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ABSTRACT

This study focused on urban public schools in an effort to: (1) gather further information about the nature and extent of parent-involvement attitudes and practices in public inner-city schools; and (2) investigate the relationships among socio-demographic factors that previously have been found to be crucial for parent participation, parent perceptions of teacher practices, and actual parent involvement. The study predicted that perceived teacher outreach has stronger associations with parent involvement than do socio-demographic variables. Specifically, the study hypothesized that the more teacher outreach parents perceive, the higher their involvement levels will be both at home and at school. Parents from three inner-city elementary schools in a large Midwestern city were surveyed. Findings indicated that parents whose children attend inner-city public schools make significant efforts to be involved in their child's education both at home and at school, in spite of adverse conditions such as low education and Socio-economic Status. However, several forms of school involvement, such as volunteering in the classroom, did not occur frequently. Parent perception of teacher outreach was the only variable that was statistically significant in predicting parent involvement both at home and at school. (Contains 21 references.) (EV)

Laboratory for Student Success

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The Mid-Atlantic Regional Educational Laboratory at Temple University
Center for Research in Human Development and Education

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The research reported herein is supported in part by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) of the U.S. Department of Education through a grant to the Laboratory for Student Success (LSS) at the Temple University Center for Research in Human Development and Education (CRHDE). The opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect the position of the supporting agencies, and no official endorsement should be inferred.

L98-14 Abstract

What Every Educator Should Know...
About the Changing Social Policy Landscape and Efforts to Ensure Student Success

Shelly Hara, Bill Shepardson, and Cynthia Brown

Educators need to be aware of and involved in changes occurring in human services, health care, youth development, and economic development. They must also look carefully at recent changes in federal education policy to determine how they can be better partners in comprehensive approaches to supporting children and families. This issue brief examines; how policies and programs for children and families are changing, specific changes occurring in human services, health care, economic development, youth development, and education; the implications of those trends and developments for educators and school-community partnerships; and the opportunities for school-community partnerships to play a key role in improving the lives and chances of children and their families in this new policy context.

Parents' Perceptions of Teacher Outreach and Parent Involvement in Children's Education

Evanthia N. Patrikakou and Roger P. Weissberg

In recent years, parent involvement has been in the center of multidisciplinary research efforts which examine how parents influence their children's academic, social, and emotional development (see for example, Booth & Dunn, 1996). Findings suggest that effective school-home relationships can be the catalyst for student success (Eccles & Harold, 1996; Epstein & Dauber, 1991). However, as Bronfenbrenner (1986; p.727) has noted, "research in this sphere has been heavily one-sided" with the majority of studies focusing on family influences on children's performance. In contrast, few studies have examined effects that school experiences can have on families.

Different models have attempted to encompass the complexity of influences and effects that home and school exert on each other. For example, Eccles and Harold (1996) emphasized the impact that beliefs and attitudes have on both parent and teacher practices. The model includes various influences ranging from general demographics to more specific parent, school, and community characteristics. In this model, direct effects are drawn between teacher and parent beliefs about the school and the roles that they can play, teacher beliefs and teacher practices, as well as parent beliefs and parent practices. However, there is no effect between teacher practices and parents' beliefs (see Figure 1). This link seems important because (a) studies which examined this relationship indicate that parent perceptions of teacher practices can be as critical for the levels of parent involvement as teacher practices per se (Epstein, 1983), and (b) it is possible to modify teacher practices and, through them, affect parent involvement. Specifically, it has been shown that parents are more likely to be actively involved in their child's education if they perceive schools to have strong parent outreach programs. When parents believe that their child's teacher is doing many things to get them involved in their child's education, they tend to become

more involved in the educational process (Dauber & Epstein, 1993). Parent perceptions of teachers' attitudes and practices were also shown to be more influential on parent involvement than background variables, such as race, marital or work status (Dauber & Epstein, 1993; Epstein 1986). In general, when parents perceive that the school invests in parent outreach behaviors and practices, they respond positively and get involved in learning activities both at school and at home. Figure 1 depicts the path that represents the relationship between teacher practices and parent perceptions which is one major focus of the present study.

Smith et al. (1997) provided additional evidence about the importance of parents' perceptions of teacher outreach practices and their effects on parent involvement. Specifically, parents' perceptions of involvement opportunities presented by their teacher significantly affected on parent involvement both at school and at home. Parents who perceived that the school had a positive, inviting climate and teachers applying proactive strategies were less likely to report barriers to involvement.

The issue of parent perceptions and involvement is especially important in urban areas. A few studies have indicated that parent involvement in learning activities is low for public schools and low-income, least educated, minority parents (for example see Lichter, 1996). Often having limited education themselves, and also possibly holding negative personal experiences with the educational system, parents in inner-city environments may mistrust and often feel uncomfortable with the school environment (Menacker, Hurwitz, & Weldon, 1988). Cultural and linguistic differences may also lead to additional problems such as paternalism and lower expectations for disadvantaged parents and their children (Moles, 1993). In such cases, teacher outreach and its perception by the parents may play a catalytic role in improving home-school relationships, parent participation, and ultimately enhancing the academic and social development of children.

Additional sociodemographic factors can complicate things even further. Variables such as gender, grade level, family structure, etc., have been shown to affect parent involvement. For

example, as children progress in school there is a decline of parent participation (Snodgrass, 1991). The gender of the child has also been found to relate to parent involvement. Specifically, parents of female students were shown to be more involved both in school and home activities (Hickman, Greenwood, & Miller, 1995). Finally, it has been shown that family structure plays an important role in parent involvement. Epstein (1990) found that although single parents reported that they spend more time more often than two-parent families assisting their children at home with schoolwork, they still believed that they did not have the "time and energy" to fulfill the teacher's expectations of them.

The present study focused on urban public schools in an effort to (a) gather further information about the nature and extent of parent-involvement attitudes and practices in public inner-city schools, and (b) investigate the relationships among sociodemographic factors that have been previously found to be crucial for parent participation, parent perceptions of teacher practices, and actual parent involvement. We predicted that perceived teacher outreach will have stronger associations with parent involvement, than sociodemographic variables will. Specifically, we hypothesized that the more teacher outreach parents perceive as taking place, the higher their involvement levels will be both at home and at school.

Method

Participants

Participants of this study were parents from three inner-city elementary schools in a big Midwestern city. Two of the schools serve a predominantly African-American population, while the third serves primarily Latino students. During the 1996-1997 school year, two of the schools (one of the two serving African-American students, and the one serving primarily Latino students) were placed on "academic probation" because the majority of the students had been scoring below state and national norms on standardized tests.

Parents were surveyed if they had a child attending a pre-kindergarten through third-grade classroom. The parent sample consists of 246 parents from all three schools. The average return rate was 64%. The majority of respondents (84%) were the mother or stepmother of the child. Fifty-two percent of the respondents said that the child's other parent was not living at the same home with the child. Overall, 20% of the parents in the sample had a child in pre-kindergarten, 23% had a kindergartner, 20% a first grader, 16% a second grader, and 21% a third grader. Fifty-eight percent of parents had a girl and 42% a boy. Seventeen percent of the parent filling the questionnaire reported as having grade school education, 27% reported some high school, 22% had a high school diploma or GED, 20% reported having some college or vocational training, and 4% held a college degree. The education reported for the child's other parent is 22% grade school, 29% some high school, 31% high school diploma or GED, 11% had some college experience or vocational training, and 7% held a college degree. As far as employment is concerned, 60% of parents completing the questionnaire were unemployed, 12% held part-time jobs, and 28% had a full-time job. It was also reported that 44% of the child's other parent was unemployed, 8% had a part-time job, and 48% held a full-time job. Table 1 presents detailed demographic information about the parents surveyed.

Measure

The parent survey used in the present study was developed as a collaborative effort between the School-Family project at the University of Illinois at Chicago, a collaborative site of the Mid-Atlantic Laboratory of Student Success at Temple University, and personnel at the participating schools. Based on feedback from practitioners and experts in the field, the measure underwent several revisions. English and Spanish versions of the survey were created. The questionnaire consisted of 37 items and covered the following areas: demographics, parent involvement at home, parent involvement at school, parent perceptions about teacher outreach to parents, and parent willingness to expand his/her involvement in a variety of ways.

Procedure

Surveys were distributed to parents through their children in the Spring of 1997. Classroom teachers handed every child a manila envelope which included a cover letter and the questionnaire. In the case of the Latino school both English and Spanish versions of the cover letter and the questionnaire were included in the packets. The cover letter informed parents about the purpose of the survey and the school's partnership with UIC. It also reassured parents that their responses would remain confidential. A confidentiality clause also appeared at the top of the survey. Parents were given a week to return the surveys. The majority of the surveys were returned within the first two weeks following distribution. The follow-up process, which was conducted in classrooms where the response rate was low (below 30%), yielded some additional completed questionnaires placing the return rate at 64%. Data were entered by trained SFP staff and 100% of entries were verified by another staff member.

Variables

This study explored eight sociodemographic and background variables, a measure of parents' perception of student outreach, and two measures of actual parent involvement.

Single item variables

1. Gender: Males were coded 0 and females were coded 1.
2. Grade level: Grade levels were coded from 1 to 5, with 1 = Pre-Kindergarten and 5 = Grade 3.
3. Parent's education: The parent filling the questionnaire was asked to check his/her highest educational level. Responses ranged from 1 to 5; with 1 = grade school and 5 = College degree.
4. Other parent's education: Respondents were also asked to check the educational level of the child's other parent. In accordance with the previous item, responses ranged from 1 to 5, with 1 = grade school and 5 = college degree.

5. Parent's employment status Parents were asked whether they were employed full-time, part-time or not employed at that time; responses were coded 2,1, and 0, respectively.

6. Other parent's employment status Participants were also asked to check the employment status of the child's other parent. Coding corresponded with that of the previous variable (0=not employed now; 1= employed part-time; 2=employed full time).

7. Race: Respondents from the African American schools were coded 0 andparticipants from the Latino school were coded 1.

8. Family structure: Parents were asked whether their child's other parent was living in the same home. Positive responses were coded 1 and negative were coded 0.

Scales

The scale of Parent Involvement at Home (PIH), which served as the dependent variable in one of the equations, was comprised by eight items that investigated various kinds of parent practices which contribute to the enhancement of academic and social development (see Table 2 for detailed item information). The Cronbach's α of the PIH scale was .77. The Parent Involvement at School (PISC) scale, which was the dependent variable in the second equation, consisted of six items that measured various ways in which parents are involved in their child's education at school (α=.71). Table 3 provides detailed information about the items in the PISC scale. Finally, the scale of Perceived Teacher Outreach (PTO) includes ten items that measured the parents' perceptions of various teacher outreach behaviors and practices that encourage and reinforce parent involvement (α=.87). Table 4 presents information about the items in this scale.

Analysis

Frequencies as well as regression analyses were used to collect information about the descriptive and predictive nature of the variables under investigation in this paper. The statistical package SPSS was used for all analyses.

Results

The results section is divided in two parts. The first presents descriptive findings for parent involvement at home, parent involvement at school, and perceived teacher outreach. The second part includes results from the regression analysis.

Descriptive Findings

Parent involvement at home: According to parents, the most common forms of parent involvement at home was checking to see that the child's homework was completed (74%) and actively helping the child with homework (68%). The behavior that parents reported as occurring less frequently was reading to their child often (26%). Table 2 presents detailed percentages of the parent involvement at home items.

Parent involvement at school: Parents reported that their most frequent type of involvement at school was to pick up their child's report card (71%). Forms of involvement that were never or rarely practiced were volunteering in the child's classroom (81%) and going to parent-teacher conferences (71%). In addition, parents reported that they never or rarely called or went to see their child's teacher (53%), or asked the teacher how they can help their child at home (69%). Table 3 presents detailed information onPISC item frequencies.

Parents' perceptions of teacher outreach: Parents were asked about different forms of outreach that their child's teacher was practicing (see Table 4 for details). Eighty percent of parents reported that the teacher notified them when their child is in trouble at school and 71% said that the teacher let them know when the child was doing something well at school. Most of the parents (74%) felt that it was easy to talk or meet with their child's teacher and that the teacher answered their questions in a helpful way (77%). Ways of parent outreach that were reported as applied less frequently include teacher encouraging parents to come to school (55%), and offering specific suggestions to parents to help their child do better (63%).

Regression Analysis

The process followed for each of the two dependent variables (PIH & PISC) included two steps: First, each outcome was regressed on sociodemographic factors, and second, the variable of parent perception of teacher outreach (PPTO) entered the equation. It was then tested whether, after the inclusion of the PPTO variable, the change in the R^2 was statistically significant; that is, whether the significance level of the change in the F-test (DF) was less than .05, which would suggest that PPTO adds statistically significant explanatory power to the model.

For the PIH equation, including the eight independent variables representing sociodemographics, the F- test failed to reach statistical significance (F= 1.491; p=.170). However, when the variable of parent perceptions of teacher outreach entered the PIH equation in the second step, the F was statistically significant (F=3.620; p=.0006) and the R^2 accounted for 25% of the variance in parent involvement at home (see Table 5). As expected, the DF was statistically significant (P<.0001). When the PPTO variable entered the equation the R^2 more than doubled, increasing by 127%. The two variables that had a statistically significant impact on home involvement were parents' perception of teacher outreach (b= .596; p<.0001) and race (b= -.286; p<.018). Based on the coding of the variable of race, the sign of the coefficient indicated that African-Americans were more involved with their children's schoolwork at home. None of the other sociodemographic variables such as parents' education, employment status, or family structure had any statistically significant impact on actual parent involvement at home.

For the PISC equation, including only the eightsociodemographic variables, the F- test again failed to reach statistical significance (F= 1.775; p=.091). Once more, however, when the variable of parent perceptions of teacher outreach entered the PISC equation in the second step, the F became statistically significant (F=2.804; p=.006) and the R^2 accounted for 20% of the variance in parent involvement at school (see Table 5). As expected, the DF was statistically significant (P<.002). With the PPTO variable included in the equation the R^2

increased by 67%. The variable of parents' perception of teacher outreach was once again statistically significant (b=.367; p<.002). The second variable that reached statistical significance was family structure (single vs two-parent families). Specifically, the coefficient (b= .251; p <.02) indicated that two-parent households were more involved in school activities than their single-parent counterparts.

Discussion

The present study gathered data on parent-involvement attitudes and practices in inner-city schools, and explored the relationship between perceived teacher outreach and parent involvement at home and at school. Findings indicate that parents whose children attend inner-city public schools make significant efforts to be involved in their child's education both at home and at school in spite of averse conditions such as low education and SES. As Bronfenbrenner (1979; p. 849) noted, "whatever the socioeconomic level, ethnic group, or type of family structure, we have yet to meet a parent who is not deeply committed to ensuring the well-being of his or her child. Most families are doing the best they can under difficult circumstances." This evidence is in accordance with that of previous studies which have also found that parents in the inner city generally display positive attitudes toward their children's education (Reynolds & Gill, 1994).

However, it must be noted that certain parent practices which have been shown to be extremely important for children's cognitive and academic development were not as widely practiced as expected. For example, reading to their child was something that few parents (26%) practiced regularly at home. This finding points to the need to increase our efforts in informing parents about different ways they can contribute to their child's education and, therefore, extend classroom learning to the home environment. As Walberg (1984) noted the "curriculum of the home" is alterable and can lead to enormous benefits in academic achievement. Parents who are aware of the benefits of improved learning conditions at home, as well as, willing to learn specific

ways in which they can implement such changes, can have large positive effects on their children's education.

Schools can play an instrumental role in disseminating to parents meaningful strategies with which they can be involved in their child's education. This goal can be achieved if there is proactive, regular, and persistent communication between home and school, and a partnership between parents and teachers is established and maintained[1]. Specifically, in order for parents to be involved in a meaningful way, they should be kept informed regularly about class rules, expectations, and current activities. Letting parents know about classroom routines, such as quizzes and homework, involves parents in the educational process and provides them with a structured opportunity to be involved in their child's education (School-Family Partnership Project, 1997).

Home-school communications can become even more effective if parents and teachers communicate with each other using the best ways (phone calls, notes, home-school journal, etc.) they can be reached. The survey's 64% return rate was an adequate one for research purposes and it also indicated that the majority of the parents in these urban schools were sufficiently interested in parent involvement to contribute their opinion on the matter. On the other hand, for the remaining 36% of parents who did not respond, the written form may not have been the optimal way for them to be reached. If parents and teachers inform each other about the best ways they can be reached, the frustration of not reaching each other can be minimized, and, most importantly, the message can go through.

Findings also indicated that several forms of school involvement did not occur frequently. For example, 59% of parents reported that they had never volunteered in their child's classroom. In addition, 45% of them stated that the teacher had never or seldomly encouraged them to volunteer at school. Given the fact that volunteering is not an uncommon practice for early grades, one wonders why this behavior was not more extensively applied in these inner-city schools.

Although involving parents as classroom volunteers may seem desirable in theory, fostering high quality participation that benefits students, parents, and teachers requires considerable time, efforts, and skills on the teacher's part. With more support and training, it would be possible to increase teacher outreach and constructive parent volunteerism in the classroom.

Other behaviors of parent involvement at school pointed to less communication between home and school. For example, 36% of parents reported that they have never participated in a parent-teacher conference and 32% had never asked the teacher how they could help their child with schoolwork. When one combines these findings with results from the regression analysis, which indicated that perceptions of teacher outreach are crucial for parent involvement, the importance of reaching out to parents becomes even more pronounced. A teacher from one of the participating inner-city schools described the solution best: "Our school can extend itself more to the parent. Sometimes the parents need a little push or motivation. If a parent can't come to the school to support their child, we must go to them."

Parent perception of teacher outreach was the only variable that was statistically significant in predicting parent involvement both at home and at school. When the variable was added in the equations the R^2 increased dramatically and the F became statistically significant. This is a important finding that emphasizes once again how crucial school factors are as reinforcing agents of parents' behavior. In agreement with previous studies (see for example, Dauber & Epstein, 1993), parent perceptions were found to be more influential than most sociodemographic and background variables. In the case of parent involvement at home, the only variable other than parent perceptions that was statistically significant was race. This finding indicated that, in our sample, African-American parents had higher levels of involvement than Latino parents. One possible explanation for this phenomenon is the language factor. When asked what language they speak, half of the parents from the predominantly Latino school checked the Spanish only option. Without knowing the language and, therefore, the demands of the task sent

home, Latino parents face an additional obstacle in their effort to get involved in their child's learning at home. On the other hand, since the current study involved one Latino and two African-American schools, it is difficult to disentangle whether this finding is actually due to a school effect. Future research might explore the issue using a larger sample of schools.

When predicting parent involvement at school, parent perceptions of teacher outreach was once again the most influential variable. Parents who perceived teachers as extending a helpful hand, as well as encouraging parents to visit the school, were more likely to participate in a variety of school activities. The only other variable that had statistically significant effects on parent involvement at school was family structure. Specifically, if the child's other parent was living at home, parents were more likely to participate in school activities. Based on findings from previous research (e.g., Bernard, 1984; Epstein, 1990; Levine, 1984; Santrock and Tracy, 1978) some teachers may be more positively predisposed to two-parent families than they are to single parent families. Epstein (1990) noted that "teachers who favor traditional families may have difficulty dealing with families who differ from their ideal." Based on this, single parents' lower school participation may be a reaction to the school's or teacher's attitude towards them. In addition, it may be difficult for a single parent who cannot share parenting responsibilities with a spouse to participate in activities that take them out of the home. It seems important to identify and offer supports, such as child care, to single parents so it will be easier for them to connect more with schools.

The present study provided evidence that parent perceptions of teacher outreach is an important contributing factor to parent involvement and, therefore, it should be included in models investigating the issue of parent participation both in home and school activities. In agreement with previous findings (see for example Smith et al., 1997), parent perception of teacher outreach was shown to be a significant factor on the level of parent involvement in children's education. The more parents perceived that teachers extended a partnership to them by keeping them

informed and providing them with the necessary information to maximize participation in learning activities, the higher their involvement with their children's schooling.

The results of the present study are limited to the identification of the phenomenon. They do not directly contribute to an explanation of it. Interviewing parents on the issue of teacher outreach will provide an insight to the reasons why parents are so influenced by their perceptions of teacher outreach, as well as illuminate specific teacher behaviors parents consider as crucial motivation for their participation. Future research should further explore the specifics of the relationship between parent and teacher beliefs and practices. In this way, existing assessment tools can be further refined and interventions can be more successful enhancing home-school relationships.

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Footnotes

1. For obtaining parent and teacher brochures on the topics of parent-teacher communication, report card sharing, and homework you can contact the Laboratory for Student Success services, (1301 Cecil B. Moore Ave., Philadelphia, PA 19122-6091; telephone: 800-892-5550) or the School Family Project at the University of Illinois at Chicago (1007 West Harrison Street, Chicago, IL 60607-7137; fax: 312-355-0559).

The Laboratory for Student Success

The Laboratory for Student Success (LSS) is one of ten regional educational laboratories in the nation funded by the U.S. Department of Education to revitalize and reform educational practice in the service of children and youth.

The mission of the Laboratory for Student Success is to strengthen the capacity of the mid-Atlantic region to enact and sustain lasting systemic educational reform through collaborative programs of applied research and development and services to the field. In particular, the LSS facilitates the transformation of research-based knowledge into useful tools that can be readily integrated into the educational reform process both regionally and nationally. To ensure a high degree of effectiveness, the work of the LSS is continuously refined based on feedback from the field on what is working and what is needed in improving educational practice.

The ultimate goal of the LSS is the formation of a connected system of schools, parents, community agencies, professional organizations, and institutions of higher education that serves the needs of all students and is linked with a high-tech national system for information exchange. In particular, the aim is to bring researchers and research-based knowledge into synergistic coordination with other efforts for educational improvement led by field-based professionals.

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