



RESEARCH IN FOCUS:

Strategies for Parental Involvement

INTRODUCTION

Parental involvement in student education is an effective way to increase student academic achievement, especially among students at the elementary school level. Researchers and educators may help to improve student academic achievement by helping parents navigate between effective and ineffective strategies. Although researchers have spent a considerable amount of time delving into ways that parental involvement can help or hinder student-academic-achievement, the literature examining effective strategies is fairly slim, and in the last five years, much of the research on parental involvement has shifted toward older students. For example, research has found that older students show an increase in academic achievement when parents expect more from them or when parents engage

in teaching their students academic socialization strategies (Wang & Benner, 2014; Wang and Sheikh-Khalil, 2014), but this is not necessarily ideal encouragement for younger students. Research has also found that effective parental involvement strategies in middle school and high school aged students boost student autonomy and provide scaffolding for students looking to the future, whereas an ineffective strategy would encourage parental over-involvement (Barber, Olsen & Shagle, 1994; Wang & Benner, 2014; Wang & Sheikh-Khalil, 2014). This brief seeks to understand the factors that contribute to parental involvement, explore effective strategies, and look to strategies that might be helpful in the future.

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

To develop programs that inspire parents to become more involved in their children's education, it is important to understand the contributing factors. Research has demonstrated that parental involvement differs across status factors such as parents' socioeconomic status, education level, and race/ethnicity (Bæck, 2010; Plank & Jordan, 2001; Pomerantz, Moorman, & Litwack, 2007). Cooper and Crosnoe (2007) found that, in general, parental involvement rates did not differ with economic status, but there were several differences in parental behavior that could be used to support students. A pattern emerged, showing that economically disadvantaged parents became involved more frequently when the teacher initiates the involvement than their economically advantaged counterparts, who initiated more involvement on their own but reduced involvement over time unless they perceived their student's academic needs were not being met. One exception to this trend was found among highly engaged, economically disadvantaged parents who initiated involvement consistently throughout their students' academic careers. The children of these parents tended to be more academic orientation consistently positive than peers (Cooper & Crosnoe, 2007). This mutually reinforcing link between parent involvement and their child's positive academic orientation represents a potential for intervention to mitigate risks associated with living in poverty.

Similar findings across other status factors indicate clues about increasing parental involvement. Bæck (2010) found that practices differed based on the parents' level of education. Parents with more formal education tended to be more active in their children's education than parents with less education. Bæck's results suggested this discrepancy may be attributed the chance that parents with less formal education may feel insecure in their knowledge of the academic system.

In terms of racial/ethnic background, varying definitions of parental involvement were identified. Parents from some racial/ethnic backgrounds engage more often in home-based involvement, such as providing children a quiet homework place, excusing them from chores for schoolwork, sacrificing to support schooling, and exposing their students to the low-paying work available to those without an education. Home-based involvement is especially common for Hispanic

and African American parents (Pomerantz et al., 2007). Researchers have also identified potential barriers to school-based involvement for parents who identify as racial/ethnic minorities, such as financial burdens, language differences, and the parents' own negative educational experiences. For example, a 2014 study (Murray et al., 2014) found that in a sample of predominately low-income African American parents whose children attend a public, urban middle school, low opinion of school, scheduling challenges, and the negative quality of parent-teacher interaction as well as poor interactions with other children and parents were all barriers to their school-based parental involvement.

Although income and race/ethnicity significantly influence parental involvement in children's education, research has shown that other variables influence parental engagement (Bronfenbrenner, 1992; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). Researchers argue that process variables, such as how parents think and respond to situations, can be influenced by strategic school programming. According to Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997), the three most impactful parental process variables include the parents' role construction, or what they believe their role to be in the first place; their sense of self-efficacy, and whether or not the parents believe the school and students want them to be involved. The researchers posit that parental role construction stems from beliefs about child development and child rearing. School programs that account for these variables have the potential to influence parental beliefs about their role in the process and their self-efficacy, which could support increased parental involvement. When a group establishes concrete expectations for positive roles, members of the group are more likely to accept the expectations (Wheelan, 1994). Relaying role expectations to parents will also help programs show confidence in each parent's ability to help their students be successful. If schools identify how parental involvement helps students and then act on their findings by establishing the parent's expected role, parents will come to believe schools desire their involvement.

“Beyond a focus on parental roles, successful school programs also help increase parents' beliefs in their abilities to help children succeed in school.”

Parental sense of personal efficacy regarding their children's education seems to have a direct link with role construction. Parents who perceive themselves to have low self-efficacy are less likely to contribute to their children's education, even if the parent believes that it is his or her responsibility to do so (Bandura, 2012). That is to say that, regardless of the parents' actual capabilities, if parents do not believe they are capable of contributing to their students' success, they are unlikely to invest their time in their students' education. Conversely, even parents who believe they are able to help are unlikely to engage in parental involvement unless they also believe they should help (Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, 1997).

Programs designed to increase parental involvement must focus both on delineating what is expected of the parents to assist in their children's education and on reassuring parents that they do, in fact, have the ability to help their students succeed in school.

SUCCESSFUL PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT PROGRAMS

In 2012, Jeynes, one of the first to study the impact of parental involvement programs on student achievement, published a meta-analysis of programs, identifying several categories of involvement including shared reading, emphasized partnership, checking homework, communication between parents and teachers, head start, and ESL teaching (Jeynes, 2012).

“Jeynes found programs that encourage students to engage in shared reading have the largest impact on student academic achievement. (2012)”

Results also revealed significant positive relationships between checking homework and increased communication and partnership between teachers and parents.

While Jeynes' (2012) meta-analysis is promising, Mattingly, Prislín, McKenzie, Rodriguez, and Kayzar's 2002 meta-analysis found little empirical support for the effectiveness of parental involvement programs to change parent, teacher, or student behavior or to improve student achievement. Mattingly and colleagues' (2002) meta-analysis examined 41 studies that evaluated U.S. public schools' K-12 parental involvement programs. Their lack of a significant correlation highlighted the need for thoughtful and purposeful planning and evaluation of parent involvement programs.

In the early 2000's, North Carolina State University Cooperative Extension and 14 state school came together to develop the 6-week Juntos Para Una Mejor Educación (Together for a Better Education) program. Designed to help 6th-12th grade Latino students and their parents work together to help increase academic success and college enrollment, the program has been replicated in 20 locations with 450 participants. The program has students, parents, and bilingual educators engage in workshops to increase their understanding of high school graduation requirements, college applications, funding, and the importance of parent-youth interaction. At the end of the course, more than 92%

of parents felt they had gained increased confidence, or self-efficacy, in their abilities to work with their children's school and help them complete high school (Behnke and Kelly, 2011; Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, 1997). Future programs designed to increase parental involvement in schools with large Latino populations might consider looking at the Behnke and Kelly (2011) study in greater detail.

To find more ways to increase parental involvement, Lewis, Kim, and Ashby Bey (2011) examined the effect of teaching practices and strategies at an inner-city elementary school. Through interviews and observations, they found five main teaching practices that engaged parents: parent outreach, parent relationships, a positive classroom climate, teaching to involve parents, and community-school connection. While the five practices engaged parents, the authors did note that school-wide activities, in an effort to meet parents' diverse needs and host community activities, established the foundation to increase parental involvement and reduce marginalization.

Another study of increasing parental perceptions that schools desire their involvement spanned a four-year period. Delgado-Gaitan (1991) observed more than 150 different activities designed to increase parental involvement. Initially, parental involvement was defined and expectations described for the K-12 participants, a sample that included 67% Euro-American parents and 30% Latino American. Over the course of the study, a district committee with a teacher representative from each school planned traditional and non-conventional parent activities to identify what worked best. Underrepresented parents, such as those who spoke Spanish, were more likely to be involved in non-conventional activities hosted by teachers who allowed parents to play a role in determining the activities. The research revealed that these events empowered underrepresented parents, in particular, to become more involved in their children's schooling.

The effect of interdisciplinary teaching teams on parental involvement strategies was also studied by Robin and Searby in three types of middle school settings – an affluent suburban school, a mid-level rural school, and a high-poverty urban school (2013). Using a multiple-case study approach, each interdisciplinary team member answered questions, wrote in journals, and participated in parent nights and related events. Parents at each site participated in focus groups, individual interviews, and questionnaires to identify commonalities. Four commonalities were identified in teachers who were successful at engaging parents. They tended to have the belief parents were essential to their children's academic success; they were approachable and available as a resource to parents; and they problem solved as part of a team.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

In future endeavors, education professionals must increase their understanding of how process factors are influenced. Schools cannot change parental socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, or educational level. Schools can, however, employ effective strategies to control for process variables by promoting parental self-efficacy, making it known that schools want and need parental involvement, and establishing a parental role identity in the context of their children's education. To accomplish this, it is suggested that schools develop parental role expectations that are shared with teachers, parents, and students and identify ways school systems can be more accessible to parents.

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