Parental involvement: beyond demographics

Stelios N. Georgiou

University of Cyprus,
Nicosia, Cyprus

The aim of this paper is to discuss the definition and the parameters of parental involvement. It looks at the psychological aspect of the term (i.e. from the point of view of the individual parent) while it recognizes the importance of the sociological factors that contribute to its development (the teachers' resistance, the school climate, the societal demands and expectations). The paper tries to answer questions such as: what is involvement, who gets involved and why, how can involvement be encouraged? The main argument of this paper, based on empirical evidence, is that demographic characteristics (gender, educational level, socio-economic status) could facilitate or hinder involvement, but they are not the only ones. Beliefs and attitudes could also play either role. This is hopeful because, unlike demographics, beliefs are changeable. Intervention programs that aim at the strengthening of parental involvement could take advantage of existing knowledge on attitude change.

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After about two decades of research, the general conclusion regarding parental involvement seems to be that it helps the three "partners", that is the parent the teacher and especially the child, while it harms none. As Redding (2006) points out, "there is substantial evidence that family engagement in children's learning is beneficial" (p. 149).

Several worldwide political, historical and socio-economic changes have increased the awareness concerning the relationship between home and school and particularly the involvement of parents in their children's education. The stimulus for this increased interest has its roots in the education reform, the democratisation of the school, the accountability movement, the move to decentralisation and the question about the responsibility of the child's education (Davies and Johnson, 1996). Consequently, educational and psychological research on the parameters and the outcomes of parental involvement has become very popular.

Correspondence concerning this article should be adresses to Stelios Georgiou, e-mail: stege@ucy.ac.cy

What is parental involvement?

Even though the term was established as a special title in the *Psychological Abstracts* as recently as 1982, a vast amount of papers on parental involvement have been published. Interestingly, this rigorous research activity has not produce a clear picture of either the concept itself or its effects on other important variables such as school achievement. Parental involvement has been defined across studies as representing many different behaviours and practices at home or at school, including parental aspirations, expectations, attitudes and beliefs regarding child's education (Hong and Ho 2005).

Many researchers and theorists pointed out that the operational use of parental involvement has been somewhat vague and at times inconsistent, despite the intuitive meaning of the concept (Christenson, Rounds & Gorney, 1992; Englund et al., 2004; Fan & Chen, 2001; Georgiou, 1997; Hong and Ho, 2005). According to Brito & Waller, (1994) parent involvement is a term that can include many different activities. It can range from an impersonal visit to school once a year, to frequent parent-teacher consultations to active school governorship. It can refer either to parental expectations (Hess et al, 1984) or to the ways parents help their children develop positive attitudes (Bloom, 1984) or to homework supervision (Keith et al, 1986).

Regardless of these difficulties in operationally defining the term, most researchers would agree with the typology suggested by Epstein, Coates, Salinas, Sanders & Simon, (1997) according to which parental involvement has five dimensions: Parenting, helping with homework, communicating with the school, volunteering at school and participating in school decision making.

The focus on parental involvement has its roots in research pointing out the positive correlation it has with children's school achievement (Englund et al., 2004). Indeed, a substantial body of literature documents the existence of such a relationship (Christenson, Rounds & Gorney, 1992; Epstein, 1992; Izzo et al., 1999; Keith et al., 1998). Kim's (2002) research findings indicate that parental involvement makes a positive contribution to children's educational achievement. Epstein (1992) argues that "students at all grade levels do better academic work and have more positive school attitudes, higher aspirations, and other positive behaviors if they have parents who are aware, knowledgeable, encouraging, and involved" (p.1141). According to Keith et al (1998) the effects of parental participation are long lasting and involvement builds a foundation for future success. Fan's (2001) study showed that parental involvement factors have a longitudinal effect on student's academic growth. Specifically, he found that parents' aspirations regarding their children's educational attainment and communication about school activities and studies have a positive effect on children's academic growth. Similarly, Hong and Ho (2005) report that parental involvement factors of communication and parental aspiration had consistent direct effects for both initial achievement status and subsequent academic growth.

Other studies appear more sceptical regarding this connection. Fan & Chen (2001) conducted a meta-analysis in order to synthesize the quantitative literature about the relationship between parental involvement and students' academic achievement and reported that research findings in this area have been somewhat inconsistent. According to them the chaotic state in the definition of the construct of parental involvement makes it difficult to draw any general conclusion across the various studies and it may also have contributed to the inconsistency of findings in this area. In fact, investigators refer to and describe only one or some aspects or dimensions of the construct of parental involvement. Additionally, researchers use different methods to measure parental involvement (Christenson, Rounds & Gorney, 1992). This may have also contributed to the inconsistent research findings.

Who gets involved?

The literature on the predictors of parental involvement has emphasized the role of demographic factors. Grolnick et al (1997) found that family SES was a strong predictor of parental involvement. Many researchers reported that parents' education is related to parental involvement (Davis-Kean, 2005; Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994; Pena, 2000). Davis-Kean's (2005) research findings suggest that the amount of schooling that parents receive has an effect on how they structure their home environment and how they interact with their children to promote academic achievement. Finders & Lewis (1994) list a variety of reasons that function as obstacles to involvement (difficulty in getting permission from work, cultural differences with the teachers, psychological barriers due to personal academic failures), which are related to the socio-economic status and the educational level of the particular parent. Another demographic factor associated with parental involvement is parent's gender. Grolnick and Slowiaczek (1994) found that mothers were more involved than fathers on each of the three aspects of parental involvement in children's schooling: behaviour, cognitive-intellectual, and personal.

A few studies go beyond the demographics and examine factors such as parental achievement attributions (Georgiou, 1999) and other attitudinal variables as predictors of parental involvement. Grolnick et al (1997) point out that when parents consider themselves as efficacious and when they view their role as that of the teacher, they are more likely to get involved in their children's schooling. That is, when parents believe that they have a role in their children's learning process, they may be more likely to get involved. According to Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler and Brissie (1992) parents who believe that they are able to "make a difference" are more likely to plan activities and to participate in events that require their active involvement. In other words, parents' involvement in their children's educational process is dependent in part on their beliefs and thoughts about themselves as parents and their beliefs concerning their role in their children's learning (Georgiou & Tourva, 2007).

Educational psychologists, teachers and other professionals who design and implement intervention programs at schools and communities aiming at increasing parental participation in their children's educational process could take into consideration the findings of studies such as the above, that parents who believe that their involvement matters will find ways to get involved.

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