Why do Parents Become Involved? Research Findings and Implications

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Summary

Brief Summary

This 2005 article builds on Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's (1995, 1997) original model of the parental involvement process. That focused on understanding why and how parents/families became involved in their children's education and how their involvement influences student outcomes. In this article, the authors add what they learned from additional research findings about the constructs importance to understanding why parents/families engage in their children's education.

Full Summary

Existing research has linked indicators of student achievement and school success (i.e. teacher reports of students' progress, student grades, lower rates of retention in grades, and higher graduation rates) to parental engagement. Additionally, parental engagement has also been found to be positively associated with the psychological conditions (such as personal competence and efficacy for learning as well as perceptions of personal agency and control over academic outcomes) necessary for student academic achievement and

success. In this review, the authors consider this growing body of literature and evidence with the four constructs of parental involvement presented by Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's (1995, 1997) work. These constructs focused on parents' motivations for involvement and included the following characteristics:

1) Parents' motivational beliefs: parents actively believing they should be involved in their children's education and feeling a positive sense of efficacy in helping their children learn,
2) Parents' perceptions of invitations to involvement: parents feeling invited to be involved by schools, teachers, and students; and
3) Parents' life-context variables: a consideration for parents' life contexts that allowed and/or encouraged involvement.

Parents' Motivational Beliefs

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's (1995, 1997) model suggests that parents' involvement is encouraged by two belief systems: 1) role construction of involvement, or a sense of personal and shared responsibility to help their child be academically successful, and 2) a sense of efficacy for helping their child learn and be academically successful.

Parental role construction for involvement is shaped by parents' beliefs and perceptions about how children develop, how parents should raise their children, and what they should be doing at home to help their children succeed. The beliefs, perceptions, and expectations of others close to the parent (such as friends and teachers) also shape their role construction. It is also influenced by parents' lived experiences, including how they experienced their own upbringing and schooling. As such, it can be said that parental role construction is socially constructed and can change over time.

Studies that looked more deeply into the development of role construction have found that it is indeed a key factor in determining parental involvement. For example, that parents are influenced by what teachers tell them. Biddle (1979, 1986) found that when teachers offered recommendations to parents about specific learning techniques for specific learning areas, parents' beliefs about the importance of their help in developing those areas increased. There have also been positive links between school-encouraged collaborative relationships with parents and parents actively being involved in their children's schooling (Scribner, Young, & Pedroza, 1999). This suggests teachers' perceptions influence how parents construct their role.

In terms of parental self-efficacy, or parents' belief and confidence that they are able to help their children, studies have found that when parents make decisions, they consider how they think their actions will impact or influence their children's development (Bandura, 1997, Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Brissie, 1992). Parents with high efficacy are more likely to make active decisions to be involved in their children's education and are more likely to persist when faced with difficult decisions or obstacles. Bandura and colleagues (1996) found that parents who reported higher self-efficacy for supporting their middle school-aged children's academic development were more likely to support their children's educational activities and develop students' self-management skills than lower self-efficacy parents.

Invitation to Involvement from Others

Although strong role construction and self-efficacy are important elements that shape parental involvement in their children's education, invitations to being involved are essential motivators because they indicate to the parent that their participation in their children's learning is welcomed, valued, and expected. Research finds that these invitations are especially crucial for parents who have a passive role construction or whose self-efficacy is weak. The most important invitations come from the school, teachers, and the students themselves.

Research has found that school climate influences how parents think about their involvement and role in the school setting. For example, positive and welcoming school staff has been found to be crucial in parental empowerment and improving the educational outcomes of low income and socially disadvantaged students (Comer, 1985; Comer & Hayes, 1991). In another study by Griffith (1998), parents who described their children's schools as welcoming and empowering reported being more involved than parents who did not describe a positive school climate. When considering school climate, it is especially necessary to consider the role of the school principal in developing and sustaining a positive and welcoming school culture. Griffith (2001) found that principals who successfully created a positive school culture in which all families felt welcomed did the following: made clear efforts to meet the needs of all school members (students, staff, and parents); were physically visible in the school building; and were publicly vocal about their advocacy for students.

In terms of invitations from teachers, strong evidence suggests that teachers' beliefs about parents (and, consequently, their invitations to contribute to student learning) are crucial to parents' decisions to be involved. This is true for parental involvement in elementary,

middle, and high school. Invitations from teachers have been found to help parents understand how they can support their children's learning (e.g. Corno, 2000; Epstein, 1991; Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2001; Hoover-Dempsey, Basler, & Burow, 1995), help parents feel welcomed and appreciated by the school (e.g. Patrikakou & Weissberg, 2000; Soodak & Erwin, 2001), and also help develop the trust necessary between parents and teachers for effective parent-school partnerships (Adams & Christenson, 1998, 2000). Additionally, the research finds that the invitations from teachers can come in different ways — through in-class conversations (Closson, Wilkins, Sandler, & Hoover-Dempsey, 2004; Kohl, Lengua, & McMahon, 2002; Simon, 2004), through conversations about parental involvement with students' homework (Balli, Demo, & Wedman, 1998; Balli, Wedman, & Demo, 1999; Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2001), and parent workshop formats (Shaver & Walls, 1998; Starkey & Klein, 2000).

Invitations from students are also critical, especially as students get older. These invitations can be explicit, for example, when children actively ask parents for help with schoolwork or ask them to volunteer in school events (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 1995). Invitations can also be implicit, like when parents notice their child is struggling and intervene with direct assistance (Clark, 1993; Cooper, Lindsay, & Nye, 2000; Dauber & Epstein, 1993; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001; Pomerantz & Eaton, 2001). Invitations from students are sometimes prompted by teachers. Students who act on teachers' requests to invite their parents to be involved have responded positively to the opportunity to share what they are learning with their parents (Balli et al., 1998; Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2001).

Parents' Life Context

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's model (1995, 1997) proposes that it is essential to consider how parents' life context shapes their involvement in their children's schooling.This life context shapes families' knowledge, skills, time, and energy and subsequently their involvement with the school. Specifically, the authors note that family socioeconomic status (SES) influences parents' knowledge, skills, time, and energy, noting that there are significant differences between the involvement of low-SES parents and high-SES parents. While research has found that low-SES families face more obstacles when attempting to be involved in their children's education, as they often have to work multiple jobs, or have limited knowledge of school systems, for example (Collignon, Men, & Tan, 2001; Garcia Coll et al., 2002; Griffith, 1998; Machida, Taylor, & Kim, 2002; Weiss et al., 2003), the authors state that this does not imply that low-SES families are not involved when compared to high-SES families (Comer, Haynes, Joyner, & Ben-Avie, 1996; Delgado-Gaitan, 2004; Epstein, 2001). Yet, research has found that there is a tendency of schools to assume that

low-SES parents are not likely to be involved in their children's education because they lack the time, energy, ability, knowledge, or motivation to do so (Collignon et al., 2001; Eccles & Harold, 1993; Gonzalez et al., 2001; Griffith, 1998; Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Jones, & Reed, 2002; Horvat et al., 2003; Moll et al., 1993; Pang & Watkins, 2001; Pena, 200; Weiss et al., 2003).

The demands of work and family responsibilities also influence how parents are involved in their children's education. Parents who have jobs that are less flexible with their schedules or that are very time demanding tend to be less involved than parents with flexible jobs or jobs with reasonable hours (Garcia Coll et al., 2002; Griffith, 1998; Machida et al., 2002; Pena, 2000; Weiss et al., 2003).

As noted by the authors, family culture is key to families' life contexts. A growing body of research points out that schools must respect and embrace different family cultures and circumstances in order to fully partner with families. It is essential that schools shape their efforts to partner with parents in ways that support parents' motivation for involvement, making them feel welcomed. This is especially true for parents who are first or second generation immigrants or families who are marginalized by mainstream U.S. culture. Families in these circumstances often face similar obstacles as those faced by low-SES families in addition to language barriers, limited understanding of school structures and policies, and clashes between their values and those presented by schools (Chrispeels & Rivero, 2001; Griffith, 1998; Lawson, 2003; Lopez, 2001; Okagaki & Frensch, 1998; Pena, 2000; Reese, Balzano, Gallimore, & Goldenberg, 1995). The authors argue that it is important to acknowledge that while these families are often seen as uninvolved or as uninterested in their children's education, they are involved in ways that schools do not notice or recognize (Lawson, 2003; Lopez, Scribner, & Mahitivanichcha, 2001; Pena, 2000; Trevino, 2004). Schools must understand and support the life context of these families in order to invite parental involvement in their students' education.

Suggestions for School and Teacher Practice

Using the constructs and literature presented above, the authors present schools and teachers a series of strategies to help support parental involvement in children's education. The first set of suggestions focuses on strategies to help schools be more inviting of parental involvement; the second focuses on what schools can do to enhance parents' capacities to be involved.

Increasing Schools' Capacities for Inviting Parental Involvement

- Principal leadership in creating a welcoming school climate: school leaders should be visibly committed to and advocating for parent-teacher partnerships, developing trust among all parties involved. The role of the school leader is especially important since developing and sustaining partnership ideals, projects, and initiatives requires time and investment.
- Empowering teachers for parental involvement: while teachers generally hold positive thoughts about involving parents in their students' education, many state that they do not receive appropriate training and support. Schools should provide ongoing in-service training to teachers, helping to develop parental involvement skills and practice, and make parent-teacher partnerships part of the school culture and values. Teachers should also be encouraged to learn about parents' goals, perspectives, and aspirations for their children.
- Join existing parent-teacher-family structures to improve involvement: school staff can partner with existing parent groups, after-school, and out-of-school programs to further develop relationships with parents.

Enhancing Parents' Capacities To Be Involved Effectively

- Communicate that all parents have a role in students' school success: schools should tell families that they are crucial contributors to students' academic success and invite them to be involved in different ways.
- Offer specific suggestions of what parents can do: similar to the previous point, schools, especially teachers, need to be explicit with parents about the ways in which they can support their children's learning. They should also share how their involvement impacts their children's learning, since once parents understand why their involvement is powerful and necessary, they are more likely to be involved. These invitations to involvement must also be aware and respectful of families and their different life contexts.
- Offer parents specific information about curriculum and learning goals: teachers should share with parents not only what their children are learning and how they can support this learning, but also invite them to set goals for their children. Teachers can do this in one-on-one parent-teacher interactions, conferences, or school-wide events. Additionally, teachers should offer parents positive feedback on their involvement.

Future Research

Finally, the authors offer suggestions for future research, suggestions they hope will help expand the field, and also improve school practices and family-school-parent relationships. Identified areas of research include:

- A closer examination of the elements that make up parental involvement. It is important to know what parents are doing to support their children's learning, and also how they are doing it across different contexts and settings.
- Asking different sources about what parental involvement is and how it is being done. This means research triangulating and capturing the experiences of parents, teachers, students, school leaders, and other stakeholders.
- A closer examination of how parental involvement influences student outcomes, beyond academic results. This includes studies that focus on how parental involvement may influence self-esteem, peer networks, and students' self-efficacy.

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