

Parental Involvement

Subjects: Education Studies

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Definition

Parental involvement is seen as an important strategy for the advancement of the quality of education. The ultimate objective of this is to expand the academic and social capacities of students, especially those of disadvantaged backgrounds determined by ethnic minority origin and low socio-economic status. In this contribution, various forms of both parental and school-initiated involvement will be described. In addition, results of studies into the effectiveness of parental involvement will be presented.

1. Introduction

For some decades now, the involvement or participation of parents in the education of their children is seen as an important strategy to improve educational careers of the children, especially those of disadvantaged backgrounds determined by ethnic minority origin and low socio-economic status^{[1][2][3]}. The underlying idea is that there is much congruence between the social and cultural climate that children of upper and middle-class parents enjoy at home and the educational climate that is characteristic of the modal middle-class school. Children of highly educated parents start school with vital educational luggage which facilitates their functioning in the school environment and significantly improves their chances of a successful career. Such luggage is lacking, however, in the homes of children with parents who have had little or no education. Differences in the norms and values of parents (cf. Pierre Bourdieu), their social networks (cf. James Coleman), and their language use (cf. Basil Bernstein) all contribute to the existence of significant gaps between the various social milieus on the one hand and the “hidden” demands of the established educational system on the other^[4]. Bridging this divide by stimulating parental involvement and participation both in school and at home is seen as an essential instrument to improve educational chances of children, no matter their family background^[1]. And along these lines, more and more pleas to better integrate the activities of schools, parents and local communities are being heard^{[5][6]}.

2. Types of Involvement, Participation, Partnership

Various terms and definitions are used to refer to the cooperation between parents, teachers and schools, and the local community^[3]. One can speak, for example, of parental involvement, parental participation, school-family relations, or educational partnership. Research on parental involvement has shown considerable variation to occur in the level of involvement and this variation to largely depend on the social-economic position and ethnic background of the parents^[7]. The term “partnership” is increasingly being used to give form to the concept of meaningful cooperative relations between schools, parents and the local community^[8] (Smit, Moerel & Sleegers, 1999). Such a partnership is then construed as the process in which those involved mutually support each other and attune their contributions with the objective of promoting the learning, motivation and development of children, and especially those of disadvantaged backgrounds^[1] (Epstein, 1995).

This vision of partnership is based on Joyce Epstein’s theory of overlapping spheres of influence^[9] (Epstein et al., 2002). This theory combines psychological, educational and sociological perspectives on social institutions to describe and explain the relations between parents, schools and local environments in an integrated manner. In doing this, three important contexts or social institutions which can influence the education and socialization of children are distinguished: family, school and local community. It is assumed that at least some of the objectives of the various institutions - such as support for the development of children - are shared and therefore best reached by communicating and cooperating. Epstein sees the three contexts as spheres of influence which can overlap to a greater or lesser degree. The congruence

between the different spheres of influence is then seen to be of considerable importance for the optimal development of children and partnership is viewed as a means to realize this. Teachers and parents are all seen as partners with their own but also shared tasks and responsibilities^{[10][11][12][13]} (also see Vincent & Tomlinson, 1997; Lueder, 1998; Hall & Santer, 2000; McNamara *et al.*, 2000). Based on empirical research, Epstein (2002) has distinguished six types of parental involvement reflecting different types of cooperative relations between schools and parents^[14] (Driessen, Smit & Slegers, 2005: 511):

- *Parenting*. Schools must help parents with the creation of positive home conditions to promote the development of children. Parents must prepare their children for school, guide them and raise them.
- *Communicating*. Schools must inform parents about the school program and the progress of children's school careers. Schools must also present such information in a manner which is comprehensible to all parents, and parents must be open to such communication.
- *Volunteering*. The contribution and help of parents during school activities (e.g., reading mothers, organization of celebrations).
- *Learning at home*. Activities aimed at the support, help and monitoring of the learning and development activities of one's school-going children at home (e.g., help with homework).
- *Decision making*. The involvement of parents in the policy and management of the school and the establishment of formal parental representation (e.g., school board or parent council memberships).
- *Collaborating with the community*. The identification and integration of community resources and services with existing school programs, family child-rearing practices and pupil learning.

In addition to classifications according to type of relation and role, it is also possible to adopt who takes the initiative as the basis for classification, schools or parents^[15] (e.g., Boonk *et al.*, 2019). In the case of *school-initiated parental involvement*, the emphasis lies on the part of the school; the relevant activities are started by the school, and the activities mainly occur at the school. In the case of *parent-initiated involvement*, the emphasis lies on the home situation; the relevant activities are started by the parents, and the activities also occur largely within the family situation.

For their meta-analysis, Barger *et al.* (2019: 858)^[15] have developed the following classification of parents' involvement and possible effects on a number of child outcomes:

Parents' involvement

A. School involvement

- Participation (e.g., attendance of open houses or school programs, volunteering in the classroom, field trips, communication with the teacher)
- Governance (e.g., membership in the PTA, PTA board, school board)
- School undifferentiated (i.e., reflecting both participation and governance or does not specify whether involvement is participation or governance)

B. Home involvement

- Discussion and encouragement (e.g., discussion of school with children, encouragement of children's learning, knowledge, interest, awareness about school)
- Cognitive-intellectual (e.g., joint book reading, trips to libraries or museums)

- Homework involvement (e.g., homework assistance, making environment conducive to completing homework, rules about homework)
 - Home undifferentiated (i.e., reflecting homework involvement, cognitive-intellectual involvement, and discussion and encouragement or does not specify whether the involvement is one of these categories).
- C. Home and school combined (i.e., school and home involvement).
- D. Unclear/other (e.g., communication with other parents about school).

Children's adjustment

- Achievement (i.e., grades, standardized test scores, academic competence)
- Engagement (e.g., persistence, truancy, dropout, classroom conduct)
- Motivation (e.g., perceived competence, expectations, perceived control, intrinsic motivation, mastery goals, aspirations, school value)
- Academic undifferentiated (i.e., combination of achievement, engagement, or motivation)
- Social adjustment (e.g., social competence, social dominance)
- Emotional adjustment (e.g., internalizing symptoms, self-esteem, emotion regulation)
- Delinquency (e.g., substance use, sexual behaviors and attitudes, externalizing)
- Nonacademic undifferentiated (i.e., combination of social adjustment, emotional adjustment, or delinquency).

On the basis of an empirical research conducted in the Netherlands, Vogels (2002)^[16] concludes that four groups of parents can be distinguished: *partners*, *participants*, *delegators* and *invisible parents*. The first two groups are closely involved in the child's school. Both partners and participants are actively involved in informal school-support activities (e.g., assistance with school activities, help with maintenance tasks). The group of partners is also active in the domain of formal participation, and this most active group consists of primarily parents with a high social-economic status, a non-denominational philosophy of life and children attending Montessori or Jena Plan schools. The largest group of participants consists of primarily parents with a middle to high social-economic position and their children in predominantly public (i.e. non-religious), Catholic or Protestant schools. The most important difference between the delegators and invisible parents is not so much the degree of active involvement, as both groups are relatively passive, but the backgrounds of the groups. The group of delegators involves primarily parents with a denominational philosophy of life and children attending an orthodox Protestant school. In the eyes of these parents, the directorate and teachers are the appointed experts and therefore the people responsible for the education of their children. This group of parents guards the foundations of the denominational school from a distance. The invisible group of parents consists of primarily parents with a low social-economic position. The parents in this group participate much less in various activities organized for pupils than the other groups. Differences also exist between Dutch parents and ethnic-minority parents with respect to helping children with their homework, attendance of parent nights and talking about school within the family: Dutch parents undertake these forms of parental involvement relatively more often than ethnic-minority parents (Driessen, 2002)^[17].

Comparable differences involving active versus passive parents are also apparent in the international literature. In a qualitative study of parental involvement in Cyprus, for example, three types of parents could be distinguished: *strongly involved parents*, an *intermediate group* and a *fringe group* (Phtiaka, 1994)^[18]. The parents in the first group were primarily high educated, very active at school and also

satisfied with the school and the information received from the school with regard to their child. The second group of parents consisted of well-educated workers. These parents contacted the school when something was bothering them but also desired more information and feedback from the school and wanted to become more involved in school activities. The third group consisted of mostly low educated parents, had considerable difficulties communicating with the school and felt powerless in relation to the school.

Based on an international literature study and subsequent consultation of a focus group, Smit et al. (2007: 52) developed yet another typology:

The supporter

- Education: low/medium
- Characteristics: satisfied and involved, prepared to help with practical matters, willing to work, an excellent helping hand, pleasant partner, active, available on demand, has sufficient time
- Key words: helpful, nice, solid, friendly, creative, sympathetic, joint thinker, harmonious, supportive, enlightening, willing to serve, naïve, well-adjusted
- Suited for: lending a helping hand, parent committees
- Not suited for: school advisory board or school board without first following one or more training courses
- How to approach: appeal to sense of solidarity, existence of an alliance, partnership with shared goals

The politician

- Education: medium/high
- Characteristics: desire to help make decisions, exert influence, and be involved; satisfied as long as parent can participate in meetings; critical consumer; extroverted; pays attention to 'democratic' quality of the choice of school
- Key words: critical, precise, optimistic, desire to inspire, persuasive
- Suited for: school advisory board, school board
- Not suited for: actual conduct of helping-hand services
- How to approach: appeal to desire to influence school policy, be heard, and hear oneself speak; in order to fully utilize the capacities of this parent, ask him/her to participate on the behalf of parents in the school advisory board or school board

The tormentor

- Education: high
- Characteristics: feel offended and misunderstood as a result of the school's attitude and own educational experiences; denounces errors on the part of the school as a critical consumer, is an unguided missile for the school team; is only satisfied when the school cringes and takes responsibility for suboptimal functioning
- Key words: know-it-all, cold, insensitive, aggressive, conflictual, fighter, theatrical, impatient
- Suited for: school advisory board, school board

- Not suited for: helping-hand activities, parent committees
- How to approach: show real interest in the motives of this parent and his or her (new) ideas regarding child raising and education; be professional but see that the parent remains comfortable; keep your goals in mind; be well-prepared; pose good questions; send a thank you note after meeting; take notes on the conversation; keep the line of communication open

The absentee

- Education: low/medium
- Characteristics: does not consider him/herself suited to make a contribution, may only participate when asked explicitly, moderately dissatisfied, uninvolved. School has no priority (anymore), leaves choice of school up to chance, impossible to contact, introverted, unapproachable
- Key words: loner, quitter, has (almost) no contact with other parents, no friendship relations with the school, uncommunicative, wrestles with cultural gap due to different cultural background
- Suited for: school support network, can serve as a bridge to other absentee parents or group of parents
- Not suited for: school advisory board, school board, or parent committees without first following one or more training courses
- How to approach: look for contact, show interest, enter to discussion of cultural background and children, show empathy, see where you can help, win trust

The career-maker

- Education: medium/high
- Characteristics: places responsibility for child raising, child care, and education on the school; one-stop-shopping approach; satisfied as long as school takes on all tasks; critical with regard to choice of school; has attitude of 'school is for the parents' and sees teachers as an extension of parents
- Key words: aloof, "no news is good news", businesslike, basically all take and no give
- Suited for: school advisory board or school board, provided this fits the individual's career prospects
- Not suited for: time consuming helping-hand services
- How to approach: enter into conversation about work, career, education: mention the functions of school advisory board and school board, interesting people participating in these, and what such participation could mean for career

The super parent

- Education: high
- Characteristics: feels responsible for child raising and education together with the school; is prepared to support the school alongside a busy job; is willing to invest in the school relation; thinks critically along with the school; contributes good ideas; is prepared to utilize own networks; is satisfied when the school does its best for the performance and well-being of own child and other students
- Key words: loyal, ambitious, strengthener, innovative, communicative, inspiring, walking encyclopedia, grows

- Suited for: thinking about problems, finding solutions, handling crises, acquisition of funds, school board (chair)
- Not suited for: supportive school network
- How to approach: show a warm interest in the opinions and expectations of the parent with regard to child raising and education, gauge the need for (greater) involvement, be open to ideas of this parent

■ 3. The effectiveness of the involvement

The results of various studies have shown increased involvement on the part of parents in schools to positively affect the cognitive and social functioning of children^[12] (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Sanders and Epstein^[19] (1998) describe the results of a number of intervention studies conducted in different countries. Activities such as parent workshops and home visits positively affected the academic achievement of students. The studies further show children's achievement to improve in the presence of intensive involvement of parents in interventions in the family.

In addition to effects of parental involvement on the children's achievement, parental involvement has been found in a number of studies to exert a positive effect on the social functioning. Improvements have been found for different aspects of the behavior of students, motivation, social competence, relations between teachers and students and relations among the students themselves (e.g., Jordan, Orozco & Averett, 2001)^[20]. Research has also shown parental involvement to influence truancy behavior, undertaking further education and level of aspiration.

Over and above to effects of parental involvement on the cognitive and social development of children, studies have also shown changes in parents to occur (Zeijl, 2003)^[21]. Support from the school for the child-rearing climate within the family has been found to lead to a more positive attitude towards the school on the part of the parents and to changes in child-rearing behavior. In addition, positive connections have been found between parental involvement and various school- and community-related outcome measures (Jordan, Orozco & Averett, 2001)^[20]. Parental involvement has been found to correlate with the functioning of the school organization and local community.

While such results make it plausible that parental involvement can influence the cognitive and social development of children, there are also studies which lead to a different conclusion. In a meta-analysis of 41 studies, Mattingly et al. (2002)^[5] found little empirical support for the claim that programs aimed at parental development constitute an effective means to improve the achievement of students or change the behavior of parents, teachers and students.

In a synthesis of meta-analyses, Hattie (2009)^[22] found a Cohen's d of 0.51 for the average effect of parental involvement on achievement, which is regarded a medium effect. More specifically, parental aspirations and expectations are strongest correlated with achievement ($d = 0.80$), while the communication dimension (interest in homework and schoolwork; assistance with homework; discussing school progress) has a moderate effect ($d = 0.38$). The effect of parental home supervision (rules for watching tv; home surroundings conducive to doing school work) has the weakest effect ($d = 0.18$).

In a more recent review study, Bakker et al. (2013)^[4] analyzed a total of 111 studies into effects of parental involvement on achievement and motivation, well-being, and self-esteem of students of different ages. The results show that for students of all ages parental involvement of parents at home is the most effective strategy. Significantly less important is the parental involvement in school and the contact between parents and teachers. The researchers do not report exact effect estimates; they conclude, however, that effects in general are small or even very small.

Boonk et al. (2018)^[23] analyzed the results of 75 recent studies examining the relation between parental involvement and academic achievement. Though they conclude that according those studies parental

involvement indeed is related to children's academic achievement, they also relativize this finding by remarking that this association is not as strong as traditionally believed. In the studies analyzed the researchers found small to medium correlations between various parental involvement variables and academic achievement. The most consistent and positive relations were found for: reading at home; parents holding high expectations for their children's academic achievement and schooling; communication between parents and children regarding school; and parental encouragement and support for learning.

In a most recent study, Barger et al. (2019)^[15] performed a statistical meta-analysis of 448 studies and found small positive associations (correlation $r_s = 0.13$ to 0.23) between parents' involvement in their children's schooling and children's academic adjustment (i.e., achievement, engagement, and motivation). Parents' involvement was also positively related to social ($r = 0.12$) and emotional adjustment ($r = 0.17$), but negatively related to the children's delinquency ($r = -0.15$). Different types of involvement (e.g., parents' participation in school events and discussion of school with children) were similarly positively associated with academic adjustment. Parents' homework assistance, however, was negatively associated with children's achievement ($r = -0.15$), but not engagement ($r = 0.07$) or motivation ($r = 0.05$). Little variation existed due to age, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status in the association between different types of involvement and children's academic adjustment. In general, the effects are small according to Cohen's rule of thumb (r_s 0.10 to 0.30 = small).

The results of many studies show clear variation to exist in the level of parental involvement and this variation to relate to the social-economic position and ethnicity of parents (Denessen, Driessen, Smit & Sleegers, 2001)^[24]. The fact that parents from disadvantaged groups experience barriers to communication with the school and, as a result of such, barriers to cooperation with the school is particularly worrisome (Todd & Higgins, 1998)^[25]. In addition to this, there are differences of opinion with regard to the education and socialization within the distinguished domains (home, school) with a significant part of the minority parents placing responsibility more or less exclusively with the school (Driessen & Valkenberg, 2016)^[26]. It is precisely children from lower social-economic milieus and an ethnic/minority background who generally achieve lower at school (Passaretta & Skopek, 2018)^[27] and therefore stand to benefit from improved and more intensive support from the school with respect to education and learning within the family, however.

The findings from the studies cited here do not lead to conclusive outcomes; insofar effects are found they generally are small and, moreover, the form of parental involvement responsible for the effect and which specific aspects of the development of children are affected still remain unclear. Information regarding the differential effects of parental involvement on various student-related outcomes is virtually nonexistent. Prudence thus is called for when it comes to the drawing of general conclusions regarding the effects of parental involvement on the learning and development of children, despite the presence of some empirical evidence indicating the importance of parental involvement for the learning of children.

But apart from the ambiguity of the studies' results, there is a much bigger problem. Firstly, almost all studies are correlational studies: parents (and teachers) are asked (in a written questionnaire) to give an indication of their involvement and participation and (at the same time) students are tested for academic achievement and behavior. Strictly speaking, such a methodological design does not allow for speaking of an "effect". Secondly, apart from this, the interpretation of any effect is very complicated. At least three types of parent participation/involvement can be discerned. (1) There are parents who are permanently involved in their children's education, for instance by reading to them, helping them with their homework, attending a parents' evening, and/or helping the teacher in the class. (2) There are also parents who are not involved at all, for instance because they are illiterate, don't speak the language, have had no or only little education themselves, or who do not believe in the power of education or who feel that education is not something for their kind of people. (3) And then there are parents who normally are not involved in their children's education but only become active when they are alerted by the teacher or by low report grades. The latter thus is a reaction to a negative situation, mostly in terms of bad behavior or low achievement. Analytically seen, the first two types of parents are relatively straightforward. The third type,

however, complicates any analysis dramatically. And there are hardly any studies where this crucial distinction is made, while this is critical for an adequate interpretation of the results. In fact, only in longitudinal studies with several measurement points focusing on both achievement/behavior and parental activities it is possible to draw valid conclusions. In sum, the validity of most studies into effects of parent involvement is questionable.

Note

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Keywords

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