

# Parental Involvement in Schools: Who is Left Behind?

Sarah Millar

*Te Rāngai Ako me te Hauora - College of Education, Health and Human Development, University of Canterbury, New Zealand*

## Abstract

Parental involvement within schools has proven to be an effective mechanism for student achievement; however, full involvement of parents in schools is yet to be attained. This literature review investigates which parents are left behind within schools and offers conclusions as to why this might be. The types of parental involvement that occur within schools are considered. This is followed by an examination of the effects of parents' socioeconomic status for educational involvement and the involvement of minority parents. Family dynamics and how familial relationships affect parental involvement are also explored. Finally, strategies to achieve universal parental involvement are proposed. Overall, the literature review reveals that, while some parents are left behind more often than others, it is ultimately up to the efforts of the school to engage all parents equally in their child's education.

**Keywords:** *Parental, involvement, school, education, minority, socioeconomic, relationship*



Journal of Initial Teacher Inquiry by University of Canterbury is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

Permanent Link: <http://dx.doi.org/10.26021/10869>

## Introduction

The involvement of parents (or lack thereof) in schooling is key in determining children's educational experiences. Students whose parents are involved in their education show higher academic values, grade point averages, and determination to move forward into tertiary education, thus, responsibility for a child's education must begin with support from home (Turney & Kao, 2009; Camacho-Thompson, Gillen-O'Neil, Gonzales & Fuligni, 2016; Park & Holloway, 2013). Within Aotearoa New Zealand, family involvement is defined as *whānau* involvement, encompassing extended family members and friends who also play a role in a child's life (Mutch & Collins, 2012). A partnership between the school community and parents should be collaborative and non-hierarchical, in which educators and families interact to improve student educational outcomes (Soutullo, Smith-Bonahue, Sanders-Smith & Navia, 2016). This literature review seeks to explore which parents are excluded from schools and why, while providing solutions to increase involvement from parents of all backgrounds.

## Types of Parental Involvement

Parental involvement is a term that is often used freely within the realm of education; however, the meaning of parental involvement can be misinterpreted. There are various types of parental involvement that can be placed into two categories: home and school involvement. Turney and Kao (2009) see parental involvement as school involvement only, while Camacho-Thompson et al. (2016) argue that both home and school involvement are important for overall student achievement. School-based involvement has been identified as attending school programmes such as parent teacher association (PTA) meetings, open houses, volunteering at school, attending extracurricular activities, and communicating

with school personnel. Home-based involvement is typically identified as talking with children about school, helping them with school work, and taking children to educational places such as libraries and museums (Camacho-Thompson et al., 2016).

Parental involvement has been widely argued to be important for student achievement (Turney & Kao, 2009; Camacho-Thompson et al., 2016). However, Rogers, Hickey, Wiener, Heath and Noble (2018) argue that it is the type of involvement that is of the utmost importance for student achievement. Parental involvement does not always have positive effects on children's education, as parental control is a negative form of parental involvement. Parental control can be seen as the use of commands, punishment, nagging, and disapproval of their children's decisions, leading to a higher level of high school dropout. However, when parents act in supportive ways, such as providing praise and encouragement to their children, it can lead to higher levels of student motivation (Rogers et al., 2018) and, therefore, greater achievement. Similarly, Park and Holloway (2013) extend upon Rogers et al.'s (2018) argument by discussing the concept of 'academic socialisation', where parents discuss their expectations regarding grades and foster educational and vocational aspirations for their children, while working together to develop plans for the future in a supportive manner. While some parents may be involved in their child's education, when it becomes overly controlling, it can lead to negative consequences. Therefore, the specific type of parental involvement is a crucial factor, and support is the fundamental driver for successful parental involvement. Liu and White (2017) argue, however, the importance of understanding what type of involvement works best for different students. This is due to ethnic groups responding differently to the varied types of involvement. For example, while White students do not

necessarily respond well to authoritarian parenting or 'controlling parental behaviours,' this style positively correlated with Asian students' achievement (Liu & White, 2017).

From an Aotearoa perspective, parental involvement has always been a strong feature of our education system. In 1906, the 'home and school' association was formed, and today, similar associations continue to exist within the New Zealand Parent Teacher Association (NZPTA). These associations organise school-based parental involvement such as fundraising, open nights, and uniform sales (Mutch & Collins, 2012). Parental involvement in Aotearoa also includes home-based involvement because parents consider their most important contribution as offering support for and demonstrating interest in their children's education (Clinton & Hattie, 2013). Clinton and Hattie's (2013) work is important because it draws on a student's perception of their parent's or parents' involvement. It demonstrates that when parents talk to their children about teaching and learning, the students recognise their parents have high expectations for their learning and future, which leads to increased student motivation.

## Socioeconomic Status

While parental involvement is an important aspect of education, not only in Aotearoa, but globally, there are limitations for parents to become involved in their child's schooling. An array of literature argues that socioeconomic status (SES) is a determining factor for parental involvement within education (Turney & Kao, 2009; Camacho-Thompson et al., 2016; Sedibe & Fourie, 2017; Velsor & Orozco, 2007; Clinton & Hattie, 2013). The higher the SES of the family, the more involved parents are with their child's education. According to Turney and Kao (2009), this is because parental involvement is often dependent on resources and opportunities the parents have. Therefore, parents who have to work full-time have less opportunities to engage in their child's education. Sedibe and Fourie (2017) expand further on this argument stating that families with lower SES usually reside a greater distance from the school and, thus, their involvement is limited by the need to negotiate transportation. Furthermore, Camacho-Thompson et al. (2016) state that families who have financial pressures are often under a lot of stress, which leads to parents being less engaged in every aspect of their child's life, including education.

There is a strong correlation between low SES, and poor relationship between parent and child, which demonstrates why education may not be a priority for families with low SES. Park and Holloway (2013) state that, while higher SES leads to more parental-school involvement, lower SES results in more parental-home involvement. However, Park & Holloway (2013) do not discuss if this home involvement is of a supportive nature, which as stated above, is the most important type of parental involvement. Park and Holloway (2013) do state, however, that parents who are more involved at home (and have lower SES) are less likely to hold high educational expectations of their children. This suggests that perhaps the involvement at home from lower SES parents is more of a controlling nature, leading to the inevitability of strained relationships between students and their parents.

In Aotearoa, schools within lower SES communities claim that parents are less likely to talk to the school about their child's achievement (Clinton & Hattie, 2013). This creates a challenge for students who are not achieving well, as the interaction between parents and teachers would help to increase this achievement. Contrary to Park and Holloway (2013), Clinton and Hattie (2013) state that parents with low SES have very high expectations and aspirations for their children's education, and many want to know how to best assist their children to achieve well. Parents in low SES areas want to be involved with their children's education, but struggle to engage due to not understanding the language of the school, often this being because they had negative experiences in schools themselves (Clinton & Hattie, 2013). Given the research on both sides, it is important for education staff to not make negative assumptions about parental involvement (from a deficit perspective), and to work positively to ascertain which type of extra support students might need.

## Minority and Immigrant Parents

In addition to low SES families, minority parents are disadvantaged when it comes to being included in their child's education. For the purpose of this literature review, minority parents are defined as 'non-White' parents. Immigrant parents face a number of challenges being involved in their child's education (Turney & Kao, 2009; Park & Holloway, 2013; Soutullo et al., 2016; Mutch & Collins, 2016), one of the biggest challenges being language. Many immigrant families do not speak the native language of the school, and thus cannot be involved in their children's schooling, despite wanting to. Communication between the parents and the school is an important aspect of the partnership in education, however, when schools only attempt to communicate with immigrant parents in English, the partnership is heavily tainted (Turney & Kao, 2009). When schools make no effort to translate notices to be taken home by the students, it sends a clear message to immigrant families that some languages/people are valued more than others. This increases the already embedded power relations that occur in parent-teacher partnerships (Maclure & Walker, 2000), and makes it even more difficult for immigrant parents to become involved with the education of their children. Turney and Kao (2009) also discuss the strong correlation between immigrant parents and low SES. This suggests that the majority of immigrant parents are already disadvantaged when it comes to them being involvement in their child's education due to a low SES, before the barrier of language is even considered.

In addition to language, Soutullo et al. (2016) also discuss how cultural differences are a challenge for immigrant parents who have different perceptions of education than their native-born counterparts. For example, in Asian countries, it is generally accepted that the teacher's role in a child's life is to promote academic knowledge, while the parent's role is to build character. However, in a country such as Aotearoa, parents and other members of a community are seen as bodies of knowledge, and they are encouraged to engage with the affairs of the classroom (MacFarlane, 2004). Mutch and Collins (2012) also discuss cultural differences as a barrier for immigrant parental involvement, stating that immigrant parents are increasingly concerned with the amount of homework given. This shows that cultural differences can lead to tensions between schools and parents, further perpetuating

the lack of involvement of parents and the lack of a partnership between the two parties.

While Turney and Kao (2009), Soutullo et al. (2016), and Mutch and Collins (2012) discuss language and cultural differences as a factor contributing to the lack of involvement of minority parents, Liu and White (2017) argue that social capital is the ultimate factor. Immigrant parents lack social capital; they are usually socially challenged in the community because of a lack of social ties, which prohibits them from being involved in the community, such as the local school. This links back to language and cultural differences because, if immigrant parents experience culture shock, they are less likely to want to learn the native language, adopt cultural practices, or form connections with the new community (Lustig & Koester, 1996).

## Family Dynamics

Family dynamics also influence parental involvement in education. According to Malczyk and Lawson (2016), family dynamics at home has a greater influence on parental involvement in a child's education than SES of the household. Parental involvement increases as the number of parental figures in the household increases. Turney and Kao (2016) state that two parents in a household leads to more involvement, however, multi-generational households (that is, those with grandparents), have even more prospects for familial involvement. This relates back to Mutch and Collins (2012) who recognise that the wider whānau plays a role in any child's education. As children age, however, the involvement of parents' decreases significantly due to children becoming more autonomous and rejecting the help of their parents (Rogers et al., 2017). Rogers et al. (2017) do not, however, discuss why parents are less involved at the school level. Park and Holloway (2013) extend on Rogers et al.'s (2017) work by stating that parents become less involved as children grow up due to the curriculum becoming more advanced and parents not feeling confident to help their children with their work. Park and Holloway (2013) also discuss why parents become less involved within the school, citing the setting of high schools makes it challenging for parents to be involved, as high school students have multiple teachers, classrooms, and buildings to navigate every day.

Turney and Kao's (2016) research suggests that children with single-parent households have less involved parents in their education. The work carried out by Malczyk and Lawson (2016) reiterates this as it looks at single-parent households that are headed by a single mother. The relationship between the child and the single mother has a significant influence on academic achievement, and single mothers tend to have a stronger relationship with their daughters rather than their sons (Malczyk & Lawson, 2016). Malczyk and Lawson (2016) do not, however, look at the relationship between a single father and his children, or how the relationship between a single mother and her son could be strengthened. According to Rogers et al. (2017), a father's involvement has a greater influence on a child's educational engagement compared with a mother's involvement. Suizzo, Rackley, Robbins, Jackson, Rarick and McClain (2016) further expand on the influence of fathers in education stating that a father's warmth, particularly surrounding education, leads to academic self-efficacy and determination. Like Rogers et al. (2017), and Park and

Holloway (2013), Suizzo et al. (2016) discusses how a father's warmth decreases as the children get older, and thus a child's academic determination declines as they age. Therefore, while it is widely argued that a father's involvement is more important than a mother's involvement in academic achievement, all parental involvement declines as children age, leading to an overall decrease in academic achievement. If there are strong positive relationships between the parents (particularly the father) and the children, the parents are more likely to be involved in the education of their children, and if parents are involved then the relationships are likely to be stronger (Camacho-Thompson et al., 2016). Therefore, it is clear that family dynamics are important for parental involvement in schools, and while low SES parents and minority parents are left behind, if the relationships between the parents and children are strong, involvement in the child's education is more likely to occur, even for these minority groups.

## Solutions and Moving Forward

While it is clear that low SES and minority parents are left behind in regard to school involvement, there are strategies that can be adopted by schools which can enhance parental involvement for all. Most importantly, schools must recognise that there are an array of challenges that occur within the lives of many parents, and they should not make judgements or hold assumptions about families who cannot be involved in a child's education (Turney & Kao, 2009; Sedibe & Fourie, 2017; Park & Holloway, 2013; Soutullo et al., 2016; Velsor & Orozco, 2007). If assumptions are made about a student whose parents cannot be involved, then it is more likely that student will not succeed academically. Similarly, if judgements are made about uninvolved parents, it will push those parents further away from being involved in their child's education, perpetuating the cycle of parents not feeling welcome and teachers having prejudice views. While it is likely schools are going to make judgements and assumptions regarding a student, based on the amount of involvement their parents have in their education, Park and Holloway (2013) emphasise the importance of not generalising, as each family and culture are different. For example, while Latino parents consistently preach the importance of education to their children, they do not generally involve themselves within the school itself. Furthermore, White parents are usually involved in the school, but do not endorse the importance of education to their children as much as their Latino counterparts (Park & Holloway, 2013). Therefore, making assumptions about Latino parents would be unjust as evidence shows the Latino culture values education just as much as, if not more than, White parents. This relates to Soutullo et al. (2016) which discusses cultural differences and the different perceptions of education for various ethnic groups. Judgements should not be made against families who are not involved in their child's education, as the majority of the time, they have challenges which prevent them from doing so. Instead, schools should make conscious efforts to involve all parents.

Schools should make a conscious effort to involve traditionally excluded groups such as minority and low SES families. School outreach practices, such as keeping parents informed regularly about student progress and expectations, have been identified as being more associated with parental involvement than a parent's SES, marital status or education

(Park & Holloway, 2013). Furthermore, when high school teachers make an effort to inform parents about tertiary education, these efforts build confidence for parents and lead to greater home involvement, as parents have more confidence to encourage and guide their children into further education (Park & Holloway, 2013). A school's constant interaction with parents can enhance the social capital of parents, enabling them to form relationships with not only the teachers and the school, but also other community members, which would ultimately lead to increased parental involvement (Liu & White, 2017).

In addition to constant communication with parents, home visits have proven to be beneficial for building positive relationships between parents and teachers. Home visits minimise the power imbalance that occurs between parents and teachers, and helps overcome barriers related to low SES families such as transportation and time management (Velsor & Orozco, 2007). When schools make clear, deliberate efforts to involve parents, their SES becomes irrelevant, and involvement is more likely to occur. Although cultural differences, especially among minority families, may act as a barrier to parental involvement, Soutullo et al. (2016) encourage schools to capitalise on these cultural differences within the classroom. Parents of minority students bring cultural and linguistic expertise, lived experiences, and social and cultural resources, all of which have huge potential to improve the educational outcomes of not only their own children, but the vast majority of students as a whole, as well as creating greater equity in our educational system (Ishimaru, Torres, Salvador, Lott, Williams & Tran., 2016). Schools should celebrate the cultural diversity that minority families bring to the classroom and encourage this diversity. This would promote the beginnings of a partnership between the school and minority families, as minority families would feel valued, rather than excluded.

## Conclusion

While it is widely agreed that parental involvement is very important for student academic achievement, there are still certain parents who are left behind. Low SES and minority parents are traditionally disadvantaged and left out, however, the factors that contribute to their lack of involvement seem to disappear when schools put time and energy into engaging them within the school community. The equal partnership between parents and teachers will not be fully achieved until schools make a conscious effort to involve parents who are traditionally disadvantaged when it comes to school involvement. Due to the rather limited research for Aotearoa, further research investigating which parents are typically left behind within a New Zealand schooling context, would be beneficial. This research could look at a comparison between Pākehā and Māori parental involvement, to discover if there are disparities between the two groups. Furthermore, research into how to support schools to make connections with parents who are traditionally left behind in a school setting, would be useful in promoting parental involvement in schools.

## References

- Camacho-Thompson, D., Gillen-O'Neel, C., Gonzales, N., & Fuligni, A. (2016). Financial strain, major family life events, and parental academic involvement during adolescence. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 45(6), 1065-1074. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10964-016-0443-0>
- Clinton, J., & Hattie, J. (2013). New Zealand students' perceptions of parental involvement in learning and schooling. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, 33(3), 324-337. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02188791.2013.786679>
- Ishimaru, A., Torres, K., Salvador, J., Lott, J., Williams, D., & Tran, C. (2016). Reinforcing deficit, journeying toward equity. *American Educational Research Journal*, 53(4), 850-882. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3102/0002831216657178>
- Liu, Z., & White, M. (2017). Education outcomes of immigrant youth: The role of parental engagement. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 674(1), 27-58. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0002716217730009>
- Lustig, M., & Koester, J. (1996). *Intercultural competence: Interpersonal communication across cultures* (2nd ed., pp. 323 - 343). New York, NY: Harper Collins College Publishers.
- MacFarlane, A. (2004). Strategies for Teachers. In A. MacFarlane, *Kia hiwa ra! Listen to the culture. Maori students' plea to educators*. Wellington: NZCER.
- MaClure, M., & Walker, B. (2000). Disenchanted Evenings: The social organization of talk in parent-teacher consultations in UK Secondary Schools. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 21(1), 5-25. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01425690095135>
- Malczyk, B., & Lawson, H. (2017). Parental monitoring, the parent-child relationship and children's academic engagement in mother-headed single-parent families. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 73, 274-282. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2016.12.019>
- Mutch, C., & Collins, S. (2012). Partners in learning: Schools' engagement with parents, families, and communities in New Zealand. *School Community Journal*, 22(1), 167-187. Retrieved from: <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ974691.pdf>
- Park, S., & Holloway, S. (2013). No parent left behind: Predicting parental involvement in adolescents' education within a sociodemographically diverse population. *The Journal of Educational Research*, 106(2), 105-119. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00220671.2012.667012>
- Rogers, M., Hickey, A., Wiener, J., Heath, N., & Noble, R. (2018). Factor structure, reliability and validity of the parental support for learning scale: Adolescent short form (PSLS-AS). *Learning Environments Research*. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10984-018-9262-4>
- Sedibe, M., & Fourie, J. (2018). Exploring opportunities and challenges in parent-school partnerships in special needs schools in the Gauteng province, South Africa. *Interchange*. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10780-018-9334-5>
- Soutullo, O., Smith-Bonahue, T., Sanders-Smith, S., & Navia, L. (2016). Discouraging partnerships? Teachers' perspectives on immigration-related barriers to family-school collaboration. *School Psychology Quarterly*, 31(2), 226-240. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/spq0000148>
- Suizzo, M., Rackley, K., Robbins, P., Jackson, K., Rarick, J., & McClain, S. (2016). The unique effects of fathers' warmth on adolescents' positive beliefs and behaviors: Pathways to resilience in low-income Families. *Sex Roles*, 77(1-2), 46-58. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s11199-016-0696-9>
- Turney, K., & Kao, G. (2009). Barriers to school involvement: Are immigrant parents disadvantaged? *The Journal of Educational Research*, 102(4), 257-271. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3200/joer.102.4.257-271>
- Velsor, P., & Orozco, G. (2007). Involving low-income parents in the schools: Communitycentric strategies for school counselors. *Professional School Counseling*, 11(1), 17-24. Retrieved from: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42732734>