Fostering Parental Involvement That Positively Impacts Student Achievement

Carole Angell
Glen Forest Elementary School
Fairfax County (VA) Public Schools
Jack Levy
George Mason University
Submitted June 2001

Introduction

As parents have come to be seen as important partners in the formal education of their children. In response, schools have focused additional resources on building strong parent involvement components. While the existence of consistent evidence of a connection between quality parental school involvement and student achievement is controversial, there is no doubt that parental at-home activity can be instrumental in boosting academic performance (Finn, 1998). Parents who provide structure, monitor the child's use of time, help teach and explain concepts, review homework and provide support are most likely contributing to their child's success at school (Hoover-Dempsey, 1995). [However, it should be pointed out that research involving students from a variety of cultural background has found that the effect of parents providing structure, monitoring time, and assisting students with homework may differ across cultures (Okagaki and French, 1998).] Recognizing this opportunity for assistance, school staff have tried to get parents involved on site as a way to further emphasize effective parenting activities at home.

Review of the Literature

The quality of parent involvement appears to depend on three variables:

1. The parent's understanding of his or her role in the child's life
2. The parent's level of belief that s/he can help the child succeed in school
3. The general opportunities for involvement presented by both the child and the school.

(Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997, pp. 8-9)

The current project focused on the last two variables in the preceding list. One of the most important questions regarding parent involvement is whether parents perceive that the schools want them to be involved. Further, the nature of the teachers' attitude toward parent involvement can be significant. In one survey of elementary parents, for example, Epstein (1986) found that parents of children who had teachers who engaged in many parent involvement activities (high-involvement teachers) were more positive about school and more aware of teachers' interest in their involvement than were parents with low-involvement
teachers. Further, the high-involvement teachers themselves, unlike their low-involvement counterparts, worked to involve all parents regardless of socioeconomic level (see also Becker & Epstein, 1982; Epstein 1994). Finally, positive parental involvement practices were found to characterize elementary schools more than middle, junior high, or senior high schools (see also Eccles & Harold, 1994).

The significance of these teacher efforts to create inviting climates for parent involvement is underscored by related findings. For example, Epstein has found that parents were most involved when teachers actively encouraged involvement (Epstein & Dauber, 1991), that stronger teacher involvement practices were positively related to higher reading achievement among children (Epstein, 1991), and that parents who recorded stronger beliefs in the school's efforts to involve them also believed strongly in the "goodness" of school (Dauber & Epstein, 1993). Similarly, Eccles and Harold (1994) reported that parents who held more positive views of the school's concern, accountability, and desire for parents' involvement were more involved in the school. Important in this sample of findings is the fact that the parents involved had children in grades ranging from elementary through middle school and represented varied socioeconomic circumstances.

Comer's work examining schools as communities (e.g., Anson et al., 1991; Comer & Haynes, 1991) has suggested similarly that school organizations oriented toward understanding students' families often experience success in increasing parents' involvement and in improving students' performance. These analyses have suggested that the results occur in large part because schools include parents in a variety of meaningful roles and, in so doing, increase communication and trust among parents and school staff -- an accomplishment particularly important for traditionally disenfranchised parent groups, including parents of color and low socioeconomic status (see also Cochran & Dean, 1991; Powell, 1991). The value of intentionally creating a climate of opportunities and demands for parent involvement in a school is also supported by role theory, described above. As group members (in this case, parents, school personnel, and students) communicate frequently and come to consensus on appropriate role expectations and behaviors, clarity and agreement on member roles is likely to increase all members' successful and satisfying performance of their own roles (see also Comer & Haynes, 1991). Indeed, Epstein and Dauber (1991) reported that schools where teachers and parents reported strong feelings about the importance of parental involvement were also the schools with stronger parent involvement programs and practices.

Overall, these varied strands of work suggest that a school climate of invitations to involvement influences parents' understanding of teachers' interest in parental help and support, parents' feelings of being needed and wanted in the educational process, and parents' knowledge about their children's schoolwork. Particularly given findings that many parents criticize home-school contacts as being empty (characterizing them, for example, as contrived, insubstantial, or awkward, mainly offering opportunities for teachers to talk and parents to listen; e.g., Harry, 1992; Lareau, 1987; Lightfoot, 1978, 1981) and want more
meaningful contacts with the schools (e.g., Eccles & Harold, 1994; Epstein, 1994; Leitch & Tangri, 1988; Moles, 1993), the general invitations and demands presented by schools seem potentially very influential in parents' decisions about involvement in their children's education.

As mentioned, parenting practices and parent involvement in schools vary across cultures and social classes. Parents from countries which differ in cultural orientations and family patterns from those traditionally valued in the U.S. -- e.g. vertical rather than horizontal approach to authority, group rather than individual orientation, need for structure as opposed to a perspective which is more tolerant of uncertainty, high context and contact vs. low, react differently to overtures by the school to become involved. In general, parents from non-mainstream U.S. cultures have had a more difficult time becoming meaningfully involved in their children's education. This is partially due to language and cultural differences between home and school. One of the important aspects of this study is its focus on parents from various cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

The present project sought to provide and assess high quality in-school activities for culturally diverse parents in the hope that their at-home parenting behaviors would increasingly be directed toward their children's education.

Research Question(s)

The project had one primary research question and a number of related sub-questions.

Primary: What type of teacher-initiated activities result in effective in-home techniques for parents of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CLD) students?

Secondary: How does quality involvement of CLD parents at school affect:

  a) Parent attitudes toward school?
  b) Parent awareness (e.g. knowledge) of school curriculum and instruction?
  c) Parent awareness of school life and culture (e.g. daily routines, rules, policies, extracurricular activities, among others)?

Methods

Site and Sample. The study was conducted at Glen Forest Elementary School in Fairfax County, Virginia. Glen Forest has a culturally diverse student population with students from 58 different countries who speak 23 different languages. A majority are on free or reduced lunch. Glen Forest has been designated as a "special needs" school, meaning that it receives additional resources from the county and its class sizes in grades K-2 are reduced. There are fifteen students in the first grade class which is the focus of this study. They consist of one English-speaking African American child and fourteen bilingual first or second-generation students. Their countries of origin include Bangladesh, Bolivia, El Salvador, Micronesia, Morocco, Paraguay, Pakistan and Sudan.
Data Collection. The primary form of data collection was two needs assessments questionnaires that were given to parents and students early in the fall (see Appendices I and II). The purpose of this data collection was to get a sense of parents' beliefs that s/he can help the child succeed in school. From this contextual information a set of subsequent activities were designed to enhance the general opportunities for involvement presented to parents.

(a) Parent Questionnaire. Between one-fifth to just over half of parents indicated involvement with the academic activities their children were asked to do in their homes. When asked how many children's books they had in their homes, 20% (parents of 3 children) indicated that they had 0-5, while another 60% (9 parents) said they had 5-25. Two responded that they did not enjoy reading, and two others said that they rarely read to their child. Another 53% (7) stated that they read with their child no more than once or twice a week. Parents of three children (20%) said that they did not regularly check to see if their child had homework, nor help with it.

The parents unanimously agreed that school was important to their child's future success, as was homework. Thirteen (83%) stated that they planned to be "very involved" in their child's first grade educational experience. All 15 parents responded that they felt "very comfortable" about visiting the school, yet little interest was shown in volunteering in the classroom (13%), tutoring or helping children at school (13%). There was somewhat greater enthusiasm for participating in field trips (40%) and other special events (47%). The one thing that nearly all (93%) agreed on was a willingness to come to school for student performances. This last result became the genesis of the evening activities conducted through the year.

(b) Student Questionnaire. The student questionnaire yielded similar responses to the same questions that had been administered to their parents. Two children (13%) said that they had no books at home, while another four (27%) noted they only had a "few." Eight of the 15 students (53%) stated that they read with a grown-up "hardly ever" or "just once in a while." Nine children (60%) responded that their parents never, or only occasionally, helped them with homework; eleven (73%) said that they did not have the basic supplies (paper, pencils, crayons, scissors, glue) needed to do their homework; and eight (53%) replied that they did not have a routine time and place for doing homework.

Outcomes

Based on the information gathered from parents and students, a plan was devised to encourage parents to become more involved in their children's education. One of the first issues to address with parents was the notion that the school both wanted them involved, but also believed they could make a meaningful contribution to their children's academic success. In an effort to have maximum effect on as many families as possible, the plan had several different components: It included school/home communication, assistance with homework and reading, and involving parents in the school. While the resulting improvements in student performance cannot all be attributed to the multifaceted approach to encouraging quality parental involvement, this plan clearly had a
beneficial effect on students' performance in the areas of homework and reading ability.

*Homework.* The number of students successfully completing homework and returning it to school in a timely fashion increased from 82% during the first quarter to 93% during the third (see Chart 1).

![Chart 1 – Homework Completed and Returned in a Timely Fashion](image)

*Reading Ability.* A second indicator of the effectiveness of the increased parental attention was the rapid and dramatic increase in students' reading ability. In September eight of the students (53%) entered first grade at the expected readiness level for reading, five (33%) were below the expected level, and one (7%) slightly exceeded expectations.¹ By December, four students (29%) met expectations, seven (50%) exceeded them and only three fell below expectations. By March the results were even

¹ One of the 15 students had an individualized education plan (IEP) and language arts instruction was provided by a resource teacher. This student consistently met or exceeded expectations of her IEP, but since data collection on her progress varied from that of her peers, she was not included in this portion of the study.
more dramatic -- four met reading expectations, two were below, and over half the class (8 students) were achieving above the expected level.

**Parent Feedback**

In order to determine which strategies used by the teacher provided the most help and support, parents rated the different components of the overall effort in a follow-up written questionnaire. Additionally, nine of the parents also took part in a focus group in March. In both the questionnaire and group interview parents were asked to comment on the helpfulness of the four aspects below.

1. **Communication** - newsletter, microphones, phone calls, portfolios
2. **Getting together** - Conferences, STAR nights, daytime activities, whole-school activities, PTA/parenting meetings
3. **Homework** - HW bags, packets

Additional questions during the focus group were:

- Now that you've been to the school for a number of activities, what are your reactions? What have you learned about the school and about helping your children succeed?
- Do you feel any different now toward the school than you did at the beginning of the school year? If so, how?
- What did you enjoy about the activities? How might they have been improved?
Parents generally responded positively to several of the features of the plan: the portfolio and the microphone-recorders. In terms of communication, three parents mentioned that they appreciated the portfolio (a collection of their children's work) because it demonstrated the students' progress clearly. The "microphones" were actually low-cost microphone-recorders in which the teachers and parents could exchange messages. A few of the parents commented that they thought the microphones were a good idea, but that it was difficult to keep changing batteries. Two of the parents suggested expanding communication channels to include e-mail, and a list was circulated with names and email addresses. The teacher also volunteered her home number and encouraged parents to call her at anytime.

All the parents were positive regarding the STAR night events. They enjoyed seeing their children perform and appreciated learning new ways to assist them at home. They all agreed that the homework bags given to their children were also helpful.

---

2 Due to their developing proficiency in English the parents' answers were not lengthy, and have not been reproduced here. In addition, because of the open-ended nature of the questions many were not able to respond at all.
In terms of helping their children with reading, all agreed that their children are now reading more at home. One parent mentioned that her child reads with his brother every night; another stated that they read together for at least 10 minutes every day (which is an improvement over the past); a third stated that her child now writes long sentences.

All the parents were extremely supportive of all the teacher's efforts throughout the year. One commented that she "did a good job….this has been a great program for my son…he had no preschool…couldn't write…but he learned from you." Another remarked that her child found the class difficult in the beginning, but after a while she "picked up speed" in her learning. Each of the parents thanked the teacher at the close of the focus group.

**Implications**

The study supported the literature by demonstrating that the quality of parent involvement rises when a number of significant opportunities are presented to parents and parents are convinced that they can make a difference. In this study, parents were incorporated into their children's schooling in more than a dozen ways, spanning the four categories listed above (communication, getting together, homework, and materials). Parents were provided with guidance on how to make their contributions meaningful, and they took advantage of it. The fact that there were noticeable improvements in homework completion rate and reading ability is evidence of the success of the project.

Perhaps the most important implication of this study, however, is its demonstration of how to meaningfully involve economically disadvantaged language minority parents in the schooling process. Both schools and parents are frequently frustrated in their attempt to work with each other, often due to cultural and linguistic differences. This study showed that with determination, creativity and support, this most important challenge can be met.

**References**


Families and schools in a pluralistic society (pp. 53-71). Albany: State Univ of NY Press.


