

# Parental Involvement in Education

## Research on Parental Involvement, Effects on Parental Involvement, Obstacles to Parental Involvement, Controversies, Current Issues

Although widespread support for parental involvement is reflected in current educational policies and practices, what this means is not always clear. Parental involvement includes a wide range of behaviors but generally refers to parents' and family members' use and investment of resources in their children's schooling. These investments can take place in or outside of school, with the intention of improving children's learning. Parental involvement at home can include activities such as discussions about school, helping with homework, and reading with children. Involvement at school may include parents volunteering in the classroom, attending workshops, or attending school plays and sporting events.

### Research on Parental Involvement

Research on the effects of parental involvement has shown a consistent, positive relationship between parents' engagement in their children's education and student outcomes. Studies have also shown that parental involvement is associated with student outcomes such as lower dropout and truancy rates. Whether or not parental involvement can improve student outcomes is no longer in question.

Researchers have begun to focus on how parental involvement affects students, why parents do and do not get involved in their children's education, and what role schools and teachers can play in creating parental involvement. Three frameworks for exploring the precursors to and effects of parental involvement have been the foundation of a majority of the research on parental involvement. Each approach highlights a different aspect of the dynamics that exist in school-home-community relationships.

Wendy S. Grolnick and her colleagues, in articles published in 1994 and 1997, conceptualized three dimensions of parental involvement based on how parent-child interactions affect students' schooling and motivation. Behavioral involvement refers to parents' public actions representing their interest in their child's education, such as attending an open house or volunteering at the school. Personal involvement includes parent-child interactions that communicate positive attitudes about school and the importance of education to the child. Cognitive/intellectual involvement refers to behaviors that promote children's skill development and knowledge, such as reading books and going to museums. Parental involvement, according to this theory, affects

student achievement because these interactions affect students' motivation, their sense of competence, and the belief that they have control over their success in school.

Kathleen V. Hoover-Dempsey and Howard M. Sandler, in articles published in 1995 and 1997, defined parental involvement broadly to include home-based activities (e.g., helping with homework, discussing school events or courses) and school-based activities (e.g., volunteering at school, coming to school events). They argued that parental involvement is a function of a parent's beliefs about parental roles and responsibilities, a parent's sense that she can help her children succeed in school, and the opportunities for involvement provided by the school or teacher. In this theory, when parents get involved, children's schooling is affected through their acquisition of knowledge, skills, and an increased sense of confidence that they can succeed in school.

Joyce L. Epstein, in a 1995 article and a 2001 book titled *School, Family, and Community Partnerships*, argued that school, family, and community are important "spheres of influence" on children's development and that a child's educational development is enhanced when these three environments work collaboratively toward shared goals. Epstein encouraged schools to create greater "overlap" between the school, home, and community through the implementation of activities across six types of involvement: parenting, communication, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaboration with the community. By implementing activities across all six types of involvement, educators can help improve student achievement and experiences in school.

## Effects on Parental Involvement

Research has shown that student and family characteristics affect levels of parental involvement. Working-class families and families in which mothers work full-time tend to be less involved in their children's education. Also, parents of elementary school students tend to be more involved in their children's education than parents of older students. Other factors, however, have been shown to be more important predictors of parental involvement than family income or structure.

Schools play a significant role in getting parents and family members involved in students' education. In their study published in the 1993 book *Families and Schools in a Pluralistic Society*, Susan L. Dauber and Joyce L. Epstein found that school and teacher practices were the strongest predictors of parental involvement. Specific practices that have been shown to predict parental involvement include: assigning homework designed to increase student-parent interactions, holding workshops for families, and communicating to parents about their children's education.

Parental beliefs and perceptions have also been shown to be a strong predictor of parental involvement. Parents' educational aspirations and level of comfort with the school and staff have been shown to predict levels of involvement. In addition, parents' beliefs about their responsibilities as a parent, their ability to affect their children's education, and their perceptions

of their children's interests in school subjects have been shown to predict their involvement at home and at school.

## **Obstacles to Parental Involvement**

Important obstacles that constrain parents' ability to become actively involved in their children's education include teachers' attitudes and family resources. These obstacles, however, can be overcome by schools and through teacher training. Each is discussed below.

Teacher attitudes may be one obstacle to parental involvement. For example, teacher beliefs about the impact of their efforts to involve parents in students' learning predict their efforts to encourage family involvement. In a study published in 1991, Epstein and Dauber found that, compared to middle school teachers, elementary school teachers more strongly believed that parental involvement is important for students and provide more opportunities and help for parents to be involved in their children's education. Low levels of parental involvement at some schools may be the result of the staff's perceptions of parents or the degree to which they feel parental involvement is important for their students.

Although all families want their children to succeed in school, not all families have the same resources or opportunities to be involved in their children's education. Families in which all caregivers work full-time, where there are multiple children, or where English is not spoken or read well face significant barriers to participation in their children's education. It is important for schools to understand the demands that exist on the families of their students and to work to overcome them. In her 1995 article Epstein argued that schools need to overcome these challenges by providing opportunities for school-to-home and home-to-school communications with families; providing communications to families in a language and at a reading level all families can understand; ensuring adequate representation of the entire community of parents on school advisory committees; and distributing information provided at workshops to the families who could not attend. Schools that work to meet these challenges and try to make involvement easier and more convenient for all families will gain support from parents and improve student achievement.

One approach to overcoming these obstacles to parental involvement is to increase the degree to which teacher training covers the topic of parental involvement. Teacher-training programs spend very little time helping students understand the impact of parents in student learning and how teachers can help parents become involved in their children's education. Without this training, teachers may not understand the importance of parental involvement or how to facilitate it. As a result, working with parents can become one of the greatest challenges faced by new teachers.

## Controversies

In spite of the evidence to suggest parental involvement can help improve student achievement and educational attainment, many are skeptical of parent-involvement programs. Michelle Fine, in a 1993 article, and Annette Lareau, in her 1989 book *Home Advantage*, raise concerns about the widespread implementation of parent-involvement policy and practices. Their concern about the effect of parent involvement programs stems from their observations that many schools and teachers use a "one-size-fits-all" approach. The result is that schools reinforce white, upper- and middle-class values and disadvantage students from other backgrounds.

Research has shown differences in parental involvement, parental beliefs, and the home-school relationship across socioeconomic, ethnic, and racial groups. The existence of different beliefs between parents and teachers can lead to misperceptions and the development of negative home-school relationships. Whether and how parent-involvement programs can be sensitive and equitable to families from all backgrounds remains an issue of discussion.

## Current Issues

An area of research on parental involvement emerging in the late 1990s and early twenty-first century is the systematic examination of the role of community. Mavis G. Sanders, in an article published in 2001, reported that schools have a wide range of community resources available but use only a small percentage of these in their efforts to educate students. Also, Sophia Catsambis and Andrew Beveridge, in a 2001 article, showed that neighborhood conditions can dilute the effect of parental involvement and argued that this has an indirect affect on student achievement. The full role of community, and its impact on schools and families, is still unclear.

Understanding parental involvement as a developmental phenomenon is also emerging as an important issue. Research is needed to understand the most appropriate forms of involvement given students' age and maturation. Although parental involvement is an important influence on students throughout their schooling, effective elementary school parent-involvement activities may not be appropriate with high school students. Related to this issue, schools need to understand how parent-involvement activities can help students and families successfully transition from one level of schooling to another. Understanding the influences and effects of parental involvement and different forms of involvement as students move through school remains an understudied process.

The importance of having parents and family members support students' efforts in school is well known and well documented. Research shows a positive connection between parental involvement and student achievement. Furthermore, when schools and teachers work to involve parents, studies show that they can increase student achievement. Concern that schools may not

be reaching out to all families and that they may not be aware of how families from different cultures perceive schools and school staff have raised questions about the effects of parental involvement for some students. Nevertheless, it appears that when schools reach out, understand the needs of all families, and create parental involvement, children are more likely to experience success in school.

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