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Educator Examines Tools to Engage Communities in Classrooms

Reviewed by Samantha Basile

Inviting Families into the Classroom: Learning from a Life in Teaching. Lynne Yermanock Strieb. Teachers College Press: New York, NY, 2010, 240 pages. ISBN 978-0-8077-5082-7

How can teachers create safe spaces for students to engage in their own education while exploring their individuality, embracing diversity, and celebrating community? What tools can educators, administrators, and policy-makers use to establish trust and encourage continuous improvement in schools? Chronicling over 30 years of one teacher's experience as a parent, activist, and teacher, Strieb adds a new dynamic to existing academic studies of families and communities. A cross between an academic longitudinal study, an insider's view into the classroom, and pragmatic toolkit, *Inviting Families into the Classroom* transparently shows why and how family involvement in schools has enhanced Strieb's experience as a teacher and learner, a point substantiated by decades of research (Epstein & Sanders, 2009; Laureau, 1987; Leichter, 1978). Strieb's work is an essential read for educators, researchers, and policy makers who wish to learn how to bridge classrooms and communities to make teaching and learning more meaningful. Over the course of the book, Strieb shares valuable tools for her reader through meticulously documented case studies and reflective analysis that models successes and challenges to integrating families and communities into her classroom.

Starting with a view into her personal life in Chapter 1, Strieb adds depth by discussing how her childhood experience as the daughter of a working class immigrant family influenced her life as a student, parent, activist, and teacher. Growing up, Strieb experienced a large gap between her family and school lives. With these experiences as a foundation from the beginning of her teaching career, Strieb consistently modeled an unwavering commitment to the education, safety, and well-being of children as she actively worked to find creative ways to make families an integral part of her classroom community.

In Chapter 2, Strieb introduces and explains how she constructs and sends regular newsletters to parents; through this example, she shows how classroom newsletters can move beyond simple

fill-in-the-blank memos to become a powerful platform for communication between teachers and parents. By Strieb's description of the newsletter and her experience with it, the reader learns about its effectiveness in building connections and setting expectations between students, teachers, and parents. Educators, and even administrators, could follow Strieb's example of sending regular, personalized newsletters home to update parents on classroom activities and invite them to join in.

Building upon relationships and communication established with parents through her newsletters, in Chapter 3 Strieb discusses her personally conflicted views on homework and the challenge of aligning this work with parental, school, and district expectations. Citing cases of too much or too little parental involvement, the capacity for homework to exacerbate existing student disadvantages, and the stress it creates for families, her only conclusion is that the teacher is ultimately responsible for a student's learning. Integrating notes from parents and her own journal about the touchy subject of homework, the reader is encouraged to reflect on his or her own ideas or policies on homework and what it means for the child's education.

In Chapters 4, 5, and 6 Strieb advocates for understanding and managing student behavior through family involvement in the classroom while recognizing challenges that do exist. When a parent's promise of revamping the annual gingerbread house class project by making individual sleighs becomes disastrous, Strieb reflects on how they could have improved communication in order to set realistic expectations in the future. This experience is juxtaposed with the synergy created when Bobbie, a helpful aunt and community member, volunteers to help with organizing classroom materials, cleanup, and hands-on projects; Strieb feels more at ease with classroom management and has more space to focus on content. Acknowledging that family involvement can and must take different forms and address different kinds of issues, when young Jalil returns to the classroom with bruises following

a conversation about his disruptive behavior with his father, Strieb discusses the parameters of parent-teacher communication and shows when it is hurtful instead of helpful. Adding nuance to works like Canter's *Assertive Discipline: Positive Behavior Management for Today's Classroom* (2010), she reasserts her conviction that the teacher is ultimately responsible for establishing a safe space for children and hopes that teachers reflect on the best way for families to engage in classrooms.

Strieb also discusses her experience with Parent Scholars (established through President Johnson's Project Follow Through from 1967 to 1995) by showing how and why teachers can capitalize on parental involvement and incorporate applicable perspectives into her practice. When she invites multi-lingual parents and guardians from varied socio-economic backgrounds into the classroom, Strieb also shows how parental involvement can be a key element to connecting students with the variety of communities of which they are a part. In a most memorable illustration, a parent (truck driver by profession) shares his passion for hair cutting with the class by cutting his own child's hair in front of all the students. Through illustrative case studies *Inviting Families into the Classroom* shows how parental involvement can cut through socio-economic barriers, increase inter-racial understanding, challenge stereotypes, and provide a foundation for communication that adds to each child's learning experience.

Strieb's reflections in Chapter 7 provide the basis for an analysis of her roles as parent activist, teacher, and community member and serve to illustrate the importance of documentation, while showing her dedication to excellence in her responsibilities as a teacher. Her innovative practice of collaborating with parents and teachers to conduct descriptive reviews provides a model to educators and administrators on how to approach student and classroom difficulties. *Inviting Families into the Classroom* suggests ways to approach diversity in a more institutional way and how administrators can make the school environment more warm and welcoming to families. Finally, Strieb's letters to administrators to change discriminatory policies at local schools and analysis of "what she could have done differently" as a new and veteran teacher provide concrete examples of how to approach the effective practice of inviting families into the classroom through taking a stand on social and community issues. Although all of her suggestions, like cooking or bringing living animals into the classroom, may not be relevant in

all environments, her steadfast commitment to all children's learning invites interpretation on how to best execute them.

Providing an inside look into over 30 years of teaching, this book serves as a significant tool that is both pragmatic, innovative, and reflective for the use of new and seasoned educators, administrators, and policy-makers.

Putting the work to use in this era of ever-advancing classroom technology, online learning, and other forms of distance learning is only a small challenge that educators could face. Strieb's model can be used as an educational framework, constantly reminding us of the importance of human connection and interaction inside and outside the classroom. Teachers, researchers, university faculty, and education policy-makers can add this tool to their arsenal of teaching resources as a base from which to create innovative platforms that connect families and educators. Additionally, mentors can use Strieb's work to show new teachers how to build a positive classroom atmosphere, professionally communicate with parents, and as a launching point for the essential conversation of how to create relationships with new communities.

Throughout the book her educational philosophy is clear and consistent: In order for teachers to fulfill their responsibility to ensure that all students learn, communication with the entire school community is essential. *Inviting Families into the Classroom* models how teachers can capitalize on parent, student, administrator, and community knowledge and skills in a safe, inviting, and supportive environment conducive to improve teaching and learning. As such, this book would be a helpful resource for community-based researchers, educational activists, and policy-makers trying to create bridges between family and school life. It is also extremely appropriate for new, mid-career, and mentor teachers seeking to implement and improve community-based strategies within their own school communities.

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About the Reviewer

Samantha Basile is an educator and specializes in language and literacy. Basile completed masters' degrees at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland in 2008 and at Teachers College Columbia University, 2011.