

Parents: Consumers, Not Just Case Numbers

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Convergence of diverse parents and children

Credit: Photo courtesy of Google Images

Consumer...as we know it is someone who expresses a want or need and seeks out specific entities who have the product or services for that want or need. In exchange for that product or service, a consumer provides the monetary means to purchase that product or service, and if satisfied they welcome purchasing relationships with those merchants. Apple, Uber, and Amazon, have

morphed into suppliers who administer products that are readily available and satisfy the needs and wants of their consumers. But what if we consider this ideology of consumer and make it applicable to both education and human services? What if we take a look at a special group of people, such as parents, who expect both of these institutions to compensate the needs and wants and not just be treated as another case number? What would it be like if parents could buy into education and human services and expect to get a return on their investment? Treating parents as consumers in both education and human services can help establish stronger and more respectable relationships between both suppliers and parents, and have a greater possibility of positive outcomes for both families and institutions.

One of my roles as a practitioner in Adult Education at the Center for Literacy that I most valued was facilitating a class in the family literacy program. Initially, the Family Literacy program goals were to make sure parents were equipped with the specific skills and tools so they would be able to read to their children (especially encouraging those with children in early childhood education) and assist them with homework and project assignments from school. But it became much more than that. As I became more involved in my practice with my learners, I began to see gaps. Not only in their literacy levels, but in the services and other resources they could have been invested in to make them more functional and productive.

They possibly weren't aware of these services and resource because in the past they hadn't been treated as a person, but instead were treated as a case number. Poverty, domestic barriers, and health-related matters played a significant role in how my learners were or were not able to progress in my class. Unfortunately, parents who came from generational at-risk programs have always been treated by educational and human service organizations as more of a liability, in contrast to being an investor who is trying to improve the quality of life for themselves and their family. Parents often discussed with me and their peers how they felt like they didn't have a voice or choice in getting their needs met in order to have products and services to improve the quality of life for their family.

How can these institutions who provide education and human services not only act as a collective dynamic to treat parents as consumers and not obligations. but to incorporate participation and relational connections with parents to get the best outcomes from products and services when utilized by families? In a research study conducted by The Journal of Special Education entitled "Family-Centered Practices: Birth Through High School (Dunst 2002)" describes both relational and participatory components as essential for educational and human service programs to implement and accept when providing services to the parents and family. The relational component includes practices typically associated with

(a) good clinical skills (active listening, compassion, empathy, respect, being nonjudgmental, etc.) and (b) professional beliefs about and attitudes toward families, especially those pertaining to parenting capabilities and competencies. The participatory component includes practices (a) that are individualized, flexible, and responsive to family concerns and priorities, and (b) that provide families with opportunities to be actively involved in decisions and choices, family–professional collaboration, and family actions to achieve desired goals and outcomes.

Human Services is defined as a profession which promotes improved service delivery systems by addressing not only the quality of direct services, but also by seeking to improve accessibility, accountability, and coordination among professionals and agencies in service delivery (nationalhumanservices.org). These efforts in collaboration with educational institutions, can work in conjunction with each other to treat and view parents as consumers and get the best possible results from both sides of the spectrum. Although both establishments work in their own separate spaces, it would be more valuable for them to work as a unit to address the needs, wants, and expectations of parents in order for outcomes to be addressed and met. Historically, health and human service organizations were largely autonomous and disconnected from one another. A number of factors influenced this condition, including federal categorical

funding; state-enabling legislation, which created distinct agencies; educational institutions and licensing organizations that support separate career and professional development paths; and funding limitations or program design, which discouraged benefit use (O'Leary and Mason 2011).¹

In the *Children and Youth Services Review Journal*, a great research perspective is provided on how programs can be more effective through this different approach. "Specifically, we review evidence that parenting programs may reach and engage more families if services are 1) led by fellow community members to align with cultural norms and multiply opportunities for service provision; 2) embedded in key settings such as homes and schools with flexibility to bridge settings; 3) aligned with the goals and needs of those settings, and bundled with other services to address families' pressing needs, thereby taking a "family-centered" form; and 4) offered through multiple formats, from traditionally formatted sequenced curricula to informal conversations infused with core parenting principles." Service providers need to move away from the desk and paper-pushing of case management, or viewing each family as a number and liability or the children as just "at-risk" to more fully engage the parents. Engaged parents are informed and serviced with the best resources to empower them to be fully invested as members of of society who reap the benefits of employment, education, and life-long

productivity.

A current in-depth conversation with one of my former ESL family literacy students (who wishes to remain anonymous and has children enrolled in one of Philadelphia's community schools) admits. There is still a lot of work to be done with establishing relationships between schools, human services, and parents. While she appreciates the communication established in the school between staff and parents, she is hopeful "there can be a bridge connecting human services to the school and the parent". She expressed how she wished her thoughts and suggestions about what she needs for herself and her children could be acknowledged more since she does receive specific assistance in helping her provide for her family. "I wish someone could explain what is on the applications my case worker gives me. There may be more that I can get, while I am trying to better my English to get a job."

As she is not the only parent who has expressed this challenge, a number of parents who I have served who were at-risk, poverty stricken, and low-literate or non-native speakers, have been treated, and at times told, by both educational and human service organizations, that their point of view had no value or that they lacked knowledge in the decision they needed to make for their families regarding the quality of the services being rendered. Therefore, leaving the importance of parents' engagement to just the confinement of the traditional

structural input/output of such multifaceted systems. To move from customary design of education and human services to a more parent/family-centered approach will take the collective support and action of our community, educational, and political leaders.

Without treating the parent as a consumer and welcoming a new design to services and education as collaborative, services will be left to a one-sided dimension supply unit.

Better service design is one of the keys to improving how we address societal issues.

As many of these societal issues have an open, complex, dynamic, and networked character, the service systems we implement to address these issues tend to have a complex character as well.² Organizations and educational systems have a responsibility to be adequate and devoted in treating parents as investors in these services and to also collaborate with parents to improve the products which are provided based on want and need and established alternative and additional commodities that will address challenges and give families a chance at an improved quality life.

Author bio

Mary L. Wilson holds the position of both Adult Education Practitioner and In-House Professional Development Specialist at the Center for Literacy. She joined CFL in 2010 as a tutor volunteer and became a member of the

staff in 2012 as an instructor of Adult Basic Education and Family Literacy. In 2014, Mary advanced to her current role. She is also a member of the Pennsylvania Association of Adult Continuing Education and served as chair of the Family Literacy Division of PAACE from 2015-2016. Mary holds a Bachelor's in Journalism from Temple University and a Master's Degree in English/Writing Studies from Saint Joseph's University.

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¹ (O'Leary and Mason 2011)

² (Bijl-Brouwer 2017)