

The Benefits of Parent Participation in Schooling

The idea that parent involvement is a key determinant of student achievement is widely accepted today. Many authors agree that children, families, schools, teachers and community agencies all benefit from home/school partnerships. For example:

There are many reasons for developing school, family, and community partnerships. They can improve school programs and school climate, provide family services and support, increase parents' skills and leadership, connect families with others in the school and in the community and help teacher with their work. However, the main reason to create such partnerships is to help all youngster succeed in school and in later life. [Epstein 1995, p.701]

Children's chances for success in school and life are likely to be improved. Their parents and other family members can also gain skills, knowledge, and confidence that will help them in rearing children, improving thier economic condition, and being good citizens. When families are informed about how the teacher and the school are supporting the child's efforts to learn, family expectations for children's success goes up. Teachers and schools are also helped. When families see that teachers communicate frequently and positively with them, they give higher ratings to the teachers and the schools. Families are more likely to understand the goals of the teacher and the school and to be more supportive of proposed changes.

Community agencies and institutions also can benefit when they collaborate effectively with schools. They can reach more of their constituents, increase public support for their work, sometimes realize cost savings, and gain access to school facilities and expertise. In some cases, school-based collaboration may be an opportunity to coordinate their services with other community organizations. [Davies nd]

Moreover, the benefits extend beyond education and include social and financial benefits [OECD 1997, pp.22, 27]. These include improved health outcomes, reduced welfare dependency and reduced crime [Wolfe and Haveman 2002].

Student outcomes

There is a significant body of research on the connection between parent involvement and student achievement. Many studies over the last thirty years have found that parent participation in children 's learning and schools generally has positive benefits on student outcomes whatever the family background and circumstances, parent relationships with schools and teachers, the resources available to schools and the general school environment [see Henderson 1988, Henderson and Berla 1994, Caplan et. al. n.d, Epstein et.al. 1997, Henderson and Mapp 2002]. For example, a review of 66 studies of parent participation, including several literature reviews, by Henderson and Berla [1994, p.14] concluded as follows:

Regardless of income, education level, or cultural background, all families can – and do – contribute to their children 's success. When parents encourage learning and voice high expectations for the future, they are promoting attitudes that are keys to achievement. Students who feel that they have some control over their destiny, that they can earn an honorable place in society, that hard work will be recognized and rewarded, are students who do well in school. Although these attitudes are formed at home, they can be either strengthened or discouraged at school.

Henderson and Berla [1994, p.30] also cite the following conclusion of one extensive review on

parent involvement in education:

In summarising the research on parent participation, it becomes very clear that extensive, substantial, and convincing evidence suggests that parents play a crucial role in both the home and school environments with respect to facilitating the development of intelligence, achievement and competence in their children.

In general, parent involvement is associated with children's higher achievement in language and mathematics, enrolment in more challenging academic programs, greater academic persistence, better behaviour, better social skills and adaption to school, better attendance and lower dropout rates [Heymann 2000, p.53, Henderson and Mapp 2002, p.24].

Two different types of studies support these conclusions. One group of studies has examined family life, the way families behave and the interaction of parents and their children. The focus of these studies is parent involvement in children's learning in the absence of support from the school. This group of studies may be termed 'parent involvement' studies [Epstein 2001, p.40].

The second group of studies has assessed the effects of school programs to support parent participation in schooling. Following Epstein, these may be described as school and family partnership program studies.

Family involvement

Many studies have examined the impact of family involvement in student learning and student achievement. Historically, these studies provided a basis to support active intervention programs to support parent participation in schooling [Epstein 2001, pp.38-41].

There is considerable variation in research studies as to the definition of parent involvement [see Baker and Soden 1998]. Some have focused on parental aspirations or expectations of children's educational success. Others have focused on behavioural aspects such as assistance with homework while others looked at parenting styles and family environment.

In general, these studies demonstrate that particular forms of family involvement have an important and positive impact on student outcomes. One study reviewed by Henderson and Berla [pp.110-1] found several ways in which families, through their attitudes and behaviour, influence their children's performance in school:

- parents become involved with teachers and schools;
- parents spend time with their children pursuing educational activities;
- parents impart values, aspirations and motivations needed to persevere in school; and
- parenting styles promote good communication and responsible behaviour.

Kellaghan et.al. [1993] suggest that the following factors are important aspects of parent support for children's learning:

- a regular family routine and priority given to schoolwork over other activities;
- encouragement and guidance for children's schoolwork;
- providing opportunities to experience and explore ideas and activities;
- providing opportunities for language development;
- parent awareness of their children's school experience; and

- high parent aspirations for their children and their school achievement.

Family attitudes such as parental expectations and the child's self esteem provide part of the emotional framework for children's home learning environment and appear to be a strong influence on student achievement. A large number of studies have found that creating a positive learning environment, including encouraging attitudes towards education and high expectations of children's success, has a powerful impact on student achievement [see Henderson and Berla 1994, pp.35-36, 39-40, 117-118, Kelleghan et.al. 1993]. While most studies focus on early childhood and primary school years, some studies have also demonstrated that parent expectations, beliefs and support are also important in secondary school success [for example, Bryk et.al. 1990, p.155].

Parent involvement in learning activities at home is generally found to be a critical factor for student achievement. It involves reading to children, listening to children reading, helping with homework and other activities. The success of such involvement has been confirmed by many studies [see Epstein et.al. 1997, Henderson and Berla 1994, pp.43-44, 63, 110-111]. Parent involvement in literacy learning, in particular, has been shown to be an important element in student achievement [Cairney et. al. 1995, Delgado-Gaitan 1990, Rowe 1991, Schaefer 1991]

Parent involvement with the school also appears to have a positive impact on student outcomes. This includes regularly talking to teachers, assisting in planning curriculum choices in secondary school, monitoring of school work and attending school functions [for example, Henderson and Berla 1994, pp.14-15, 88-89, 110-111]. In particular, a positive attitude toward the school, as exemplified in participation in school events and interaction with teachers, seems to be important.

These positive effects are apparent in secondary schools as well as primary schools.

The few studies that look at parent involvement at the high school level reached similar findings. Students whose parents monitored their schoolwork and daily activities, talked frequently to their teachers, and helped develop their plans for education or work after high school, were much more likely to graduate and go on to post-secondary education. [Henderson and Berla 1994, p.18]

Parenting style also appears to be an important influence on student outcomes. Studies reviewed by Henderson and Berla [1994, pp.39-40, 57-8, 127-8] found that parenting style is a more powerful predictor of student achievement than parent education, ethnicity or family structure. For example, students whose parents adopt authoritarian or permissive practices tend to do worse than those of parents who adopt more considered and authoritative approaches.

Henderson and Berla [1994, p.16] also report that the evidence is mixed on the effects of parent participation in decision-making on student achievement. There is little evidence that putting parents on advisory committees or governing bodies improves student outcomes unless the parents are also involved in the school and their child's learning in other ways. The best results seem to occur when parents were involved in both learning and decision-making roles. However, it should also be noted that the rationale for parent participation in decision-making has more to do with the role of parents as citizens and the need to ensure school accountability to the parent community than as a way of improving student outcomes.

One important measure of the significance of parent involvement is the differences in outcomes for students from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds. While there is a general

relationship between socio-economic background and student achievement, a low socio-economic background does not automatically mean poor school outcomes. Many students from such backgrounds achieve very successful school outcomes. It appears that parent involvement in their children's learning is likely to be a factor contributing to these different outcomes for students of similar backgrounds.

The socio-economic level or cultural background of a home need not determine how well a child does at school. Parents from a variety of cultural backgrounds and with different levels of education, income or occupational status can and do provide stimulating home environments that support and encourage the learning of their children. It is what parents do in the home rather than their status that is important. [Kellaghan et. al. 1993, p.145]

There is evidence to support this. Several studies have found that parent participation in children's learning in low SES families contributes to successful student outcomes. A large-scale United States study of the impact of SES background and parent involvement on high school achievement found that parent involvement has an important positive effect on outcomes independent of SES background [Henderson and Berla 1994, pp.59-60]. Two small studies of low income Black families in the United States [Henderson and Berla 1994, pp.39-40, 119-120] show that high-achieving students generally came from families who had clear goals and expectations about schooling, played a supportive role in learning at home and had a family life conducive to the development of children. Another study showed that the students of low-income parents who maintained contact with teachers and supported literacy learning at home achieved better results than other students from similar backgrounds [Henderson and Berla 1994, pp.123-124].

Epstein [2001, p.45] considers that parent participation in student learning is at least just as important as family background factors for student achievement.

Teachers' practices to involve families are as or more important than family background variables such as race or ethnicity, social class, marital status, or mother's work status for determining whether and how parents become involved in their children's education. Family practices of involvement are as or more important than family background variables in determining whether and how students progress and succeed in school.

School and family partnership programs

The other major area of research on parent participation in schooling is on programs designed to support parent involvement in learning at home and at school. There is a vast literature on general programs operated by schools and programs directed at specific interventions such as parent involvement in literacy learning [see Swap 1993, Cairney et. al. 1995, Epstein et. al. 1997, Epstein 2001, Henderson and Berla 1994, Wolfendale and Topping 1996].

The vast majority of the programs aimed at supporting parents in assisting the learning of their children involve parents of young children and of primary school children. There are relatively few studies of programs involving parents of secondary school age.

This research generally shows that parent participation programs are successful in increasing the involvement of parents in the learning of their children at home and at school and lead to improved student outcomes. For example:

When schools encourage families to work with their children and provide helpful information and skills, they reinforce a positive cycle of development for both parents and students. The studies show that such intervention, whether based at home or at school, whether begun before

or after a child enters school, has significant, long-lasting effects.

The reverse is also true. If schools disparage parents, or treat them as negative influences, or cut them out of their children's education, they promote attitudes in the family that inhibit achievement at school. Programs and policies to improve outcomes for students will be far more productive if they build on the strengths of families and enlist them as allies. [Henderson and Berla 1994, p.14]

The available research also attests to the positive impact of home-school partnership programs on literacy development. Parental involvement in reading programs has been an important factor in literacy improvement for many students. For example, Topping [1996, p.159] concludes that the evaluation of several parent involvement programs is generally positive:

The majority of parental involvement in reading literature reporting 'objective' outcomes thus provides evidence of generally positive results. Subjective feedback from participants, gathered in various ways, is ubiquitously positive. Long-term follow up data are very limited in quantity, but are positive.

Generally, it is a case of the more the better as the more extensive the involvement, the higher are student outcomes.

Across the programs studied, student achievement increased directly with the duration and intensity of parent involvement ...Each one reported that the more parents are involved, the better students perform in school. [Henderson and Berla 1994, p.6]

A detailed analysis by Epstein [1991] of student outcomes associated with teachers who use parent participation in different degrees found that teacher leadership in parent involvement in learning activities at home positively and significantly influences improvements in reading achievement. Teacher leadership in involving parents can have a significant impact whatever the family background.

Parents are one available but untapped and undirected resource that teachers can mobilize to help more children master and maintain needed skills for school, but this requires teachers' leadership in organizing, evaluating, and continually building their parent involvement practices. [p.233]

However, Epstein did not find a similar relationship for maths achievement. Part of the explanation of this is that teachers give greatest emphasis to parent involvement in reading and there was little guidance given to parents on how to help their children with maths at home.

Some studies show that the children who are the farthest behind make the most gains from parent involvement in their learning [Henderson and Berla 1994, p.16]. Young children whose background place them 'at-risk' of failing or falling far behind will outperform their peers for years if their parents are given training in home learning and support. Older children whose performance starts to decline can be helped by home re- inforcement and support.

Several studies also show that programs designed to involve parents more in their children's learning can achieve significant improvement in outcomes for students from low-income families [for example, Comer 1988, Henderson and Berla 1994, pp.37-38, 45-46, 97-98, Swap 1993].

The OECD [1997, p.3] says that one of the most interesting findings relates to the relatively

untapped potential of parental education in assisting parents from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds to support their children's learning more effectively. Improving their understanding of the educational process not only enables them to become more involved with the school, but can give them confidence to continue with further education. In this way, school-based initiatives to involve parents serve to build parent capacity to assist the learning of their children and reduce exclusion and improve equity.

Finally, it should be recognised that the effects of programs to increase parent participation are not always positive. Parent participation in schooling can also have negative influences on student and these effects have been largely ignored by researchers. One exception is Lareau [2000] whose study revealed that parent involvement can lead to increasing pressure and stress for students not performing to family expectations and to family strains and tensions. Many parents reported regular and serious conflicts with children over homework. Such family tensions around schooling were not as apparent in families who did not see it as their role to intervene in their children's education.

There is also limited research on the impact of parent participation in schools on student achievement. Some studies suggest a positive impact and there is evidence of significant relationships between parent participation in school activities (such as parent organisations, attending school functions and participating as a volunteer in the school) and student achievement, between decision-making involvement of parents and good parent-teacher relationships and between parent involvement and satisfaction with the school [Delgado- Gaitan 1990, see also Henderson and Berla 1994, pp.88-9, 123-4, 152].

Summing-up

In summing up their review of a wide range of studies, Henderson and Berla [1994, p.15] conclude that there are four basic roles played by parents that make for higher student outcomes. These are:

- As teachers, parents create a home environment that promotes learning, reinforces what is being taught at school, and develops the values and life skills children need to become responsible adults
- As supporters, parents contribute their knowledge and skills to the school, enriching the curriculum, and providing extra services and support to students.
- As advocates, parents help children negotiate the system and receive fair treatment, and work to make the system more responsive to families.
- As decision-makers, parents serve on advisory councils, curriculum committees, and management teams, participating in joint problem-solving at every level.

School and other programs to support these roles by parents can contribute to improved student success at school.

School benefits

Bringing parents into the school also improves overall school outcomes. Schools can call on more resources and support. There are more adults to assist in general education. All this makes a difference for the school as a whole.

Not only do individual children and their families function more effectively, but there is an aggregate effect on the performance of students and teachers when schools collaborate with parents. [Henderson 1988, p.150]

A key effect is on the culture of the school. A study reviewed by Henderson and Berla [1994] concluded:

It is important to recognize that the presence of parents in the school not only provides more adults to teach reading or offer help and support to children, but also transforms the culture of the school. [p.152]

When parents are more involved in the school, teachers learn more about the cultural and ethnic communities served by the school. This knowledge gives teachers greater understanding of the students and the stresses the children encounter in daily life that may impact on their school experiences and learning [Haynes et. al. 1996, p.47].

Henderson and Berla [1994, for example, pp.103-4] cite several studies that found that parent participation had a positive influence on school outcomes as a whole. These studies indicate that schools with high achievement levels are also schools that are more open to parent and community involvement. This impact is present irrespective of family income and background characteristics.

Parents also develop better attitudes toward schools and staff members. The more a school works with parents, the more highly the parents rate the school and its staff [Dauber and Epstein 1993, see also Henderson and Berla 1994, pp.30, 88-9, 130].

Thus, parent participation provides benefits which are critical to the success of schools.

We cannot afford to sequester parents on the periphery of the educational enterprise. Parent involvement is neither a quick fix nor a luxury; it is absolutely fundamental to a healthy system of public education. [Henderson 1988, p.153]

Qualifications

While the general message from a large number of research studies is that parent involvement in children's learning has a positive effect, issues have been raised about the methodology of many of these studies and there are gaps in the research evidence on which practices work best and how.

Few of the many studies of parent participation, at least until recently, are well designed and most are very general in their approach. One study concludes that the claimed benefits of parent participation are without foundation [Henderson and Berla 1984, pp.146-7]. It analysed a wide range of studies of parent involvement and concluded that few of them were well-designed, most being methodologically flawed. The study argues that most research on parent involvement fails to meet rigorous standards for validity.

Another study notes several flaws of studies into parental involvement which result in a lack of confidence in their findings and which limit their accuracy and usefulness [Baker and Soden, 1998]. The flaws include the use of non-experimental design, lack of isolation of parent involvement effects, inconsistent definitions of parent involvement and non-objective measures of parent involvement. Wolfendale [1992, p.40] notes that it is difficult to measure the contribution of parent reading programs to student outcomes and to ascribe improvements exclusively to increased parent input.

Nevertheless, these authors acknowledge there is mounting evidence that parent involvement

Benefits

contributes to better student achievement and that there are valid studies that point to such benefits. The significance of methodological issues is not so much to undermine the general conclusions about the importance of parent participation for successful student outcomes but in determining what practices are most effective.

Epstein [2001, p.38] concedes that while there are positive connections between family involvement and student achievement, little is known about which practices, how, when, for whom, and why particular practices produce positive student outcomes. She states that research about school and family connections needs to improve in many ways.

Early research was often based on limited samples, too global or too narrow measures of involvement, and limited data on student outcomes. As research proceeds with clearer questions, and better data, measurement models should be more fully specified, analyses more elegant, and results more useful for policy and research.