

Barriers to parental involvement in their children's education

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Abstract

While parental involvement in students' education has long been known to be effective and is encouraged by both the literature and policy, consistent parental involvement has not yet been achieved. This review investigates potential barriers to parental involvement, including those for minority and disabled parents, and offers suggestions to overcome these barriers. Moreover, differences between rhetoric and the reality of parental involvement, including contradictions at the political level, are challenges that are discussed. Finally, the different types of parental involvement (home-based and school-based) are evaluated for their effectiveness on student achievement.

Keywords: *Parental Involvement, Parent-school Relationships, Minority parents, Parents with Disabilities*



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Introduction

Parental involvement in their children's education has long been noted for its effectiveness in the child's academic achievement (Fan & Chen, 2001; Hill & Taylor, 2004; Jeynes, 2003, 2005; Pomerantz, Grolnick, & Price, 2005) (although the extent to which involvement helps is debatable (Pomerantz, 2007). Generally parental involvement is broken down into two categories: school-based involvement (e.g. parent-teacher conferences and volunteering at the school) and home-based involvement (e.g. homework help and engaging their children in intellectual activities). Benefits go beyond students' academic achievement, including improved teacher-parent relationships, attendance, parental confidence and parental interest in their own education (Pomerantz, 2007; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). However, not all parents are equally involved in their child's schooling, and this review seeks to clarify some of the barriers to parental involvement in their child's education.

Parental Involvement

Mutch and Collins (2012) reviewed barriers to parental involvement in New Zealand based on six key factors found by the Education Review Office external evaluation of over two-hundred schools (Ministry of Education, 2006). They claim that historically parental involvement is well entrenched in the New Zealand schooling system, but that an increasing number of immigrants, changes in family structure, impacts of educational,

social and economic reforms, and changes in technology have all influenced parental involvement. There is a general commitment in New Zealand to involving whānau in partnerships with schools, however there are still gaps in having consistent involvement of families in education. It is not just how the school went about engaging parents, but also the spirit in which that engagement was sought that led to successful engagement, including shared values and mutual respect, collaborative approaches and effective communication. Six factors were found to influence the contributions of parents to the school: Vision and commitment from school leaders, time and energy invested in building relationships, the clear expectation that partnership was in the child's best interests, a positive school culture including a commitment to inclusiveness of diversity, networking with community groups, and effective communication strategies. Where these partnerships were fostered and working well, the report claims there were many benefits to students, including maximised learning time, and a positive atmosphere to the school. However, other than suggesting that school policy needs to reflect the desire to work within these key factors, the report does not suggest other methods of breaking down barriers to parental involvement.

Involvement of Minority Parents

Yanghee Kim (2009) investigated the lack of involvement of minority parents in their children's schooling. Often viewed as being less interested in their children's education, research

suggested that home-based involvement was no less for minority families than for other families, but that it was in the area of school-based involvement that participation was lacking. Individual variables were identified as contributing to why minority parents do not volunteer at their children's schools, including language barriers, differences in child-rearing practices, and lack of social networks. However, Kim argues that these are all individual barriers and that it is the school system that creates a barrier for minority parents to become involved in schooling. Attitudes of the school are often a barrier, with Kim suggesting that negative attitudes towards the capacity of minority parents, a lack of positive communication, a lack of diversity of parental involvement programs and school policies and leadership all play a role in influencing the participation of minority parents. While individual barriers, such as language, definitely influence parental involvement, these barriers are time-consuming to break down and removing school barriers to parental involvement are more within the realm of what is achievable for the schools. The biggest change suggested by Kim is that of school policy, emphasising family involvement in the school and administrative support for teachers to implement parental involvement.

Involvement for Disabled Parents

Barriers also exist for parents with mental and/or physical disabilities. Stalker, Brunner, Maguire, and Mitchell (2009) conducted a study of 24 parents with disabilities in Britain, chronicling their experiences and both barriers and positive actions by their children's schools to involve them in their children's education.

Perceptions of disabled parents were found to be the greatest barrier to involvement in their children's education. Disabled parents involved in the study said they were often perceived as lacking parenting skills and often not consulted about policies or services, and that schools often did not see it as their duty to involve disabled parents. While physical accessibility was an issue for some parents, the overwhelming majority spoke of the perceptions of the school and its staff as being the biggest barrier. The investigation concluded that there was an "urgent need for local authorities to implement disability equality training, including information about anti-discrimination legislation" in schools for all staff. Knowledge of a parent's disability was at the forefront of the solution, but no conclusion was made as to the best method of obtaining such information or how many within the school should or needed to know. Suggestion was also made for parents to inform the schools of support they would require in order to be involved in their child's schooling (eg. accessibility, Braille books sent home alongside reading books), and parents appreciated a flexible, pro-active approach on the schools part. The parents studied indicated that they were more likely to disclose their disability if doing so would have a positive impact on their child's education.

School Policy vs Reality

Many of the other articles investigated determined that school policy is at the forefront of what needs to change in order to remove barriers to parental involvement but, as Hornby and Lafaele (2011) determine in their article, there is considerable variation between rhetoric and reality in parental involvement. Simply changing policy is unlikely to involve more parents in schools unless those policy changes are backed up with action.

The gap between rhetoric and reality is due to factors at the parent and family, child, parent-teacher, and societal levels acting as barriers. Individual parent and family factors include parents' beliefs about parental involvement; if parents believe their only responsibility is to get their child to school, they are unlikely to ever become involved in their child's education. Similarly, if parents doubt their ability to help children, for example due to low-levels of parental education, they are also unlikely to involve themselves in the school community. Parents need to feel that their involvement is valued by schools, and therefore prefer to be invited to help rather than volunteer. More practical considerations such as parents who work full time or have large families may find time is a barrier to their involvement in the school community. Class, ethnicity and gender also can act as barriers, with white middle class values of many schools ignoring diversity. Schooling is also often considered a 'mother's world'.

As children age, involvement of parents tends to decline. This is in part due to children finding their independence and being less interested in having their parents involved in their lives, however at older ages children still desire their parents to be involved in things such as homework. Children who struggle with school are more likely to have their parents involved in their education as this is often sought by the school. Similarly, students who are doing well at school are likely to have more involved parents as their involvement is a pleasure. Conversely, those with children with behavioural challenges are less likely to be involved.

Common goals and agendas between teachers and parents are more likely to result in parental involvement. However schools are more likely to be focused on parents as a method of reducing costs and addressing cultural disadvantage, while parents are more often focused on improving their children's performance. Attitudes to the relationship between education and schooling also play a part, where parents who believe most of their child's education comes from schooling being less likely to be involved in their child's education.

Historical attitudes to parental involvement, where it consisted mostly of fundraising activities, also form a barrier. At a political level contradicting information, such as a push for parental involvement while policy leans towards competition rather than collaboration, can hinder parental involvement. With little or no funding given to schools for the development of parental involvement, the political push for parental involvement appears to be nothing more than talk.

Effectiveness of Parental Involvement

Pomerantz and Moorman (2007) investigated the type of parental involvement that was effective in students' education. While they acknowledge that educational policy has a key goal for increasing parental involvement, they focused on how effective parental involvement was in education. While Pomerantz and Moorman claim that school-based parental involvement is shown to have a positive effect on student achievement academically and often foreshadowed students achievements later in life, home-based parental involvement was a different matter. While indirect parental involvement at home (e.g. reading with their children) also had a positive effect, the outcome of parental involvement at home directly related to school based activities, such as homework, was less clear. Several studies actually concluded the more parents were involved in their children's homework, the less well students were performing at school. However one study showed that

once the children's performance was monitored, their level of achievement increased with persistent homework help. Other studies determined that there was no added benefit of parents helping with homework. That the usefulness of parental help in the home with school based activities is doubtful is of concern, as this is where the majority of parents are involved in their children's education, and warrants future investigation.

Conclusion

Overall, the articles reviewed agreed that school-based parental involvement in children's education had a generally positive outcome for student achievement. However, while most indicated that it was school policy that needed to change in order to involve more parents, Hornby and Lafaele (2011) stress that school policy means nothing unless it is backed up by action on the school's part to include parents and make them feel that their contributions are worthwhile.

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