Reading between the lines: exploring the assumptions and implications of parental involvement

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Parental involvement in the Northern American literature has been portrayed as the newly discovered way of improving school effectiveness and academic performance. However the cultural assumptions behind ubiquitous calls for parental involvement have been left largely unexplored. Critics of current notions of "parental involvement" argue that the term itself has been poorly defined in the literature and that it has often been described as an aspired ideal whose demands on the parents and the implications for the nature of home-school relations remain un-scrutinized. This paper seeks to explore existing literature on parental involvement though a cultural lens and draw on theoretical arguments that problematize the assumptions behind the discourse and practice of "parental involvement" or "home-school partnership". The discussion focuses particularly on the implications that culturally- and class-specific assumptions about parental involvement may have for minority and immigrant families who run the risk of becoming marginalized while being held responsible for getting "involved" (de Carvalho, 2001).

Introduction

Parental involvement, mainly in the western world, has increasingly been gaining ground during the last 50 years (Hepworth Berger, 1991) as a method to increase student achievement. This relationship between family and school has seen many phases and faces through time with parents transgressing from spectators to co-teachers in their children's schooling. Models of home-school partnership differentiating between parental involvement and participation (see Symeou, 2001) and among various levels within each (see Sheldon, & Epstein, 2002) have come to axiologically distinguish between ways of involvement. Through a process of hierarchization parental support for children's education at the level of preparation of clean clothes, food, and arrangements to attend mandatory schooling has been put to the very bottom of the involvement scale and has often been regarded as minimal and insufficient in comparison to "higher" or "more desirable" ways of involvement, more likely to be encountered among middle- or upper middle-class families.

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As a result, demands for parent involvement have often been left unscrutinized with regards to the cultural assumptions they hold, the advantage they provide to particular social groups, and the high demands they place on socially vulnerable groups such as immigrants and minorities. The aim of this discussion is to critically examine such assumptions and build on arguments that problematize the notion of universal parental involvement so as to increase awareness about its culturally specific nature and about the negative consequences it may have on the inclusion of socially vulnerable groups into mainstream schooling and the subsequent democratization of public education (see de Carvalho, 2001).

The discussion is divided into three main sections: the first provides a brief clarification of the various terms relevant to the discourse of parental involvement; the second section critically examines the implications and the negative effects that particular policies for the promotion of parental involvement may have for socially vulnerable groups; and the third and final part offers suggestions for the amelioration of the marginalization of socially vulnerable groups with regards to home-school relations.

Framing parental involvement

The effort in this first part of the discussion centres on defining and framing the context of parental involvement with regards to its forms and aims as these have been presented in the literature.

According to Hepworth Berger (1991), originally, "…the kindergarten movement, early childhood education, and parent involvement in schools were started by middle-class parents who believed in the natural goodness of a child, [but] they became avenues for acculturating lower-class immigrant families into the mainstream culture of the United States" (p. 212). More recently the idea of partnership and parental involvement at home and in the classroom is promoted as one that can benefit the child's education (Kelley-Laine, 1998; Sheldon, & Epstein, 2002). However, as the 1998 report of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) shows, countries may wish to increase parental involvement for a number of reasons that may or may not be directly related to child achievement.

These include: democracy in countries where parental involvement is perceived to be a right; accountability in market-oriented countries; consumer choice in contexts where parents as consumers may choose their children's schools; rise in achievement standards through the improvement of home-school relations; equalization of social resources by showing parents how to best support their children's education; addressing social problems, such as teen drug and alcohol use through the cooperation of school and family; gaining resources from parents who can not only be fundraisers but also providers of human resources through voluntary work; improvement of student achievement; provision of parental education on parenting techniques or the curriculum; communication with the home; influence on the curriculum or the school by families (especially on cultural matters); support for the school through fundraising; and support from the school (Kelley-Laine, 1998).

Parent academic involvement is commonly defined as "parents' work with schools and with their children to benefit the children's educational outcomes and future success" (Hill, Castellino, Lansford, Nowlin, Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 2004, p. 1491).

In a review of the literature on parental involvement and student motivation, Gonzalez-DeHass, Williams and Holbein (2005) report that parental involvement was measured as:

participating in parent-teacher conferences, and/or interactions, participating in school activities, and/or functions, engaging in activities at home including but not limited to homework, engaging in students' extracurricular activities, assisting in the selection of student's courses, keeping abreast of student's academic progress, reaction to student's academic grades, imparting parental values (attitudes about the importance of effort and academic success), or the level of parental control and/or autonomy support offered in the home environment (p. 108)

Although frequently used interchangeably, parental involvement and parental participation are not synonymous terms. Parental involvement refers to the kind of involvement in school matters whose degree and format is defined by school personnel (Symeou, 2001). This usually means conceptualizing involvement in more individualistic terms through volunteer work and attendance in school events for the benefit of a parent's child. Parental participation refers to a more collectivist approach to home-school relationship in situating the latter as a relationship of power-sharing characterized by clearly defined rights and responsibilities for each part and framed by a policy that allows full parental participation in the decision-making process, targeting the welfare of the entire school and student body rather than that of the individual child (ibid.).

Sheldon and Epstein (2002) identify six types of family and community involvement which the schools can encourage through the design of appropriate activities: Type 1 involves parenting or helping all families establish home environments supportive of children's educational careers; Type 2 concerns establishing communication between school and the home; Type 3 has to do with getting families to help the school and support students through volunteer work or other forms of organized action; Type 4 involves showing parents how to help their children with homework; Type 5 involves the inclusion of parents in the decision-making process and the development of parent leadership; and finally type 6 includes the collaboration with the community or the integration of community resources and services to support schools, students, and families.

Re-thinking parental involvement

Moving on to a more critical examination of practices and policies for parental involvement, the second part of the discussion focuses on the critiques that have been presented in the literature regarding the effects that such practices and policies have had on the participation of minority groups in their children's education.

The purpose of such an analysis is to show that current calls for parental involvement have failed to realize what they set out to accomplish in the first place: the democratization of the educational process (de Carvalho, 2001). The reader should bear in mind that for the purposes of the discussion that follows the terms "parental involvement" and "parental participation" will be used interchangeably.

Despite the wide publicity parent involvement has gained among policymakers, educators, and education theorists, there has been little scrutiny with regards to the implications it has for socially vulnerable groups (De Carvalho, 2000). Authors who appear to be more hesitant as to its effectiveness and extensive implementation point to the inconsistent empirical evidence regarding its effects on student achievement. Drummond and Stipek (2003) argue that while some studies have shown a positive association between parents' involvement at school and children's achievement, it is unclear whether parent involvement may cause higher student achievement or whether the high academic performance makes involvement easier and more pleasant for parents. In other studies, on the other hand, parents appeared to be more involved when their children were achieving poorly, suggesting that they may intervene more when their children are not doing well (ibid.).

Critiques of parental involvement practices have also focused on their culturally specific nature which hinders participation for socially vulnerable groups such as immigrants and minorities. For instance, parental participation in the U.S. has been found to be lower for minority parents than for Anglo parents and to be also related to parent's income and educational level (Marschall, 2006). The 2002-03 report on Parent and Family Involvement in Education, also in the United States, showed that the percentage of students whose parents had attended a general school meeting was higher in households where parents had completed higher levels of education (Vaden-Kieman, & McManus, 2006).

Along similar lines Griffith (1996) reports lower participation in school activities, including classroom volunteerism, in families who have an ethnic minority background (e.g. Hispanic, African American and Asian American), low socioeconomic status (low educational, income and/or occupational level), and special child or circumstance (having children in special education classes or in English-as-a-Second-Language programs) (cited in Porter DeCusati, & Johnson, 2004). Especially ethnic minority and lower SES adolescents appear to be at increased risk for lower academic performance, completing fewer years of schooling, and lower career aspirations.

The influence of demographic factors may be indirect through their effect on parent academic involvement (Hill et al, 2004) as at-risk parents may exhibit fear, aggressiveness, or apprehension towards their child's school or education in general (Plevyak, 2003). Recently, there has been a push for greater parent involvement and greater collaboration between families and schools based on the assumption that goals regarding students' achievement are most effectively met through ecological models of cooperation which support connections among individuals and organizations (Wasonga, Christman, & Kilmer, 2003).

However, parents' ability to be true collaborators with their children's teachers and school is not uniform across ethnicity and socioeconomic status. Parents from higher SES backgrounds are more likely to see themselves as collaborators to their children's teachers and as having rights entitling their involvement whereas parents from lower SES backgrounds often encounter socioeconomic difficulties in participating (Hill et al, 2004). In specific, factors involved in lower parental participation include "...cultural differences, fear of authority-based institutions, parental illiteracy, family problems, negative education experiences, job-related issues, economic conditions, health, living arrangements, and lack of resources needed for participation" (Plevyak, 2003, p. 32).

Nonetheless, these barriers do not function similarly across contexts. Transportation to the school and neighborhood safety might be important factors in one community, whereas language and cultural differences may loom bigger in another, which suggests that schools need to be aware of what impedes parent involvement in their own local context (Drummond, & Stipek, 2003).

Additionally parental involvement does not appear to have the same effects across SES and ethnicity. Across the latter, it is more strongly related to achievement for African Americans than for European Americans.

Among families with lower parental education, parental involvement appears to increase adolescents' educational and career aspirations but seems to do little regarding their school behavior or academic performance as parents from lower SES backgrounds may feel uncomfortable or incapable of helping their children with schoolwork.

On the contrary, in families with higher parental education, parental involvement was first associated with achievement and later with aspirations through improving school behavior (Hill et al, 2004). Interestingly, in a review of the literature concerning parent involvement and student motivation, Gonzalez- DeHass and her colleagues (2005) note that students' perceptions of their parents' values about learning and achievement have the strongest relationship with both motivation and competence. This finding, the authors maintain, suggests that the most overt displays of parental involvement, which are often encouraged by teachers, such as participating in Open houses and volunteering, may not always be the most effective type of involvement.

Furthermore, phrases such as "Parental involvement communicates to children how important they are to their parents" and "Parents who attend parent-teacher conferences, open houses, or other school activities show how important their children are to them" (Gonzalez- DeHass et al, 2005, p. 119) convey problematic messages about parents who are unable to participate in their children's education in these ways (ibid.), even though they may be thought to be value-free. Educators in Lareau's and McNamara Horvat's (1999) study on parent involvement in third-grade children believed that their calls for parental involvement were neutral, technically efficient, and designed to promote higher levels of achievement. In reality, however, teachers chose and accepted specific behaviors from a range of potential socioemotional styles.

As a result, some groups are more likely to comply with educational policies on parental participation than are others because of differential social resources. When the parents' cultural and social resources facilitate their compliance with schools' demands, these then become a form of social capital which has been reported to include "parents' large vocabularies, sense of entitlement to interact with teachers as equals, time, transportation, and child care arrangements to attend school events during the school day" (Lareau, & McNamara Horvat, 1999, p. 42).

More specifically, in Lareau's and Shumar's (1996) study, working-class parents (who were paid by the hour) were generally unable to change their schedule to attend school events. Among lower class parents who did not have the constraints of work, other barriers such as limited income, lack of transportation, and child care burdens made their presence at the school difficult. Teachers in this study, however, did not consider such differences in social resources. Instead teachers perceived parental attendance of school events to be an indication of the parents' level of concern (ibid.).

As shown by Drummond and Stipek (2003), however, parental involvement among low-income parents is not a matter of their not valuing education-a common assumption among teachers (De Castro-Ambrosetti, & Cho, 2006; Joshi, Eberly, & Konzal, 2005). Rather what may be at issue here are cultural differences among parents in the enactment of their beliefs about the value of education. For example, even though most low-income parents in Drummond's and Stipek's (2003) study valued involvement in their children's learning, parents who perceived their children's achievement to be lower rated the importance of helping them higher for reading but not for math.

Findings such as the above point to the need to not underestimate minority parents' commitment to education, as well as to the need to broaden our conception of involvement and examine the assumptions behind particular demands or practices (Porter DeCusati, & Johnson, 2004). Consider for instance a common parent involvement practice-classroom volunteerism. The particular practice is often appealed to because of the perceived advantage of lower adult-child ratios which in turn allow for greater individual attention to the child (ibid.). Yet, behind what may appear to be a commonsensical argument in the western world lies the cultural value of individualism, usually met in western societies.

The examples of China and Japan (see Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989) whose classrooms have much higher adult-child ratios by choice because of the value placed on "group membership" show that the value of individualism is not only culturally-specific but may also be problematic for societies who cherish it. Calls for volunteerism also emphasize the importance of treating parents as co-teachers, show interest in their ideas, and use their contributions to the curriculum and classroom life (Porter DeCusati, & Johnson, 2004).

Whereas in the countries mentioned above, parent involvement is non-existent and purposely discouraged, at least at the elementary level, because of the separation of spheres between home and school and because of societal perceptions as to educators' professionalism (Peak, 1991). Furthermore, calls for equal status in the classroom between parents and teachers

hold the risk of undermining the professional status of educators and creating friction between parties who may have different roles and similar responsibilities, neither of which ends up being clearly defined (see De Carvalho, 2000).

Cultural differences may also exist among groups interacting within the same context. It is not unlikely for parents and teachers to mean different things when referring to ideas of "support" and "help" towards students (Plevyak, 2003). Research has shown that Latinos tend to be very respectful towards teachers, feel uncomfortable asking questions, and perceive involvement in their child's education as encroachment on school territory (see Marschall, 2006). Similarly, working-class parents seem to believe that they are supportive and helpful to their children's academic career when they turn over responsibility for education to the teachers (Lareau, & Shumar, 1996).

Considering the fact that school standards and expectations are laden with cultural and social experiences of intellectual and economic elites, it is not unlikely that lower-class parents may choose to defer such responsibility to educators also because of feelings of inadequacy as to their educational capabilities. Working-class parents in Anne Lareau's study (1987), for instance, regarded teachers as "educated people" and thus turned over the responsibility for education to them whom they viewed as professionals.

Even though working-class parents shared the same educational values as those of the middle-class families in the same study, the former saw a separation of spheres between the home and school whereas the latter described the relationship with their children's teachers as one between equals. Moreover, economic differences between groups determined attendance at school events. Attendance at parent-teacher conferences required resources more likely to be found among middle-class families such as transportation, child care arrangements, and flexibility at the workplace (ibid.).

A finding that has only recently gained attention in the literature of parent involvement is the importance of social networks. Research has shown that groups of parents approach school communities with different levels of interest and access to social networks associated with school. Middle-class mothers are usually located in a social structural system of dense social networks which connect them with other mothers in the school community and which provide them extensive information about the school. Whereas for working-class and lower-class mothers whose networks are predominantly organized along kinship ties, information about school is usually limited to what their children tell them (Lareau, & Shumar, 1996). Professionals are also more likely to be present among middle-class social circles and thus can be more easily mobilized by middle-class families in their negotiations with the institutional environment of the school. On the contrary, resources usually found among working-class families, such as grandparent wisdom, are less valued by the school and as such also less powerful in disputing its authority (McNamara Horvat, Weininger, & Lareau, 2003).

Different networks are also acted upon differently by parents to deal with a situation at school. An ethnographic study on parental involvement has shown that when faced with a problem, middle-class parents often mobilized other parents in their network to bring about change in the school *as a group* and thus were able to achieve the desired outcome more effectively. On the other hand, working-class parents who had no parent network to mobilize usually ended up dealing with the school as *individuals* and as such were less effective in fulfilling their goals (McNamara Horvat et al, 2003). Nonetheless, the authors warn, the efficacy of parental networks and parental school involvement is conditional upon the presence of other forms of capital which in its totality is used to overcome resistance when individuals or families need to deal with institutional agents.

Parental involvement is not only an issue of social capital but also an issue of power which is not equally distributed across social groups (Kroeger, 2005). Aside from the issue of power rooted in social inequalities, there also exists differential power between parents and schools which teachers need to be aware of in their interaction with parents. Both working-class as well as middle-class (but to a lesser degree) parents have expressed the fear that inadequate satisfaction of the school's standards (e.g. compulsory school attendance, hygiene and discipline) may result in their report to the appropriate authorities and the eventual deprivation of their custodial rights (Lareau, & Shumar, 1996).

What is more there has not been a careful assessment of the impact of parental participation on parent-child relationships (De Carvalho, 2000). By not considering parents' differential educational skills, family-school policies ignore the potential negative impact on parents' dignity and authority in the home when they find themselves in the position to reveal their limited educational skills (Lareau, & Shumar, 1996). Even when the educational background is not an issue, an emphasis on parents assisting their children with homework may put a strain on their relationship

and introduce severe tension and conflict in the home (De Carvalho, 2000). Phrases such as "Educators play an important role in determining the degree to which family, school, and community contexts overlap" (Sheldon, & Epstein, 2002, p. 5) hold the cultural assumption that different spheres should overlap. Such an assumption, however, may not be shared by all cultural groups, may hold consequences for the nature one's parenting style, and may be unfavorable to the existence and transmission of familial or cultural knowledge that is not school-related or valued. De Carvalho (2000) takes a step further to argue that school demands for involvement confuse parenting with teaching, impose a particular parenting style, and leave parents with little choice but to participate in case their choice to abstain is regarded as omission or negligence.

Matters become more complicated with issues of equity and accountability for student performance as parent involvement policies are more likely to target families at risk in need of re-education, and in the event of student failure when an agent will be held responsible for it.

Conclusion

The present discussion was an attempt on the one hand to raise awareness with regards to the negative effects parental involvement policies and ideologies, as they are currently framed, may have on socially vulnerable groups, and on the other hand to deconstruct a seemingly neutral discourse which masks culturally-specific ideas behind the authority of "pedagogical expertise". As policies and practices of parental involvement stand now, not only do they appear to fail to integrate various vulnerable groups in schools, but they also seem to further their marginalization, and thus, indirectly, strike a blow to the democratization of public education. Hence, unless the present policies, practices and ideologies of parental participation become more culturally-sensitive, which could mean their taking up an entirely new form, it is my suggestion that schools should seriously consider abandoning them altogether.

By focusing on formal parental involvement (e.g. attendance at school events and classroom volunteerism), schools are ignoring cultural differences regarding parent and teacher roles and are shunning away from their responsibility to establish effective communication with marginalized groups

(Marschall, 2006). Meanwhile, by pushing for parental involvement policies, the state is shifting responsibility for social and educational matters to the family, which in turn may increase inequalities among social groups and also contribute to a possible reemergence of the discourse of culture of poverty.

To minimize the likelihood and the extent of negative effects, schools' and policymakers' decisions to increase parental involvement for marginalized groups should be accompanied by family-friendly practices (Porter DeCusati, & Johnson, 2004) as well as provision of resources to help these groups overcome structural barriers that prevent them from participating. The latter may include translation services, transportation, child care, and greater flexibility to scheduling events (Marschall, 2006). More importantly, institutions do not exist or work in isolation from one another. Hence even a change in what may seem as a relatively simple matter of educational practice, needs a concerted effort by numerous parties that may or may not be directly associated with the educational system: school administrators and teachers, teacher educators, students, parents, business and community organizations, and government officials (Marschall, 2006).

Education schools also have an important role to play in preparing in-service and pre-service teachers to cope with culturally diverse classrooms and communities. They should, therefore, enrich their programs with concepts of cultural diversity as well as examine in their courses issues of parental involvement. Teacher educators should also be mindful of language in courses that may pit teachers and parents against each other and should encourage teachers to familiarize themselves with their students and their families (De Castro-Ambrosetti, & Cho, 2006) by becoming ethnographers of their classrooms and communities (see Heath, 1983).

At the end of the day, implementing an educational policy is never a culturally-neutral call, a universally beneficial one (at least not to an equal degree), or a-consequential. In the case of parent involvement, regardless of its pedagogical value as an idea per se and before policymakers and educators push for its wide adoption, one needs to keep in mind that parents approach schools with different perspectives about how they fit in their children's education, with different perceptions of their power compared to that of the schools (Lareau, & Shumar, 1996), and with different cultural resources (Lareau, 1987) some of which may be more valued than others by the school.

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