

Educators' Notebook

Reviews of Research of Interest to Educators

Parent Involvement

Ben Levin
University of Manitoba

This issue of the Notebook is drawn from an extensive review of research prepared for the British Department for Education and Skills. The full report is:

DesForges, C. & Abouchaar, A. (2003). The Impact Of Parental Involvement, Parental Support And Family Education On Pupil Achievement And Adjustment: A Review Of Literature. It is available at www.dfes.gov.uk/research as RB433 (summary version) and RR433 (full report).

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Parent Involvement

Introduction

Educators recognize that the active support of and participation by parents in their children's learning is a vital element in students' success. Attempts to enhance parental involvement in education occupy governments, administrators, educators and parents' organizations across North America, Australasia, and Europe. It is widely believed that parents should play a role not only in the promotion of their own children's achievements but more broadly in school improvement and the democratization of school governance.

A growing body of research has addressed various aspects of parent involvement such as how widespread such involvement is and what forms it takes, what factors promote or inhibit parental involvement, and the steps that schools can take to promote effective parental involvement.

What Involvement Matters Most?

Parental involvement can mean many different things, from good parenting in the home – such as providing a secure environment with intellectual stimulation and support for education – to ongoing contact with schools to share information to active participation in school governance (Epstein, 2001). Of all these, it is the 'at-home' relationships and modeling of high aspirations by parents that are most important. In essence parenting has its influence indirectly through shaping the child's self concept as a learner and through setting high aspirations. Indeed, the research consistently shows that what parents do with their children at home is more important to their achievement than parents' social class or level of education. It would seem that if overall levels of parent involvement practices could be raised to the

best levels, very significant advances in school achievement might reasonably be expected. This inference from research cannot be said too often.

Parent involvement in the form of 'at-home good parenting' has a significant positive effect on children's achievement and adjustment even after all other factors shaping attainment have been taken out of the equation. Other forms of parental involvement do not appear to contribute to the scale of the impact of 'at-home' parenting. In the primary age range the impact caused by different levels of parental involvement is much bigger than differences associated with variations in the quality of schools. For older students, parent involvement continues to have a significant effect on graduation rates and educational aspirations. The scale of the impact is evident across all social classes and all ethnic groups. There are however, important differences across ethnic groups in the specific ways in which parents model values and support their children.

What Shapes Parent Involvement?

Differences among parents in their level of involvement are associated with social class, poverty, health, and also with parental perception of their role and their levels of confidence in fulfilling it. Some parents feel put down by schools and teachers. Parent involvement tends to diminish as the child gets older but this is not inevitable. With younger children, direct help with school skills is important. With older students, activities that promote independence and autonomy more generally become more relevant. Parent involvement is strongly positively influenced by the child's level of attainment: the higher the level of attainment, the more parents get involved, so schools may need to make particular efforts to work

closely with parents of children who are struggling.

An important but insufficiently recognized element is that children at all ages play an important role in mediating parent-school relationships (Coleman & Collinge, 1998). Students may discourage and obstruct their parents' involvement or they may promote it. Students see themselves as autonomous and with a right to some privacy. They do not always want or need parental involvement. Support for independent learning by students is an important element in building strong school-family ties. This role is rarely recognised.

What Can Schools Do?

Parents' capacity to be involved will be enhanced or limited by the barriers or opportunities afforded by schools and teachers. The parent/teacher interface is a critical meeting ground for mutual support and understanding or for mutual distrust. Some key helpful features would include frequent communication to the home, accessible material covering the things parents want to know, and consultations that are flexible and likely to maximize attendance (www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/parentalinvolvement).

Most efforts in schools to increase parent involvement are small-scale and not well connected to the core work of the school. They depend on volunteers or on special funding, both of which often disappear after a time. More comprehensive strategies would need to be built into school's overall planning, connected to teaching and learning, and also be connected to appropriate resources and follow-up. They would need to take into account the realities of parents' lives – such as the impact of poverty, illness or substance abuse - as well as the effect of barriers created, even inadvertently, by schools – for example the fears of some parents based on their own lack of success in

schooling. Evaluation of current activity in direct linkages between parents and schools suggests that all school initiatives lack some of these element and most lack most of them.

In addition to changing school practices, interventions to promote parental involvement also include programs ranging from parent training programs through initiatives to enhance home-school links and programs of family and community education. Evaluations of these activities reveal that there is an increase in demand for such support. High levels of creativity and commitment are evident amongst providers and participants express high levels of appreciation. Programs are becoming more effective in engaging 'hard to reach' parents including those in extreme poverty, those deemed depressed, and those with negative attitudes to schools.

The available research on the results of these interventions is weak. The evidence is that current interventions, while promising, have yet to deliver convincingly the achievement bonus that might be expected. This is not to say that they do not work. It does raise the questions of whether current activity is getting a good return on the extensive effort and to what degree current provision is tapping the vast potential revealed in the basic research.

Conclusion

We seem to know as much in principle about parental involvement and its impact on pupil achievement as Newton knew about the physics of motion in the 17th Century but it took another 300 years in physics to work out all the applications. What we seem to lack is the 'engineering' science that helps us put our knowledge into practice. We must not wait hundreds of years to promote stellar advances in pupils' achievement. We need urgently to learn how to apply the knowledge we already have in the field.

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This is a brief review of a complex body of educational research. Since no brief review can capture a full body of research, readers are urged to consult the references which have been cited. The views expressed in this notebook are those of the author. The sponsors welcome your comments on this issue and your suggestions for future issues of Educators' Notebook.