Engagement at a Distance: Reflections on Parent Engagement and Student Learning in a Physics Classroom

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Early physical theories of forces like electricity and gravity proposed what Albert Einstein famously derided as "spooky action at a distance." The Earth has never touched the Sun, and yet the mass of the Sun somehow communicates with the Earth to keep it locked in gravitational orbit. Einstein developed a new theory to explain this communication, but the fact remains that objects at one place in the universe can affect objects far away without ever coming into direct contact.

"Spooky action at a distance" characterizes the prevalent approach to family engagement in many public schools across the United States, including the one in which I have been conducting my student teaching. In the entirety of the eight months I've spent helping out and eventually teaching full time in a physics classroom, I have met face to face with only four parents, all of whom I saw at parent-teacher conferences early in March. My cooperating teacher has sent emails to parents of students who misbehave or behave particularly well and has received calls from parents asking about their children's grades, but these have been sporadic and specific communications rather than lasting working relationships.

This common paradigm for family engagement could be termed "engagement at a distance." Engagement at a distance is different from neglecting to engage families – quite to the contrary, new technologies have made it much easier in recent years for schools to involve parents in their children's educations without ever setting foot in the school building. Online gradebooks allow parents to keep track of students' grades and prod them to complete missing assignments. Learning management systems like Blackboard or Schoology go even further, placing the entire selection of course materials within the reach of parents (as long as they can persuade their child to show it to them). This is certainly a form of family engagement, but it keeps families at a distance, engaging only with the pictures of their children's courses that are painted by a list of grades and a few course documents.

It might be expected that on the spectrum of family engagement, engagement at a distance would have a modest impact on students' educational experiences, somewhere between the holistic, personalized engagement which is the ideal and a lack of engagement altogether. In my student teaching so far, however, I have seen a great deal of evidence that this engagement at a distance, like the physical forces Einstein sought to explain, has profound reverberations from afar for my students both inside and outside the classroom.

The end of the marking period, which most recently fell right before spring break, heralded the onset of the highest stress most of our students ever felt about their grades, and showed me unequivocally that the assignments and grades I was giving were having unintended consequences. One student told me that he was grounded for the entirety of spring break because of his low grade in our class. Another student told me at the beginning of the next quarter that he would not be able to celebrate his birthday unless his grade went above a C by the end of the week. This incident was particularly perplexing to me, since there had only been a few assignments graded by then, giving each assignment disproportionate importance and making the grade at that point in time not an accurate representation of the student's progress. The pressure placed on students by their parents due to incomplete communication at a distance showed in class as well. When I assigned a project offering them the opportunity to explore any topic of interest to them in the unit we were studying, the vast majority of students chose the simplest topic we had covered in our first class of the unit rather than taking the risk of picking something new and more interesting. Their worries about their grades, stemming in part from the accountability to their parents that the online gradebook imposed, trumped their interest in having fun with the project.

This conflict between grade anxiety and motivation to learn highlights the perils of engagement at a distance. In the few face-to-face communications I have had with parents, my cooperating teacher and I were able to communicate so much more nuance and detail about our hopes and expectations for their children than any curt email could ever convey. We were able to share what we enjoyed about having their children in our class, and clarify why we were grading or structuring an assignment in a particular way. With one of these conversations in particular, I remember noticing the tone

change from hostile to constructive as we honed in on our common goal of helping the student achieve his potential.

There is nothing radical in arguing that sustained, deep, and constructive engagement with parents is ideal for furthering students' educational goals. What is perhaps less intuitive is to propose that engagement at a distance might actually be worse for students than no engagement at all. Without online grades accessible to parents, students would bear the full responsibility of communicating their progress with their parents and collaborating with the best efforts of the teacher to stay up to date with course work and material. If appropriately scaffolded by the teacher, this practice could be good preparation for taking responsibility of one's affairs outside of the classroom. Most importantly, however, students would be relieved of the pressure of maintaining certain grades without a full understanding of what those grades mean in terms of their education. When we task parents with being enforcers without also making them fully cognizant of the nuanced system they are enforcing, it is natural that they may end up reinforcing the wrong message and ultimately disinclining our students from taking academic risks. The ideal response to this pitfall, of course, is not to forfeit communication with parents, but rather to take a more holistic view of the purpose of engaging families. Families working as partners rather than enforcers could work wonders in helping create a joint vision for the education of their children. From what I have seen in my short stint of student teaching, anything less than this broader vision places undue burdens on students and stifles creative learning. There's another physics analogy to be made here – particle collisions release massive amounts of energy, and can create new particles never before imagined. I will aim to have as many face-to-face collisions as I can with my students and their families, and harness that energy to provide authentic, engaging, and relevant educational experiences for all my students.