

A New Paradigm in Parent-School Relationships

Review by Robert McKinney, Jr.

Soo Hong, *A Cord of Three Strands: A New Approach to Parent Engagement in Schools*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2011. ISBN 978-1934742549

Soo Hong is passionate about schools, education, and that critical union between schools and the communities in which they operate. In *A Cord of Three Strands: A New Approach to Parent Engagement in Schools*, her passion for, and knowledge of this union come to life as she deftly articulates what might rightly be described as a new paradigm in parent-school relationships. Through a detailed qualitative case study, Hong focuses on the experiences of one Chicago community as its residents and school personnel struggled to improve the quality of education for students. The process that emerged led to the creation of a strong, active system in which parents and schools come together in a mutually supportive system that brings out the best in their children. Out of the experiences of this community, Hong extracts the three strands (induction, integration, and investment) that she believes are necessary to replicate this parent involvement model in other communities. In the book, Hong articulates how one neighborhood developed these three strands in a joint effort to improve its schools.

The community that serves as the basis for this study is the Logan Square section of Chicago. As in many other communities, parents of school-aged children in the Logan Square community felt disconnected from their schools. Other than cursory knowledge of the names of their children's teachers, parents had very little information about the school and its inner workings. This dynamic is not unique; unfortunately, this is the norm in many communities across the nation. In *A Cord of Three Strands*, Hong dissects the education process and points to critical junctions at which parents and schools can or should be able to work together in a symbiotic relationship. Hong sees the underlying theory as an ecological one. "With an ecological perspective on parent engagement, schools design processes for parent participation that actively center around parents rather than limiting them to roles in the periphery" (p. 26). This attitude is the crux of the entire model Hong puts forth.

The model is not a simple one, however. The bar set by the residents of Logan Square is a high one, yet it is not unattainable. For this community, the change took place over the course of approximately 40 years, although the foray into educational reform is a relatively recent one. Their particular paradigm shift began with the efforts of the Logan Square Neighborhood Association (LSNA). This community organization was established in the early 1960s and has served the members of the community well by ensuring that city leaders consider the needs and desires of the community members, by bringing disparate community groups together, and by developing the sense of mutual support that makes communities strong. These activities are similar to those of many other community organizations across the country. It was the change of focus onto the educational system, however, that began to differentiate the LSNA from many other community organizations.

Early school-based activities for the LSNA consisted primarily of local school councils that provided representation for families in the educational hierarchy; however, members of the LSNA began to see the need for something more than mere representation in order to create meaningful, systemic changes in the schools infrastructure. In the mid-1990s, the LSNA began to shift its school-based activities from a representative capacity to a more engaged, hands-on function. At the heart of this effort was the LSNA Parent Mentor program. This was a collaborative effort in which parents were actively involved in the educational process. Parents worked right alongside teachers in classrooms. Members of the LSNA sought ways to become actively involved in the innermost operations of the community schools. Key to the success of their endeavors was the attitude of mutual respect and support that was assumed by people on all sides of the issue at hand. LSNA members made no attempts to usurp the roles of the school personnel; rather, their

function was to step in to assist with tasks that schools had not been able to complete successfully.

As might be expected, the process of changing roles from that of a parent of a child in school to that of a Parent Mentor who is intimately involved in the educational process is not an easy one. Hong follows the experiences of one cohort of Parent Mentors at one school and chronicles their successes and struggles as they learn to navigate school policies and familial responsibilities. Some parents find the role of Parent Mentor to be a very difficult one, while others take on the responsibility quite naturally. Through a detailed description of the different processes of parents, Hong illustrates how parents bring their unique backgrounds and interests to the learning environment their unique backgrounds and interests to the learning environment, which serves to add to the overall breadth of experiences for the students. Hong reports the comments of one Parent Mentor about another:

She is like the mother hen. What she does is she holds us all together; she makes me feel that we are capable and can make a difference here. I see her as a leader in this school. And by being with her and getting to know her, it definitely encourages me to think about what I might be able to do, you know, what kind of leader I could become (p. 77).

Hong draws from the examples provided by the Logan Square community to cut to the underlying principles that made this model work. Parents who serve as Parent Mentors are not relegated to the back corners of classrooms to alphabetize the crayons; instead, they are given responsibilities that make them fully invested partners in the educational processes. In this capacity, parents become well acquainted with their children's teachers and classmates. This interconnectedness extends back into the community and helps to bind residents together outside of the school environment. Additionally, teachers report that the presence of parents in the classrooms helps to motivate and inspire children to perform better. As parents become more involved in the classroom, teachers also begin to experience changes in their attitudes. Instead of seeing parental involvement as a burden, teachers truly think of their Parent Mentors as assets, additional tools to help provide students with positive outcomes. The struggles many teachers face today, including the perfect storm of increasing class sizes and decreasing discretionary funding, reveals how the presence of invested parents an indispensable part of the teachers' toolkit in the Logan Square community.

Hong's work is a testament to the Logan Square Neighborhood Association and to the schools and

students of the Logan Square community. As a study in community activism and parent involvement, it is difficult to imagine a stronger example than the transformation that this community has experienced. Hong's writing is compelling and clear, even when she elucidates complex theoretical constructs. By organizing the book as a progression through the historical context of the LSNA, the organization's development of the Parent Mentor model, and individual stories that reveal much of the details of why this program works, Hong provides the reader with the necessary contextual framework to describe the development of the program and still offer the intimate day-to-day details of its successful operation.

As an appendix, she includes a detailed, readable, description of the theoretical underpinnings of her work, in which the work of qualitative researchers Joseph Maxwell and William H. Schubert figure prominently, as well as the particular research methodologies she employed in the writing process, providing a useful component for readers interested in exploring similar approaches in parent involvement and community engagement research. Hong also describes her own particular ethnographic approach, something she calls layered ethnography, in which she employs many of the elements of portraiture concurrently with her basic ethnographic research. This methodological approach allows Hong to describe the broad systems at play (ethnography) and to illustrate how those systems impact particular students at particular locations (portraiture). The combination of these two methodological approaches enables Hong to provide deep, rich understanding of the systems at play.

At the heart of *A Cord of Three Strands* is Hong's understanding of the context of the community and the individual experiences of the residents of Logan Square. The depth of her knowledge, gained through meticulous analysis of interviews and field notes collected during her research, comes through as she describes parents' everyday triumphs and tragedies. The examples she provides help the reader feel the urgency and importance that the parents and teachers experienced as these community schools experienced positive change over time. This work makes a valuable contribution to our current research literature, and is well suited for people who are interested in community development, educational policy, education reform, or community activism.

About the Reviewer

Robert McKinney, Jr., LCSW, ACSW, is a doctoral student in The University of Alabama School of Social Work.