." (# 861) Parents embrace their role as educators when they immerse themselves in their children’s education and the broader life of the school community. For this reason, it is critical to examine the research interface of parenting and family with Catholic education. In addition, changes in family structures, systems, and demographics over the last quarter century make it imperative that Catholic educators and catechists stay informed of the most current research and practice for dealing effectively with children and families. This chapter reviews research focusing on the intersection of parenting and family life with educational issues and concerns. Major topics covered include parent involvement, parenting and children's development, family dynamics and children’s functioning, parental choice of schools, and parent education and parenting programs.

PARENT INVOLVEMENT

Bach (1991) examined the reasons for parent choice and involvement for minority (59%) African American, 27% Hispanic) families in a study involving 1,070 parents of ninth through twelfth graders in five inner-city Catholic schools. Three dimensions of parent involvement believed to influence learning were included: participation, decision making, and communication. Analyses of variance demonstrated that parents’ reasons for school choice were associated with their participation in school-related activities. Specifically, parents whose primary reason was their primary reason were more likely to report involvement in school-related activities than parents that reported that their child’s choice was the primary reason for choosing the school. Further multiple regression analyses indicated that the strongest predictors of participation were parents’ choice for a discipline or safety reason, parent’s church participation, and parents’ expectations for their child’s education. Achievement, the communication of attitudes, and close relationships were also significant predictors. Significant differences were also detected for educational attainment, church participation, and income. Contrasting African American parents and high socioeconomic status parents were likely to communicate more frequently with teachers than their counterparts.

McDonald and Farkas (1996) further pursued this linkage between school choice and involvement through examining the effect of school responsiveness on parents' choice arrangements. The study
sample included parents (N = 575) from three types of school choice arrangements: Catholic, single-focus specialty public magnet schools, and multifocus public magnet schools. After controlling for income and ethnicity, parents in the different choice arrangements differed in their reasons for school choice, perceptions of school responsiveness, and parent involvement. Parents chose Catholic and single-focus magnet schools more frequently for discipline and safety reasons. Of the three arrangements, parents only chose Catholic schools for moral reasons. The authors also investigated the extent to which parent-school interactions differed as a function of school-choice arrangements. Based upon discriminant analysis, findings indicated that in Catholic and single-focus magnet schools, parents were more likely to report (a) having current information about school policies, (b) helping at school and serving on committees, and (c) checking over or helping with homework. Catholic schools and single-focus magnet schools were more likely to fail to provide information about course selection and how to help students, (b) be effective in communicating with parents and helping them to feel at ease in approaching the school, (c) seek advice from parents regarding school decisions, and (d) require parent volunteering. A second discriminant function distinguished along a private-public school dimension. After controlling for income, Catholic parents were more likely to contact the school and to enforce rules at home. Furthermore, "parents in Catholic schools were more likely to perceive their schools as providing effective communication with parents and making parents feel at ease in approaching the school," and were less likely to require parent volunteering" (Bauch & Goldring, 1996, p. 15).

Bauch and Goldring (1996) also examined the nature of the relationship between parent involvement and teacher decision making in three different school settings: Catholic schools, multifocus magnet schools, and single-focus public schools. Survey data were collected from teachers and parents of seniors in a total of 13 schools located in three urban areas of the United States. Canonical correlation was employed to explore the interrelationships of levels of parent involvement and teacher decision making. Different patterns emerged between parent involvement and teacher decision making across the three types of school choice settings. Results for Catholic schools suggested that a combination of "more involvement in school activities and opportunity for involvement, but less participation in decision making and less involvement around a child's educational issues, correspond with more teacher influence in decision making" (1996, p. 418). In single-focus schools, low levels of parent involvement were associated with low levels of teacher decision making. In multifocus magnet schools, "lower levels of teacher decision making are associated with higher levels of parental participation in school activities, but lower levels of parent involvement in their child's education" (p. 420). These findings suggested that Catholic schools might be developing a partnership model of parent-teacher relations, beyond that measured in the single-focus or multifocus public schools. However, the results also indicated that parents are treated somewhat as clients in the Catholic school, as they appeared not to have a significant role in the school organization. Bauch and Goldring noted that, from a practical perspective, their study

caution us to consider how the improvement of parent involvement could be threatening to teachers who may not wish to include parents' opinions and ideas in their decisions and how increased teacher decision making could mitigate the influence of parents in school matters. (p. 425)

More research is needed on the dynamics of shared power in the collaborative efforts of parents and teachers in education matters.

During the last decade, several dissertations have explored elements of parent involvement. For example, Ladd (1997) examined the relationship between teachers' perceptions of parental involvement in Catholic schools. Parents (N = 122) and teachers (N = 101) from two schools in the Archdiocese of Newark completed measures of parental involvement, parent participation, and perceptions of quality of school. Effects of socioeconomic status were detected in this study, such that less educational and occupational backgrounds of parents increased perceptions of the opportunities the school provided for parents to learn about education and
their children decreased, as did their perceptions of their involvement in personnel decisions. As the number of children in the school increased, parents exhibited lower perceptions of parent involvement in shaping the school's budget and policies. Results indicated that parents who were members of the parent association perceived parents as less involved in educational choices and were not as satisfied overall with the school as parents not in the parent association. Parents reporting higher achievement of their children had higher perceptions of parental involvement and satisfaction with the school. Significant differences were not reported between parents' and teachers' perceptions of parental involvement, with one exception: parents felt they were able to participate in more learning activities about education and their children than did teachers. Finally, in examining the relationship between overall satisfaction with the school and parents' perceptions of involvement, Benevento (1991) reported that higher parent satisfaction was associated with increased perceptions of parents' involvement as shapers of school policy and decreased involvement as learners and as supporters of school.

Research on social capital by Coleman and Hoffer (1987) provided the conceptual basis for Chilamkurti's (1995) dissertation examining the relationship of parental involvement in school-related activities at home, school-home communication, and parental attitude toward school to outcome indicators such as students' academic performance, attendance, and self-esteem. Families of elementary school children (N = 317) from six Catholic schools completed a demographic questionnaire, the Hopkins Survey of School and Family Connections (HSSFC) (Epstein & Salinas, 1993), and a Parent Involvement Questionnaire designed by the investigator. Findings demonstrated significant correlation between involvement in school-related activities at home, school-home communication, and parental attitude toward school and children's attendance, performance, and self-esteem. The most important predictor of these outcomes was parental involvement in school-related activities.

An issue of the Private School Monitor devoted to parent involvement featured two articles that specifically addressed parental involvement practices in Catholic schools (Mastaby, 1993; Mazzola, 1993). Mastaby conducted a descriptive analysis of a diverse, inner city parochial school. Results indicated the presence of a strong, supportive parent community that believes in the traditional value of education. Attendance at school functions was greatest for activities that directly involved children in terms of grades, entertainment, and awards. Specific barriers that prevented attendance at school functions were examined including factors such as safety, time, work schedules, childcare, and daily life routines.

Mazzola (1996) analyzed data from the National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS) of 1988 to determine whether parents who send their children to Catholic schools are also more involved with their child than parents with children in public schools and whether this involvement makes a difference in the performance of the student. Survey findings indicated that Catholic school parents are also more likely to volunteer, participate in the parent-teacher organization, and know more parents of their child's friends when compared to parents with similar characteristics who send their child to public school. Both sets of parents engage in home-based involvement (e.g., talking with child, providing supervision) at similar rates. Mazzola also determined whether association between involvement and performance are the same for public and Catholic school students. Talking with parents about current school experiences is a strong predictor of math test performance for both Catholic and public school students. Regression analyses also demonstrated that three parent monitoring activities (restricting television on weekdays, supervision by an adult after school, and number of friends parents know) were associated with math test scores for public school students, but showed no relationship for Catholic school students. It was hypothesized that Catholic schools may achieve more than in the level of students' test scores. As a correlation, the relationship between parental monitoring activities and test scores was stronger for Catholic school students.
employed a qualitative, multiple-case study methodology including semi-structured interviews (with parents, teachers, principals, parents' outreach coordinators, school secretaries and PTA officers), observations of parent interactions with school officials, and examination of school documents. Smekal found that overarching differences in family organization in response to parents' employment status greatly outweighed any differences due to income and material resources among parents. The patterns of stress and coping in regard to the work-family intersection provide direction to families' relationships with schools. As a result, school processes and structures that promote social cohesion, commitment, and communication (highlighted in-depth in the magnet school case study) are effective mediators of the influence of social class on family-school relations.

Quantitative research on parental involvement is complemented by a qualitative inquiry conducted by Donovan (1999). The unit of analysis for the investigation was a K-8 Catholic elementary school in the Diocese of Scranton, Pennsylvania. Data were collected through several methods including personal interviews (principal, 6 full-time teachers, 18 parents), review of documents and records of the school's parental involvement program, and administration of a two-part Likert questionnaire. Donovan reported a strong parental presence in the areas of monitoring extracurricular school events and fundraising. In contrast, parents reported little participation in areas such as curriculum revision, textbook selection, budgeting, and policymaking. Interview and questionnaire data indicated that parental participation was encouraged for co-curricular and extracurricular activities but not for activities considered professional in nature. In sum, the parental involvement philosophy at this school most approximated the teacher's helper paradigm (Baach, 1990; Udero-Blackburn, 1996) and stands in contrast to a parents-as-partners model (Riley, 1994) or a full empowerment of parents' concept (Sarason, 1995).

Parental involvement in school governance and decision making was addressed in Convey's (2000) 10-year follow-up of O'Brien's (1987) nationwide survey of bishops and priests' perceptions of the value, effectiveness, funding practices, and future structure of Catholic schools. Conducted in 1996, survey results were based on completed questionnaires from 184 bishops and 1,026 priests. Across the entire survey, the greatest increase in agreement from 1986 to 1996 occurred for the item, "Parents must be given a substantial role in the development of policy for Catholic schools" (Convey, 2000, p. 81). From 1986 to 1996, bishops' agreement was recorded at 63% and 85%, respectively. Although priests' agreement with the item was lower than bishops' agreement (40% in 1986 versus 68% in 1996), there was a significant change of 28 percentage points. Additional items not included in the 1986 survey indicated more support from bishops than priests for parents' voice in governance and the needs for boards for all schools. Convey also provided percent agreement findings for subgroups of priests (pastor – school, pastor – no school, associate, etc.) revealing that pastors of parishes with schools were not quite as supportive as other pastors.

Parenting and Children's Development

Mc Cormick initiated a program of research (1995, 1998, 1999) focused on formative parenting defined as the process of communicating parenting practices that are foundational to healthy development) and its relationship to the holistic psychosocial development of children. McCormick's (1995) dissertation examined how well the Catholic elementary school functions as an agent of formative parenting. Responses from 332 parents identified specific formation needs such as (a) communicating the components of socialization, self-esteem, prosocial behavior, democratic family atmosphere and identity formation; (b) suggesting strategies or practices for developing these components; (c) encouraging consistency in parenting practices, and (d) providing guidelines for discipline, sibling rivalry, peer relations, and angry behavior. McCormick (1999) reported that according to questionnaire data, parents felt that the school functions at least fairly well as an agent of formative parenting. Interview data, however, elicited a different pattern. A majority of parents (83%) felt that the Catholic school in terms of parenting had not helped them. As to why they evaluated high in the questionnaires, parents reported that they were pleased with the academic program, approved of the school atmosphere, or perceived that they had been helped vicariously by teachers' interactions with their children.
McCormack (1999) reported follow-up research that explicitly sought to uncover parenting practices that contribute to the foundation of identity formation within children. Principals of 16 schools submitted the names of 93 children (from grades K-12) that met specified criteria, such as “appears secure and comfortable,” “has a sense of personal boundaries,” “demonstrates positive social behavior,” “follows through with tasks,” and “is accountable for consequences of actions.” Parents of these children were then invited to participate in the research project. Among this sample, McCormack noted a great amount of “attentive parent presence,” described as consistent availability to and interaction with the child. For the first three years of life, each of these children had experienced attentive presence of a parent throughout the day in a stable, consistent caregiver within a private home-type daycare. As part of the research protocol, parents reported (independent of each other) the practices they had used during the past year that might explain why their child displayed security, autonomy, prosocial behavior, and accountability on a consistent basis. Across families, parents mentioned similar parenting practices that likewise mirrored discussions of effective parenting practices in the developmental psychology research literature. For example, their parenting styles featured firm-setting, positive affect, expectations of responsibility, provision of encouragement, and freedom with concomitant accountability.

Similar to McCormack (1995), Gorman’s (1996) dissertation investigated the relationship of parenting practices to the holistic development of the child. Specifically, the study explored the particular parenting that parents, administrators, and teachers in Catholic elementary schools of a California archdiocese perceived as the most likely to both empower and encourage parents in promoting healthy child development. A survey instrument provided to parents, teachers, and administrators assessed three domains: (a) parenting practices most important to the process of fostering the holistic development of children, (b) the degree to which the Catholic school assists parents in the formative areas of parenting, and (c) areas of parenting in which parents needed assistance. All three groups identified parenting practices that are conducive to a democratic family atmosphere, self-esteem, identity formation, and prosocial behavior as important. Significant differences emerged between parents on one hand, and parents and teachers on the other, such that teachers and administrators identified more areas where assistance was needed than did parents. The study concluded that families clearly have formative parenting needs that Catholic schools must attempt to meet through the development and implementation of comprehensive parent education programs.

Family Dynamics and Children’s Functioning

Written for educators, parents, and anyone that works with children, Garonzik (1995), author of Child Centered, Family Sensitive Schools: An Educators Guide To Family Dynamics (NCEA) dedicated to the overarching goal of understanding the impact of family dynamics and structures on the school setting. The book is divided into three parts. The first provides a theoretical framework (family systems theory) within which the developmental and environmental needs of children can be understood. Part one also explores, through case study vignettes, varieties of healthy families (dual-career homes, single-parent homes, blended families, and adoptive families) and how the relational and developmental needs of children are met in differing family configurations. The second section of the text is devoted to examining the counterpart to healthy family structures and explores in-depth dysfunctional family styles. Family pathologies such as substance abuse, family violence, and the “fragile family” are discussed. Linkages are presented between various dysfunctional family styles and the resultant psychological and behavioral difficulties manifested by children at home and school. Finally, part three provides suggestions and guiding principles for intervening with families, as well as recommendations for increased consultation and cooperation among school and family professionals.

As a seasoned educational leader and parent of four children, Garonzik (1995) has also worked on the teaching of children in narcissistic families. Narcissistic families are those that exhibit an unhealthy level of self-regard, are excessively demanding, poorly differentiated, and belittling of their expectations of the child.
and the school. Families such as these are especially prone to unnecessary advocacy for their child as a result of their anxiety over the demands of the school combined with the parents' feelings of inadequacy. Since narcissistic parents view the child's poor performance as a reflection on themselves, the parents in turn project their anger and disappointment onto those who are the source of the poor evaluation (often the child's teacher or principal). Garanzini (2000) detailed strategies for handling narcissistic families and their children: (a) reinterpret negative behavior of the child and parents as a call for help, (b) model appropriate behaviors and boundaries, (c) stress the child's need to take responsibility, and (d) help the child learn to defer gratification and internalize rewards. In terms of implications for Catholic educational leadership, Garanzini delineated several elements that could assist educators and administrators in dealing with narcissistic families. For example, acquiring knowledge and skills, especially in regard to the psychological literature on family dysfunction, is recommended. Other strategies suggested are working with teams (as opposed to compartmentalized strategies and uncoordinated interventions), appraising and developing the resources of the school community, and lastly, espousing a commitment to continuous spiritual and psychological growth.

**Parent Education and Parenting Programs**

Schenfeld (1993) authored a text designed to assist in creating parent education courses for refugee and immigrant parents, with a special emphasis on those who are having difficulty in parent-child relations. The guide is based upon three parent education projects sponsored and coordinated by the North American office of the International Catholic Child Bureau. Each of the projects was conducted at separate sites and featured an eight-week course for Cambodian refugees who were having difficulties in their parenting roles. Schenfeld described the common theme of the program as parental empowerment, wherein each program asks parents to take a hard look at themselves, their children, and their situation and to take action to prevent and improve conflictual parent-child relationships that are harmful to parent, child, and the family as a whole (p. 2). The guide contains a detailed chapter on the implementation of the parent education program in each of the three sites including topics such as (a) staff perception of parents' needs, (b) goals for the course, (c) principles underlying course design, (d) weekly description of course components, and (e) staff assessment and evaluation of the course. These case studies provide an array of experiences, common obstacles, and shared aims that are meant to assist in the design of a locally tailored program. Although Cambodian refugee families were the participants in the parent education program described in the guide, Schenfeld noted that the results have broad application to other refugee and immigrant groups. The guide also contains several chapters that provide program-planning advice based on the content of the program descriptions as well as outcome evaluations of the three parent education programs.

Research indicates that the most effective sexuality education occurs when both the parent and the school cooperate to educate the child about sexuality. Accordingly, Marnell (1999) conducted a program evaluation targeted at whether a religious-based sexuality education program (the "In God's Image Program") would positively impact parent-child comfort and communication about sexuality. The program is meant to complement informal education in the family and to provide a developmentally sound approach that encourages parental involvement. Furthermore, the program is meant to counter negative attitudes toward sexuality and to alleviate the generational cycle of discomfort with addressing sexuality that is experienced in many families. The research was a qualitative, multiple-institution study in which 135 eighth-grade students from five socio-economically and morally diverse schools participated in the 10-week sexuality education. One of the program components at the end of each session included a worksheet to be taken home and discussed with parents. At the conclusion of the evaluation, focus groups were conducted with such as and 40 parents. The focus group discussions were on the degree and scope of acceptable communication about sex for both parent and child. Moreover, students reported an increase in their knowledge of church teachings in regard to sexuality, with 79% of students stating that the program had increased their desire to pursue such involvement.
Parental Choice of Schools

Several dissertations in the 1990s examined the role of various demographic variables and motivational constructs in order to better understand parental choice of schools. Gibson (1993) examined demographic and educational variables to explain the motivation of suburban Milwaukee parents in choosing private elementary schools (Catholic, Jewish, Independent, or Lutheran) for their children. Data for the investigation were gathered through surveys and telephone interviews. Gibson found that of parents who chose Catholic schools, 98% of the mothers were Catholic and 80% of them had attended private schools themselves. Relevant educational variables, that emerged from parents choosing Catholic schools included religion, moral values, and committed teachers. When compared to parents initially choosing Catholic schools, Gibson reported only a slightly different pattern of relevant educational variables for those parents who transferred their children following dissatisfaction with public schools, noting the importance of religion, moral values, and warmth of school climate.

A dissertation by Esposito (1993) focused on parental choice among Roman Catholic schools, public schools, and parish catechetical programs for 206 parents of fifth- and sixth-grade students. Survey methodology was used to explore the relationships among demographic variables, selected constructs (superior goal attainment, strong mutual commitment, organizational jealousy, and school environment), and subsequent parental choices. Significant differences were found between Catholic school parents and their public school counterparts for the importance of superior goal attainment as a determinant of parental choice. All three groups, and especially the Catholic school parents, reported strong concerns in regard to organizational jealousy, as parents perceived a serious financial threat to the future viability of their school environments. For the school environment construct, all three school types evidenced stronger social cohesion than alienation in relation to their communities. Results also revealed that Catholic school parents participated in their schools at higher rates than did the other two groups and that they embraced the uniqueness of their school more than their counterparts. Esposito concluded that to the extent that they patronize such schools and report satisfaction with the educational programs, parents of children in Catholic schools and parish catechetical programs attained optimally effective instructional environments.

Noting parents' increasing involvement in school choice, Gallanter (1994) explored parent selection factors at three private elementary schools: two private independent, one Catholic. A descriptive, cross-sectional, survey research methodology allowed for data collection from faculty, staff, and parents through a questionnaire format. Analysis of the parent selection factors revealed that the most important reason parents selected private schooling was to avoid public schooling, which they perceived as offering less than a quality education. Teachers were also an important influence on parents' choice and selection. Overall, parents sought small schools with small class sizes because of their desire for greater individual attention for their child.

The purpose of Todaro's 1996 dissertation was to examine the reasons associated with parents' choices of specific types of private schools (Roman Catholic, Episcopal, Independent, Jewish, and Fundamentalist Christian). Survey data were gathered from all randomly selected families from 25 private high schools in the Greater Miami area. The survey employed a Likert type rating scale that emphasized general variables such as academics, religious and values and morals, and educational environment and security and convenience of the school. Differences across types of schools emerged across several variables: financial disruption, the commitment of teachers, to emphasize on religion, a small class size, to well-developed academic goals. A priority of the schools' location, the perception of desirable secondary school, and the emphasis of the school's program in leadership and parents' involvement in school life are special factors. Each child was evaluated according to their needs, strengths, and weaknesses.
Data collected over a 10-month period included a parent survey, formal and informal interviews, participant observation, and review of school documents. With an enrollment of 350 students, the elementary school, located in an economically distressed area, was 100% African American and 90% non-Catholic. The parent survey, which provided the data in regard to reasons for school choice, consisted of three open-ended questions. Returned surveys were supportive of the school overall and mirrored reasons and explanations found in the literature. Parents noted the school's sense of community, differences from the public schools, reputation for academic excellence, emphasis on values, the development of a faith community, and emphasis on discipline and order (p. 72). Tuition aid was not a motivating factor for parents. Interviews revealed that tuition aid provides an opportunity, but it is not a determining factor for parents. Parents saw the distinguishing features of the school to be its smaller class size, emphasis on academic standards, teacher interest in students, discipline and order, and attention to values and sense of community.

**VARIOUS TOPICS**

**Social Capital**

Coleman identified the religious dimension as the foundation of the Catholic school as functional community. A dissertation by Saunders (1992) explored this contention more specifically by investigating the impact of the family's social capital on the religious outcomes of eighth-grade students in Catholic elementary schools. Students and parents (N = 248) completed questionnaires assessing religious, academic, and social values and parent-child interactions. When operationalized as predictors of religious outcomes, particularly those involving practice, religious predictors enhanced overall prediction beyond the effect of the academic and social predictors. The student's perception of the school was a strong predictor of several religious outcomes, particularly those of a cognitive nature. By partitioning the sample into three groups (students with two Catholic parents, students with parents of mixed religious backgrounds, and students of single parent families), Saunders detected limited evidence that a strong set of religious predictors does compensate for structural (single parent family) and functional (parents of different religious backgrounds) deficiencies in the family.

**Teachers' Perceptions of Parental Support**

Schaub (2000) provided a profile of American Catholic school teachers based on data from the U.S. Department of Education's *Schools and Staffing Survey*. In 1993-1994, the nationally representative sample of teachers responded to items assessing teacher attitudes, one of which targeted parental support ("I receive a great deal of support from parents for the work I do"). Survey results indicated a dramatic difference between Catholic and public school teachers' perceptions of the amount of perceived parental support for teaching activities. For the item above, 85% and 83% respectively, of Catholic elementary and secondary school teachers expressed agreement. In contrast, 38% and 43% respectively, of public elementary and secondary school teachers agreed. These findings are noteworthy in that higher levels of perceived parental support contribute to teachers' overall views of the working conditions in their schools, which in turn are commonly associated with teacher quality and retention.

**Parental Perceptions of School Staff**

A dissertation by Smith (1995) explored the perceptions of parents regarding the important aspects of a program of quality education and the effectiveness of laypersons and religious in delivering the program to the Diocese of Fall River, Massachusetts. By key themes from the research literature, provided the foundation...
for this investigation: (a) a shift from religious instruction and formation to academic quality in parents' primary reasons for choosing Catholic schools, and (b) parents' concern regarding the effects on the schools of the decline in the number of religious and the increase in the number of laypersons. Questionnaires were completed by 465 parents with children in the Catholic schools in the diocese. Structured interviews also supplemented these data. Sullivan reported that parents showed interest in strong academic programs and demonstrated equally strong interest in moral and value development. Data indicated that while parents' perceptions were not affected by demographic variables such as age and education, perceptions were affected by grade level of their children and by administrator of the school. Lastly, although a majority of parents reported that it made no difference who fostered characteristics associated with academics and values, a majority of parents perceived that religious would do better at fostering characteristics associated with religion.