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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses research on the role of the family in determining children's intelligence and school achievement, observing at the outset that existing research demonstrates clearly that students whose families have certain educationally supportive attitudes and behaviors are most successful in school. In regard to evidence of the relationship of family involvement in school activities to children's academic performance. The paper notes that while research on parent involvement is somewhat limited, a strong correlation between parent participation in school activities and children's achievement and interest in school has been demonstrated in the research that does exist. The document concludes with suggestions drawn from the research literature for the implementation of effective home-school relationship programs. This resarch has indicated that parent involvement programs are most effective when they include opportunities for a variety of parent involvement and when parental roles are characterized by a balance of power with the school. It has been further indicated that most interactions between families and schools are most likely to be successful when there are increased opportunities for such interactions, when parents and teachers receive training in interpersonal skills, when parents and teachers recognize that they have separate, but complementary role responsibilities for children's well-being, and when schools incorporate families' cultures into their curricula. (ABL)

Family Involvement in Education

Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction/Herbert J. Grover, State Superintendent

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Prepared by Gay Eastman

A paper prepared for the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction

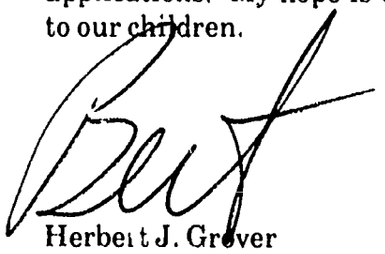
Herbert J. Grover
State Superintendent

January 1988

Foreword

I am pleased to introduce this paper commissioned by the Department of Public Instruction in connection with the Year of the Family in Education. Since designating the 1987-88 school year as a year to promote family involvement in education, I have been overwhelmed by the enthusiastic response to this initiative. The goals of the program—seen as ongoing—are to enhance the partnership role of families in the education process and to recognize the important role families play as the first and primary educators of their children.

For educators and family alike, the information in this paper has many practical applications. My hope is that whatever our roles, we commit ourselves to a rededication to our children.



Herbert J. Grover
State Superintendent

Executive Summary

A review of the research on parent involvement in the education of children at home and school was written at the request of the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction as part of the Year of the Family in Education effort. The paper addresses research on the role of the family in determining children's intelligence and school achievement. It further examines evidence of the relationship of family involvement in school activities to children's academic performance. It concludes with suggestions drawn from the research literature for the implementation of effective home-school relationship programs.

How does the family influence the child's intellectual growth and academic achievement?

Families provide the child's first educational environment. Existing research demonstrates clearly that students whose families have certain educationally supportive attitudes and behaviors are more successful in school. Specific family processes that are related to higher school achievement include holding high educational and occupational aspirations for children, maintaining warm and supportive family relationships, providing clear and consistent discipline, organizing time and space for academic tasks, and reinforcing verbal and thinking skills.

How does parent involvement in school activities affect children's school performance?

Although research on parent involvement is somewhat limited thus far, existing research does demonstrate a strong correlation between parent participation in school activities and children's achievement and interest in school. Schools are more effective learning environments when teachers encourage parent involvement and when parents spend more time participating in their children's schools.

Studies which have attempted to demonstrate that increased parent involvement actually causes students to perform better in school have largely been limited to preschool and elementary grade programs for economically disadvantaged students. Such studies have clearly shown that involvement programs in which parents are expected to teach or reinforce their children's learning through educational activities at home can directly and positively influence children's school success.

What are the characteristics of effective home-school interaction programs?

Existing research can only suggest tentative answers to this question. It appears that parent involvement programs are most effective when they include opportunities for a variety of types of parental involvement and when parental roles are characterized by a balance of power with the school. Further, more successful interactions between families and schools are more likely when there are increased opportunities for such interactions, when parents and teachers receive training in interpersonal skills, when parents and teachers recognize that they have separate, but complementary role responsibilities for children's well-being, and when schools incorporate families' cultures into their curricula.

Although it appears that there are positive effects of involving parents at all grade levels, the most effective parental roles at each level are not yet known.

How can parent involvement programs be implemented most successfully?

Existing research suggests that parent programs are more likely to successfully involve parents when they are designed with high expectations for parent involvement, when they provide a variety of ways for parents to be involved, and when they accommodate the needs and perceptions of the particular families to be involved.

Family Involvement in Education

> *If parents and teachers could meet often enough and intimately enough . . . and if both parents and teachers might have their say unreservedly, such modifications of school practice and parental upbringing might take place as would revolutionize the life of children everywhere." (Waller, 1932)*[1]

In American society, two institutions are primarily responsible for the education of children: families and schools. Social science research has long been concerned with questions of how each of these institutions influences children's development. It seems likely, however, as Waller recognized more than fifty years ago, that relationships between parents and teachers also affect the child. Waller's revolution has yet to take place, but research done in the intervening years convincingly indicates that the family has an enormous impact on the developing child and that a partnership between home and school is an important method for enhancing the education of our children.

The purpose of this paper is to present a review of the research on parent involvement in the education of children at home and school. First, it addresses research on the role of the family in determining children's intelligence and achievement. Then it presents three types of evidence for the relationship of family involvement in the school to children's academic performance: a) correlational research on the relationship of parent participation to children's school performance, b) evaluations of experimental parent involvement programs, and c) theoretical work which suggests characteristics of effective family-school interaction programs. The final section outlines some suggestions from the research literature for the implementation of such programs.

The Role of the Family

Although families have taught attitudes and life skills to their young since the beginning of civilization, research on the role of parents as educators is of relatively recent origin. Until the 1960's social scientists tended to dichotomize the processes of childhood development into research on how families socialize children and how schools educate them.[2] Research done during the 1960's made it increasingly clear that both institutions carry out both functions. Sociologists' studies of schools demonstrated the role of the "hidden curriculum" in socializing students to various school and societal norms.[3] Scientific inquiries into the family's role in cognitive learning had roots in work which demonstrated that intelligence was not totally fixed by heredity and that early stimulation was important to the intellectual development of both animals and humans. Prior to this time psychologists had generally advised parents to allow children's intellectual growth to unfold naturally toward its predetermined capacity. However, books such as J. McVicker Hunt's *Intelligence and Experience*[4] and Benjamin Bloom's *Stability and Change in Human Characteristics*[5] changed the desired parenting role from one of observing to one of facilitating children's cognitive development. Hunt challenged the concept of fixed intelligence and Bloom claimed the experiences of the early years are so important that 80 percent of a person's intelligence is developed by eight years of age.

Preliminary research on the family as an environment for learning,[6] on the effect of specific family language patterns,[7] and on the effect of maternal teaching styles[8] on children's mental development followed. In 1966, Coleman's comprehensive *Equality of Educational Opportunity* study[9] demonstrated that student achievement is highly correlated with family background factors such as income, parent education, and family structure, and family attitudinal factors such as a sense of control over one's life. Further analysis of Coleman's data[10] concluded that about half the variance in achievement differences among children in the same classrooms at the sixth, ninth, and twelfth grade levels is due to what the child brings with her or him from the home and the community. This research from the 1960's clearly demonstrates that families are their children's first teachers and that they do strongly influence children's intellectual growth and school achievement, but such research could only begin to explain why certain families are better at supporting their children's school learning than others.

Family Status Factors and Children's School Achievement

In order to ascertain how home environments mediate student achievement, social scientists began by looking at categories of families distinguished by status or situation. They considered the effects of growing up in families that differed by such factors as socioeconomic status (as defined by educational, occupational, and financial levels), race and ethnicity, marital status, or maternal employment.

Socioeconomic status (SES) has been the most frequently studied of the family factors; it appears to be a better predictor of children's school performance than other status variables. Research has consistently shown that groups of families with good incomes or high levels of parental education have children who are evaluated more favorably in school than are children from groups of families who are less advantaged educationally or economically.[11]

Generalizations about the effects of race and ethnicity on children's school achievement are difficult to make because these factors are so closely tied to socioeconomic status in American society. Differences in performance on cognitive and achievement measures for different family groups categorized by racial or ethnic status have been found by some researchers, but not by others.[12]

A recent review of studies on maternal employment, done by the National Academy of Science,[13] concluded that, in general, the school achievement of children of working mothers differs little from that of nonworking mothers. However, employment is not a single uniform condition and there is some evidence that maternal employment may interact with other variables such as socioeconomic status or mother's attitude about working. For example, researchers have found that for poorer children, maternal employment has been correlated with higher intelligence test scores, possibly because such mothers have higher aspirations than nonemployed poor mothers, while no such association exists for middle class children. Whether or not mothers are happy about their employment status appears to be more important to children's well-being than whether or not the mother is employed.[14]

Some studies have found that children of single-parent families perform less well in school than children of two-parent families when teacher evaluations such as grades are used, but differences, though statistically significant, are small. Further, the effect of

parents' marital status on children's school achievement is difficult to separate from other factors such as SES. For example, family income is almost always lowered with the absence of a spouse. In such cases, when the sole parent may be preoccupied with work or worry about financial difficulties and thus may be spending less time with the child, school performance may be expected to decline. On the other hand, if income is not a problem, a single parent may have more time for the child; in fact, there is some research that has found better verbal skills among children in single-parent than in two-parent families when both have middle class socioeconomic status.[15]

Thus, the research on the effects of family types on the academic achievement of children demonstrates that the educational, income, and occupational levels of families are related to how well or poorly children perform in school directly and also in interaction with other status and situational factors, such as race or family structure. However, within any particular socioeconomic status level, families differ greatly; differences among middle class families turn out to be greater than differences between middle class and lower class families. This means that, although the average behavior of parents and children in higher and lower social classes is different, most individual families in both social classes behave in ways that are more similar than different. Consequently, it turns out that socioeconomic status is not such a good predictor of individual family behavior or child achievement after all.[16]

In fact, in determining children's school success, researchers have decided that it is what the family does that matters, rather than its SES. Family process variables—measures of what the family values and how it acts—predict academic learning twice as well as the socioeconomic status of families.[17]

Further, process variables are often more useful than measures of social address. For example, schools that wish to work with families to enhance children's learning cannot change a family's marital status or income, but they may be able to teach parents to expand their children's vocabularies or to help their children learn thinking skills.

Family Process and Children's School Achievement

Studies of family effects describe a wide range of process variables associated with the development of intelligence, competence, and school achievement in children. It is often difficult to compare studies since definitions of parent behavior and child performance vary, but certain categories of similar family processes have been repeatedly reported as affecting children's development in positive ways.[18]

One family process that has been shown to enhance children's academic performance is holding high educational and occupational expectations and aspirations for them. Parental expectations that are high, but not completely out of line with the child's current skills, seem to be most effective. Exerting some pressure for achievement, providing academic guidance, and demonstrating general interest in their children and their children's activities are other related characteristics of parents whose children have higher academic achievement scores.

In addition, better school performance has been found in families where children and parents have warmer, more affectionate relationships. Parents in such families tend to be nurturing, giving more verbal praise for their children's accomplishments.

While parents of successful children are warm and affectionate, they also exert control over their children's behavior. They are firm disciplinarians who set clear and consistent standards without being rigid or harsh. Parents of high performing children are also more likely to involve them in the decision-making process, that is, to explain decisions, to consider the child's viewpoint, and to communicate this understanding.

Children who are evaluated more favorably by their teachers tend to come from homes where space and time are well organized and conducive to academic tasks. For example, regular routines and mealtimes are followed; books and magazines are available; television use is monitored.

Finally, the amount and type of verbal interaction between parents and children have also been shown to have a strong effect on how well children do in school. Children with higher scores on achievement tests have parents who spend more time playing, talking, and reading with them. Parents of high scoring children also use more verbal variety and more effective verbal teaching strategies. They are more likely to read themselves and to model the reading process for their children. Furthermore, parents who use more advanced levels and styles of thought and language with their children are more likely to have children who experience school success. The use of detailed instruction and explanations and problem-solving strategies have all been shown to be helpful.

Unfortunately, the research on family effects on children's educational achievement is not yet sophisticated enough to even suggest whether any of these types of family processes are more important than others.[19] Nor can it explain how the behaviors might work together. Although most studies focus on individual family processes, probably more important is the overall quality of the family's lifestyle, that is, some optimal combination of affection, control, support, and stimulation.[20] Furthermore, researchers cannot yet tell us whether certain processes are more effective at certain ages. Family influences on children's cognitive development and school success have been demonstrated for children of all ages, although some studies suggest that the family's sway is probably stronger and more direct in preschool and elementary school than in high school.[21]

This body of research does demonstrate clearly and forcefully, however, that parents have powerful resources for producing and reinforcing their children's learning. These resources include beliefs and attitudes, interpersonal relationships, and parenting skills as well as more direct educational techniques such as verbal skills and teaching strategies. Families do provide influential learning environments at home.

Family-School Relationships

Families can also influence the learning environments of schools. Unfortunately, research that examines the relationship between parent involvement in schools and student achievement is still quite limited in scope and often methodologically unsound. As a result, answers to questions such as which types of interaction are most effective can only be suggested. The first part of this section will focus on descriptive correlational studies linking parent participation with school achievement. The second part reviews

evaluations of intervention programs that had parent education and involvement as program components. The third part of the section outlines some theoretical work that proposes some optimal types of home-school interactions.

Parent Participation in the School

Evidence for the relationship between active parent involvement in schools and student achievement is provided by a number of descriptive studies. The assessments of parent involvement vary from measures of teacher perceptions of parent interest to attendance at school activities like PTA meetings or open houses. Given the correlational nature of these studies, they are unable to demonstrate definitively that parent involvement produces higher achievement. They do, however, show that high parent participation and high achievement coexist.

Some studies have found that schools that relate well to their communities have student bodies that outperform other schools. One researcher found that elementary schools with an active PTA or PTO averaged higher student achievement than those with inactive or no parent organizations.[22] School and class level ratings of parent participation in school activities like volunteering in the classroom and attending PTA and other meetings were found to be related to higher scores on reading and math tests among second and third graders in 72 California schools. [23] And researchers in another California study found that reading achievement gains of black sixth graders were higher among schools that had high levels of community participation.[24]

A study commission on the quality of education in 22 metropolitan Milwaukee school districts found that principals, teachers, and parents all reported considerably more parent involvement in higher achieving schools than in lower achieving schools.[25] Although particular types of parent involvement were more common at certain types of schools (for example, more volunteering in suburban than in urban elementary classrooms), the strong relationship of parental involvement to better school performance remained even when the socioeconomic background and location of the schools were statistically controlled. In general, at more successful schools, a larger percentage of parents were involved in each of a wide variety of activities (for example, observing, volunteering, *and* attending meetings and conferences) while at less successful schools the only common activity was attending conferences with the child's teacher.

A large-scale study of high schools found that the degree of parental interest was correlated with math achievement and college plans and concluded that it was "the critical factor in explaining the impact of the high school environment on the achievement and educational aspirations of students."[26] In this study parental interest was measured by teacher responses to the questions of whether parents seemed interested in their children's progress and whether parents often asked for appointments with teachers to discuss their children's school work.

Some of the strongest evidence for the link between parent participation and children's enhanced school performance has been provided by researchers who have explored teachers' provision of opportunities for parent involvement. Principals in one study of more than 800 elementary school-aged children rated their teacher's levels of parent involvement as intensive or not intensive.[27] Children in classes of teachers who intensively involved parents gained more than a half a grade in reading performance over

students in classes of teachers who less less intensively involved parents. A statewide study of Maryland schools[28] indicated that third and fifth grade students whose teachers were leaders in parent involvement made greater gains on standardized reading achievement tests, but not in math achievement, than did students whose teachers did not stress parent involvement. This may be because in this study parent involvement was defined as the degree to which the teacher encouraged parents to work at home on school-related tasks, particularly reading activities, with their children. This study also demonstrated that when teachers made parent involvement part of their regular teaching practice, students had more positive attitudes about school.

And finally, a few researchers have used the actual amount of contact between the parents and the school to measure parent involvement. A study of a prekindergarten program for disadvantaged children in New York state[29] found that, when parents spent more time participating in school activities like school visits, meetings, and phone calls with teachers, children had higher scores on measures of cognitive reasoning, verbal skills, and school-related knowledge. It is worth noting that children who had the lowest preprogram scores on verbal skills were most positively affected by parent involvement. In a survey of high school students, The National Center for Educational Statistics[30] found that parent involvement, as measured by such factors as parents' knowledge of how well the child is doing in school and parental attendance at PTA meetings, was higher among children receiving mostly A and B grades than among those receiving mostly C and D grades. Similarly, a recent survey of 8,000 high school students found that parent attendance at school events such as open school nights is strongly linked to better grades regardless of parental income or education levels.[31]

This body of research demonstrates that higher student achievement occurs when schools have more active parent communities, when teachers encourage parent involvement, and when individual parents spend more time participating in their children's schools. As stated earlier, the correlational nature of these studies means that they cannot show that more parent involvement *causes* students to learn more. Nor can existing research of this type identify which forms of parent involvement in the schools are more closely related to positive performance than others. But these correlational studies do show that, in general, the higher level of parent involvement, the more effective the school is as a learning environment.

Parent Education and Involvement Programs

In order to demonstrate that increased parent involvement actually produces corresponding changes in student achievement, it is necessary to examine evaluation studies that have compared an experimental group that participated in a parent involvement program with a comparison or control group that did not. Most of the intervention programs that have included parent participation as a program component have been directed toward low-income or low-achieving students in order to address expected cognitive deficiencies. Compensatory education projects for disadvantaged preschool children, which began in the mid-1960s, often included provisions for parent participation, parent education, and parent decision-making roles, sometimes going so far as to mandate parent participation as a condition for federal funding. The evaluations of these programs provided the first empirical information on relations between parents and teachers and of the effect such interaction had on children.

Infant, Preschool, and Elementary Programs

In programs for infant and preschool children, parent participation has included such activities as serving as a classroom aide, receiving training in stimulating children's language, or talking with a home visiting teacher. Numerous reviewers[32] have concluded that such programs can bring about gains in disadvantaged preschool children's IQ or achievement test scores, although the positive effects cannot usually be attributed to the parent involvement component alone because evaluations did not usually separate the specific effects of the parent involvement components from other parts of the programs. One reviewer did do a comparison of early intervention programs that had parent participation components with others that did not and concluded that involving parents as true partners in preschool learning can reinforce programs and sustain their effect: "The involvement of the child's family as an active participant is critical to the success of any intervention program."[33] Parent programs on the preschool level seem to be more effective when they include personal, direct interaction with parents in home visits or other one-on-one teaching, when tasks for parents have clearly specified objectives and are highly structured and concrete, and when parent-program interaction occurs over a period of at least one and a half to two years.[34]

For children in elementary school, the effects of parent involvement components of compensatory education programs are less clear because few programs have been evaluated systematically. Comparable comparison groups not receiving the program were often not included in study designs; parent involvement components of programs were not often considered apart from the effects of the total program. Thus, evaluations of Follow Through, an antipoverty program for elementary children who had "graduated" from Head Start, indicate that Follow Through parents were more aware of their children's school activities and were more likely to participate in the school, but results could not prove that specific program models focusing on the parent-school partnership resulted in achievement gains greater than those of alternative models.[35]

Intervention Programs

Among the few intervention programs for school-age children that have been systematically evaluated are a few that have demonstrated positive effects as a result of parent involvement on the school performance of economically disadvantaged children. The typical parental role in such programs is to help children with educational activities at home either by tutoring the child or otherwise reinforcing school learning. For example, in one project, parents of elementary school children performing below grade level in reading and mathematics were able to raise their children's scores above those of a comparison group after receiving intensive training in math and reading skills and tutoring methods.[36] Similarly, in another program significantly greater gains in reading performance were achieved by economically disadvantaged five- to nine-year old children whose parents listened to them read at home daily compared with a group receiving extra tutoring in school and with a no-intervention control group.[37] Another project successfully raised kindergarten children's achievement test scores by using parent volunteers to coordinate a program to help parents support their children's educational activities at home.[38] Parent-child activities that contributed most to children's doing well in school included reading books with parents, using the library, supervised use of television, and parental help with homework.

Learning Reinforcement Programs

Two projects successfully combined home reinforcement of school learning with school level changes as well. One of these studies involved a comparison of three performance-contracting programs in low income elementary schools that had varying levels of parent involvement.[39] The evaluation demonstrated that the district with the most comprehensive parent program scored the greatest gains in reading achievement. In districts where parent involvement consisted only of activities like filling out questionnaires or attending large group meetings, the achievement of the pupils was much less than the achievement in the district where administrators, teachers, and parents received inservice training on home-school interaction and where parent leaders were taught to conduct informational sessions for other parents which focused on the educational program, cooperation with the school, and reinforcing the child at home.

In another comprehensive project for low income minority students, parents were asked to create home conditions conducive to reading and homework and to show encouragement for their children's school work.[40] The evaluation of this program demonstrated that it was successful in increasing children's reading test scores above those achieved by a comparison group not participating in the program.

Although the program developer believed that these low income minority parents did not possess the values and attitudes that would impress upon their children the importance of schooling, she did assume that these parents were interested in their children's education and wanted them to do well. Volunteer mothers were used to personally invite families to school activities. Meetings were held at which teachers explained to parents how their help was needed in supporting their children's schooling. Parents were asked to read to their children or listen to them read, to structure a quiet time and place at home for the children to do homework, to remind children of work to be done, and so on. Teachers were provided with extra clerical assistance to free them to spend more time with students. Teachers received inservice training that emphasized the influence of the family on the child's achievement. The program also brought neighborhood people into the school to talk about their jobs, thus creating additional links with the community.

Comparison of Parent Involvement Programs

As this body of research effectively demonstrates, parent involvement components of compensatory education programs in which parents serve as teachers or reinforcers of their children's learning can improve the school achievement of economically disadvantaged children. Unfortunately, evaluation studies of "parent-as-teacher" programs do not typically articulate or test program models fully, so characteristics of more effective parent involvement programs cannot be directly determined by such research. Perhaps, by comparing programs that were successful with those that were not, some evaluative idea of intervening processes can be suggested.

Evaluations of two parent involvement programs that did not meet their stated goals will be used as examples. One unsuccessful program attempted to improve second grader's attitudes toward and achievement in mathematics by increasing the number of parent-teacher conferences and providing parents with information about their children's homework;[41] the other program attempted to increase rural children's scores on standard-

ized achievement tests by sending home instructional packages for parents to do with their second to sixth grade children.[42]

A systematic comparison of the implementation of these two programs with the more successful ones cited above suggests that the one major difference is differing assumptions about the appropriate role of parents. Both of the unsuccessful programs imposed conditions of participation, placed parents in roles subordinate to teachers, and required parents to follow given curriculum and teaching methods, while the successful program requested parent involvement and solicited parental commitment to the programs, viewed parents as sharing the teaching role, and, while providing information about curriculum and teaching strategies, also solicited ideas from parents about teaching methods. In other words, in the successful programs, parents were seen as true partners who were assumed to be interested in their children's education and capable of helping their children learn.

How Should Parents Be Involved?

The conclusion that can be drawn from these evaluation studies is that, for disadvantaged children who are having difficulty with school subjects, carefully designed programs, which assume that parents are interested and capable of encouraging their children's learning, can have significant effects on their school achievement. However, there are serious questions that need to be raised regarding parent's performing this role in the elementary schools of economically disadvantaged children. Though parent-as-teacher programs *can* improve children's school performance, the issue of whether parents *should* serve this function needs to be addressed.

The stated aim of compensatory education programs for economically disadvantaged children is to equalize educational opportunity by improving children's school achievement. While compensatory education programs with parent components have demonstrated that they can raise disadvantaged children's school performance relative to other disadvantaged children, they have not shown that they can help such students achieve at levels equal to those of middle class children.[43] Thus, compensatory education programs where parent involvement components are a major focus and parents are viewed as the principal agents of change responsible for developing children's academic potential run the risk of shifting the burden of accountability from schools to parents.[44] Though parent-as-teacher programs have proven effectiveness, they certainly have not been, and most probably cannot be, a panacea for larger social ills. Thus, using parent programs to achieve grandiose aims such as equalizing educational opportunity and reducing poverty runs the risk of co-opting parents and making them responsible for failure, over which they have no control, while absolving schools of responsibility for children's poor learning. This does not mean that parent involvement programs in compensatory education should not be undertaken, but rather that the potential danger of "blaming the victim" in such programs needs to be considered. Though such programs cannot remake society, they can make school success more probable for some children. This is not an unimportant accomplishment.

The effects of programs for economically disadvantaged children cannot be generalized to middle class children. One carefully designed study involving 2,000 elementary school children in seven schools, although conducted more than thirty years ago, is interesting because it provides evidence that the parent involvement role of parent as rein-

forcer of children's learning can positively influence the home and school environments of children from all socioeconomic classes.[45] In the experimental program, parents and teachers met two hours a week for twenty weeks at the school. One hour each week involved observation of classroom activities by parents and one hour involved discussion and planning by the parents with the teacher of their children. Each group of parents and teacher was to structure the session as they wished. But parents and teachers were to perform their normal roles.

Parents were asked not to help their children in any school work, but they were encouraged to provide opportunities in the out-of-school life of their children for use of the skills and information that they were acquiring in school. Likewise, the teachers took no direct part in helping children plan for or conduct their out-of-school activities, but they were encouraged to make use of these out-of-school experiences and activities whenever situations arose naturally in the classroom.[46]

Statistically significant differences on standardized tests were found between children in schools where the program was held compared with those in carefully matched nonprogram schools. The study also included observations of both homes and classrooms and noted positive changes in the educational opportunities provided in both those settings by parents and teachers who had taken part in the program. The researcher reported that although teachers found the additional work load required by the program to be difficult, the increased parental understanding and support they received led them to be very satisfied with the program. Though only one study, this research suggests that increasing parental involvement to reinforce children's school learning can bring about positive changes for middle income as well as low income children.

Effective Home-School Interaction

Existing experimental research clearly demonstrates that parent programs in preschool and elementary schools in which parents are expected to teach or reinforce their children's learning through educational or enrichment activities at home can directly affect children's school success. Unfortunately, such research cannot answer the larger questions of whether and how parent involvement in general can improve children's school achievement. Are other types of parent roles important? Under what conditions are they most effective? Are particular parent participation roles more important at different grade levels? Existing research and theory can only suggest tentative answers to such questions.

The Many Roles of Parents

Much of what would be considered family-school participation involves roles other than teacher or reinforcer of children's school learning. Parents also serve as an audience, receiving information from schools about the educational program and their children's progress through materials such as newsletters and report cards. Parents have face-to-face interactions with school personnel at PTA meetings, open houses, parent-teacher conferences, and so on. Parents often serve as observers or volunteers in classrooms. They may serve as participants on school advisory boards. Unfortunately, we do not yet know how these roles affect children's learning or whether any of these roles are more effective than others. The research literature does not include systematic evaluations of programs

that have succeeded at increasing parent participation in roles such as these. Research cited thus far in this paper can prov[illegible] some insights, however.

The research on family effects on children's learning, which demonstrated that parents affect children's expectations, beliefs, and attitudes about school as well as more specific educational skills like reading and thinking, suggests that parent involvement roles besides those of direct teacher of the child might be important. For example, having the parent visit the school and talk with the child's teachers may be important in communicating to the child the importance the parent places on formal schooling. The correlational research on family-school relationships cited earlier demonstrated that parental roles that involve active participation in and interaction with the school are related to children's school achievement, and that, in general the more parents are involved in a wider variety of activities, the better for children. The cited research on experimental programs, which demonstrated that balanced role status was essential to the success of parent-as-teacher parent involvement programs, would seem to suggest that this might also be an important factor in other types of parent involvement roles as well. Urie Bronfenbrenner has summarized the limited empirical knowledge about the types of family-school linkages that he hypothesizes would be expected to best support children's development:

> These interconnections would be characterized by more frequent interaction between parents and school personnel, a greater number of persons known in common by members of the two settings, and more frequent communications between home and school, more information in each setting about the other, but always with the proviso that such interconnections not undermine the motivation and capacity of those persons who deal directly with the child to act in his behalf.[47]

Parent-Teacher Conflict

Another scholar, Sara Lawrence Lightfoot, has used other, more qualitative research, to suggest some additional conditions that she believes are necessary if parental roles involving face-to-face interaction with teachers are to be effective in enhancing children's education.[48] Lightfoot assumes that some conflict between parents and teachers is inevitable because differing roles produce different perspectives and behaviors. Parents are concerned with their child as an individual; they are apt to be protective and highly interested in the child and want the teacher to treat the child as a unique individual. Teachers, on the other hand, must deal with groups of children. Even though they may interact differently with individual children, they are still guided by a system which mandates that they provide equalized attention to all children. Such dissonance may be functional for children's growth, since school attendance may help the child move away from his dependence on his family. However, like Bronfenbrenner, Lightfoot believes that two conditions are necessary for such conflict to be positive: parents and teachers must have opportunities to openly articulate their differences and such opportunities must be characterized by a balance of power.

Because Lightfoot believes that conflict due to role differences is inevitable, she believes that parents and teachers should be taught to expect conflict and to handle it productively. Conflicts should be dealt with openly and directly. For parents and teachers to

relate productively, Lightfoot believes that their respective areas of competence and responsibility must be clearly delineated, but that each must also recognize the importance of the role of the other in the child's life. And if both parents and teachers can recognize that the child is an autonomous individual and perceive the child as central to their interactions, the interactions will be characterized by "creative conflict" rather than "negative dissonance."[49]

Lightfoot also points out that role conflict becomes destructive when it is heightened by unequal power relationships, such as those faced by poor and minority parents in dealing with schools. Since Lightfoot, like Bronfenbrenner, views a balance of power as a necessary condition for positive parent-teacher relationships, schools need to look for adaptive strategies, rather than pathologies, in all of the families of their students, and schools need to incorporate the cultures of their pupil's families and communities into the curriculum. Better home-school relations are built when teachers learn about the families of the children they teach rather than just assuming that families should adjust to meet the school's agenda.

Conditions for Positive Interaction

Thus, Lightfoot's theoretical model suggests that, for parent-teacher interaction to be positive, certain conditions are necessary: recognition by parents and teachers that conflict is likely, opportunities for parent-teacher contact, parent and teacher interpersonal skills to deal with such conflict openly, delineation of role responsibilities, and recognition and incorporation by the school of the child's culture, all with the overriding condition of a balance of power.

Both Bronfenbrenner and Lightfoot suggest that strong links between homes and schools have more impact on the development of younger than of older children. But, as was shown earlier, there is strong empirical support for the relationship of parent involvement to academic achievement at all grade levels. Some scholars have suggested that it is not that home-school interaction is less important at certain ages, but rather that changing developmental needs necessitate differing types of parent participation at different grade levels.[50] As the research on intervention programs has demonstrated, direct instruction of children by parents improves academic achievement at the preschool and primary levels when specific educational skills would be expected to be emphasized by the school curriculum. During the later grades the most effective parents' roles vis-a-vis the school might change, possibly to that of supplementer of the child's cultural and recreational experience during later elementary and middle school and to adviser, providing guidance and encouragement, during high school.[51] But the sparse nature of existing research allows only speculation on this question of parent involvement and age.

Implementation of Family-School Programs

As this review of the research literature has demonstrated, there is strong evidence that parent involvement can be a powerful means of enhancing children's schooling. In order for these potential effects to be realized, however, schools must succeed in actually involving parents. This is not always easy. A statewide survey of Maryland schools, for example, found that only about four percent of parents were very active in the school and

that most parents could not or did not become involved.[52] Though limited as yet, there is some research that addresses the issue of how best to implement parent involvement programs to involve a wide range of families.

Programs that successfully involve parents are designed with the expectation that parents will participate. One researcher found that teachers who expected poorly educated and single parents to participate in school activities with their children at home were successful at involving such parents.[53] On the other hand, unsuccessful teachers did not provide many opportunities for parents to be involved, claiming parents lacked the ability or willingness to help. In fact, many researchers have found that most parents are interested in their children's education[54] and in being more involved with their schooling.[55]

Qualities of Effective Programs

Effective programs do, however, include many different ways for parents to participate and do not expect all parents to be involved in the same ways.[56] Some researchers have found that families with time constraints, such as employed[57] or single parents,[58] are less likely to have personal contact with their children's teachers or to volunteer to help out at school. But research has demonstrated that when provided with opportunities and guidance, these parents are as likely or even more likely than other families to participate in educational activities with their children at home.[59] Successful programs view even minor involvement by parents as a basis for later, more active involvement rather than as a lack of interest.[60]

Programs experience more success at involving parents when they tailor activities to meet the needs of the particular parents involved. For example, there is some evidence that programs are more appropriate for urban than for rural families.[61] Programs for single parent families may be most successful when they facilitate the building and strengthening of informal social networks.[62] The planning of parent involvement activities for employed parents may need to take into account different types of scheduling or may need to ask employers to change leave policies.[63]

As was stated earlier, programs for families of economically disadvantaged children need to be designed with obtainable goals and objectives where parents and schools share responsibility for children's learning. Another issue that is important to consider during design and implementation of such programs is that the parent's perceptions of the program need to be assessed. If program planners do not understand how parents view programs, they will be ineffectual at best and harmful at worst. Programs could convince parents that they are not very good teachers of their children.[64] They may threaten the parent's status in some low income and minority communities where "people believe either that educational institutions are not amenable to change or that they are irrelevant to the needs of the community."[65] Again, they may weaken the parent's status in the eyes of the child if "the parent is perceived as acting in a manner determined by an agent external to the family constellation, a situation all too familiar to children on welfare."[66]

Another consideration in planning programs to successfully improve the school achievement of children in low income families is that schools may need to make a special effort to help parents understand expected standards of achievement. Researchers have

noted that the lower income parents they interviewed knew less about school programs than middle class parents[67] and that they wanted to have more information about the school program[68] and their children's progress.[69] Although it is possible that schools provide poorly educated parents with less information than more advantaged parents, there is no evidence to suggest that this is the case. Research does suggest, however, that middle class parents, having experienced a greater degree of success in school themselves, may have a better frame of reference for assessing how their children are doing in school.[70] One researcher, for example, noted the difficulty he had involving economically disadvantaged parents in a proposed program. Seventy percent of the parents, all of whose children were performing poorly in math, did not think their children had a math problem because their children's grades were as good as those of other children they knew.[71] The research on family influences on education cited earlier shows that parental expectations for educational achievement strongly affect children's actual school achievement. To help economically disadvantaged parents form realistic and accurate expectations, schools may need to make an extra effort to provide relevant information on the school program and achievement standards.[72]

Different Levels of Involvement

Although comprehensive programs that include several types of possible activities for family involvement are the ideal, sometimes even small efforts, if creative and matched to the needs of a particular community, can be powerful. An example is an experiment conducted in a first grade classroom in a rural area where contact between families and the school was almost nonexistent.[73] In order to involve parents in some way, the researcher asked the teacher to record a short, daily telephone message which reported present and future class activities and homework assignments. Parents were sent a letter informing them about the message service and providing them with a special number that they could call at all hours. Parental interest was extremely high with approximately one call per student per day recorded, demonstrating that the parents were interested in obtaining information about their children's school activities when it was convenient and nonthreatening for them to do so. Children's spelling scores improved as a result of the program. And the teacher was enthusiastic; recording a message took little of her time each day and the rate of parental compliance with nonacademic requests such as having the child bring something to school was much higher when such requests were included on the recorded message.

There is some evidence that implementation of parent involvement programs may be most successful when they are begun at transition points—when children are entering a new school or a new level of schooling. For example, researchers have found that parental interest in children's schooling is extremely high during the first few weeks before and after kindergarten entrance[74] and that parents are more involved for the first few months after a family has moved to a new school.[75]

In mounting parent involvement programs, it is essential that school personnel realize that families will always vary in the degree to which they wish to or are able to become involved in their children's schooling.[76] Schools must ensure that teachers treat the children of participating and nonparticipating children equally. But school efforts at involving parents are worthwhile regardless of the level of involvement; there is much empirical evidence that demonstrates that all children may benefit when even a few parents are involved.[77]

Summary

This review has examined the research literature on the role of the family in children's education at home and school. Although many questions remain to be addressed empirically, existing research supports the following conclusions:

1. Families provide the child's first educational environment; the family strongly influences the child's intellectual growth and school achievement.

2. The family's socioeconomic or other status is less important in determining children's school success than are specific family attitudes and behaviors.

3. Specific family processes that are related to higher school achievement include holding high educational and occupational aspirations, maintaining warm and supportive relationships, providing clear and consistent discipline, organizing time and space for academic tasks, and reinforcing verbal and thinking skills.

4. More effective schools have higher levels of parent involvement.

5. Parent programs in preschool and elementary schools, in which parents are expected to teach or reinforce their children's learning through educational activities at home, can directly affect children's school success.

6. Parent involvement programs are most effective when they are comprehensive, i.e., they include frequent communication as well as interpersonal contact; they include a wide variety of possible parental roles.

7. Parent-teacher interactions characterized by a balance of power are more likely to be effective.

8. Some degree of conflict between families and schools may be inevitable, but such conflict can have positive effects on children when parents and teachers have increased opportunities for interaction, training in interpersonal skills, delineation of individual role responsibilities, and when schools recognize and incorporate the families' culture in the curriculum.

9. The benefits of parent involvement in school programs are not confined to early grades; there are strong effects from involving parents continuously through high school, although the most effective roles at each level are not yet known.

10. Parent programs are more likely to successfully involve parents when they are designed with high expectations for parent involvement, when they provide a variety of ways for parents to be involved, and when they accommodate the needs and perceptions of the particular families to be involved.

Research effectively highlights the family's essential role in supporting and enhancing the education of children. Further, it demonstrates that the ideal situation is one in which the family and the school serve as mutually supportive partners:

> The relationship between family and school is comparable to that of the right and left hemispheres of the brain. Both are necessary. Both are complementary, nonduplicating, unique and vital. (Rich, 1985)[78]

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