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Examining Understandings of Parent Involvement in Early Childhood Programs

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Abstract

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The importance of parent involvement in children's development and learning is increasingly recognized in the research literature and in federal and state policies; however, no unified definition of parent involvement exists. This study examined different understandings and definitions of parent involvement in a sample of administrators of Illinois state-funded preschool programs. Ten Illinois preschool administrators were interviewed. Analysis of their remarks found a variety of understandings or definitions of parent involvement, some of which were inclusive of a wide range of activities related to children's development and learning. Those who had a more flexible definition of parent involvement tended to have more positive views of parents and perceived higher levels of involvement. Administrators with narrower definitions of parent involvement appeared to hold more negative views of parents and perceive lower levels of involvement in their programs.

Introduction

Education policies at the federal, state, and local levels in the United States place increasing emphasis on the role of parent involvement in early childhood programs. This is exemplified at the federal level by the Family Engagement in Education Act of 2011, which states that "positive benefits for children, youth, families, and schools are maximized through effective family engagement that . . . is continuous across a child's life from birth through young adulthood" (Family Engagement in Education Act of 2011, Section 3). Similarly, the Illinois State Board of Education (2002, 2011a, 2011b) recognizes parent involvement as a key component of successful early childhood education programs. This trend is due, in part, to a growing body of research on the positive impact of parent involvement on children's brain development (Kirp, 2007; Olds, Sadler, & Kitzman, 2007; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Urdang, 2008), school readiness (Kirp, 2007; Laible, Carlo, & Roesch, 2004; Ritchie & Willer, 2008), and overall early development (Olds et al., 2007; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

Despite the emphasis on the value of parent involvement, different understandings exist of what it means for parents to be involved in a child's development and education. Understandings of parent involvement are the foundation of education policies. They influence what is considered best practice in educational programs and ultimately affect child and family outcomes. Parents and program personnel may find the variety of definitions and expectations to be confusing.

Review of Related Literature

Parent involvement is conceptualized in a variety of ways by an array of national, state, professional, and scholarly sources. For example, in an urban kindergarten, parents of children with speech and reading

challenges practice linking specific phonemes to physical motions to reinforce classroom activities (Kindervater, 2010). A Head Start program launches an initiative to increase father involvement in the classroom (Palm & Fagan, 2008). The Illinois State Board of Education (2011b) sets standards for preschool programs that encourage family/school partnerships where families are invested decision-makers in their child's education.

Conceptualization of Parent Involvement in National Policy

The bipartisan sponsorship of the [Family Engagement in Education Act of 2011](#) illustrated growing support for a broad and flexible conceptualization of parental involvement in children's education. A sense of partnership among key stakeholders is central to both House and Senate versions:

The term *family engagement in education* means a shared responsibility . . . of families and schools for student success, in which schools and community-based organizations are committed to reaching out to engage families in meaningful ways and families are committed to actively supporting their children's learning and development. (Section 12)

This definition can be interpreted to reflect a wide range of possible types of parent involvement.

At the federal level, policy research addressing parent involvement in early childhood education has emphasized parents' role in supporting young children's development of literacy skills (Judkins et al., 2008; National Center for Family Literacy, 2008; O'Donnell, 2008). Reports issued by the National Literacy Panel (National Center for Family Literacy, 2008) and U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences (Judkins, et al., 2008) focus on parents' participation in intervention programs that trained them to teach literacy skills. Judkins et al. (2008) "found a statistically significant relationship between hours of parental participation in parenting education and the quality of their responsiveness to their children" (p. 125).

Implementation of national-level parent involvement policies has been challenging. For example, Duch (2005) critically examined the effectiveness of Head Start and other two-generation programs incorporating parent education, identifying significant barriers to family participation, such as Temporary Assistance to Needy Families work requirements, the need for care of younger children, and psychological stresses on mothers and families. Zellman and Perlman (2006) expressed concern that some forms of parent involvement in child care settings might further reduce the time busy parents can spend with their children. They concluded that effective measurement tools that are valid across early care and education settings are necessary for understanding how to maximize the benefits of parent engagement. Similarly, Dail and Payne (2010) critiqued the National Early Literacy Panel Report, calling for creation of "expanded matrices for evaluating family literacy programs that reflect a more inclusive measure of effectiveness" (p. 330). For parent involvement to be valuable for families and children, its conceptualization should include their perspectives and needs, and its measurement should be meaningful to families and program staff.

Official Understandings of Parent Involvement in Illinois

The Illinois State Board of Education's policy and report guidelines over the last 10 years establish program expectations for supporting the involvement of families from diverse cultural backgrounds (Illinois State Board of Education, 2011a), highlight strategies to expand parent involvement (Illinois State Board of Education, 2011a; Illinois State Board of Education, 2011b), and identify indicators of parent involvement throughout the early childhood years and into kindergarten (Illinois State Board of Education, 2011b).

The Illinois Birth to Three Program Standards (Illinois State Board of Education, 2002) prioritize family involvement. The standards emphasize 1) parental choice in level of family involvement; 2) opportunities for varying levels of participation, including literacy-promoting educational activities for parents; 3) the expectation that staff will support all levels of parent involvement; 4) respect for the family, community, environment, and culture of the child; and 5) establishment of parents as stakeholders involved in leadership and program decision-making.

The Illinois State Board of Education (2011b) identifies key indicators of successful parent involvement in its state-funded preschool program (known as Preschool for All or PFA):

Parents are welcome in the school and their support and assistance are sought; multiple opportunities are available for parents to be involved with school; parents are partners in the decisions that affect children and families; community resources are used to strengthen schools, families and student learning; communication between home and school is regular and two-way; parenting skills are promoted and supported; parents play an integral role in assisting student learning; barriers to family involvement such as transportation and language are reduced; family workers, social workers, and community parent involvement specialists work together to assist parents in obtaining services within the school district and community. (p. 159)

The Preschool for All Implementation Manual (Illinois State Board of Education, 2011b) outlines ways educators and administrators can enhance family partnerships. These include strategies for communication with families, such as arranging conferences for times when child care is available; translating materials for speakers of

languages other than English; conducting home visits; and encouraging participation in program-sponsored activities that provide information to promote parents' sense of self-efficacy and competence in advocating for their children.

The Call for an Expanded Definition

The need for a more unified, inclusive definition of parent involvement has been noted by an array of sources. The National Early Literacy Panel Report noted the effectiveness of parent involvement in literacy interventions (National Center for Family Literacy, 2008). While recognizing that report's significant contributions, Dail and Payne (2010) call for a broadened conceptualization of parent involvement, encouraging inclusion of programs that are "familial and culturally competent" (p. 330). The policy advocacy organization Federation for Community Schools (n.d.) calls upon educators to "expand commonly-held definitions of engagement beyond parents' presence in the school" (p. 8–9). Further, they comment:

Oftentimes, people involved in education and with schools seem to use the term "parent" as a catch-all, referring not just to biological parents and/or "traditional" family structures, but referring also to caregiving adults in a children's lives (i.e., grandparents, guardians, foster parents, older siblings). It is important to intentionally frame a conversation around parent engagement to include **FAMILY** engagement. (p. 8)

The Illinois State Board of Education (2002) has similarly called for attention to family participation, asserting that an early childhood curriculum should reflect "the high priority of family involvement at whatever level each parent chooses ... [and provide] for various levels of parent participation, ranging from enrichment and mentoring to more intensive educational opportunities" (p. 17).

Methods

Qualitative interviews with 10 Illinois preschool administrators were used to explore the relationship between parent involvement definitions and the impact of those definitions on administrators. The following research questions were addressed: 1) What understandings of the term *parent involvement* are expressed by administrators of Illinois preschool programs? 2) Are different understandings of parent involvement associated with particular program practices and with administrators' perceptions of participating families?

Data Collection Procedures

An extreme sample (Miles & Huberman, 1994) of 10 administrators was drawn from state-funded preschool sites that completed the *Illinois Birth to Five Evaluation (Evaluation)* survey in 2008 (Hilado, Kallemeyn, Leow, Lundy, & Israel, 2011). In the *Evaluation*, "high parent involvement programs" had scores of 20 or higher for the five survey questions on parent involvement, confirmed at the time of the interview. Any score below 20 for parent involvement on the *Evaluation* survey was considered to indicate low involvement.

The original sampling criteria used the quadrant method to determine four categories of participants based on the extreme frequency of scores for social resources and levels of parent involvement on the *Evaluation* survey (Hilado et al., 2011). For this study, the four categories were collapsed into two categories to reflect programs reporting high levels of parent involvement and low levels of parent involvement. Out of 843 participants who completed the original survey, 10 interviewees were selected based on sampling category, region of the state in which their programs were located, and type of program, with a goal of identifying a diverse participant pool. The final sample included five administrators who described parent involvement as "high" on the *Evaluation* survey (labeled HP1, HP2, HP3, etc.) and five administrators who described parent involvement as "low" on the survey (labeled LP1, LP2, LP3, etc.).

The final sample comprised six school-based programs, three community-based programs, and one military-based program, all located in "collar counties" surrounding Cook County or in central and southern Illinois. The 10 selected administrators were asked to participate in semistructured in-person interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) lasting 45–60 minutes. Three of the 10 participants completed phone interviews because of travel constraints. All were asked to describe the characteristics of families served, the types of parent involvement they observed in their programs, and the successes and challenges their programs faced in engaging parents. These questions were not covered by the original survey.

Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed and summaries sent to participants for member-checking. Confirmation of accuracy was requested before analysis proceeded. The transcripts were analyzed using an inductive analytic approach; interview data were organized into patterns, categories, and themes that were constantly refined into more abstract units of information (Cresswell, 2009). The 10 interviews were reviewed for themes from the related literature and for emergent themes that arose from the interviews.

When all interviews were coded with these initial themes, a matrix was developed to compare the themes

across the four participant categories based on the sampling criteria. After combining, excluding, clustering, and redefining themes, we focused on three themes that were evident across all 10 interviews. Interview data were then interpreted and compared based on whether participants had reported high or low parent involvement.

Findings

Three themes were identified from the interviews with preschool program administrators: parent involvement definitions and understanding, program and family contexts, and correlation of administrator's understanding of parent involvement to other factors.

Definitions and Understandings of Parent Involvement

The participating preschool administrators expressed a range of definitions of parent involvement. All respondents reporting low levels of parent involvement referred to parent involvement as attending school programs or activities such as parent-teacher conferences, parent education programs, and assisting in the classroom. One respondent, for example, commented on the number of times the parent library had been used—"the parent library only has four check-outs a month"—and referred to challenges related to home visits:

Most families are resistant to someone coming in the home, so we do the visits at the center. I think it is hard to go from work and then go home and feel they have to clean their homes, so we schedule it at the centers right after work to make sure it actually happens. We want to make it work for them. We offer the visits on the Saturday. (LP1)

This respondent also reported low parent participation despite these accommodations and described levels of parent involvement in her program as low. Another respondent based her report of low involvement mainly on parents' attention to homework assignments and attendance at class activities:

We're struggling [to engage parents]. We try to do field trips once a month. I send homework home once a week, like activities to do with their child, and a newsletter of what we do weekly. ... It seems like they do work in the beginning of the school year and then they decrease. Like the first project, the first family night, we have a big turn out and then it starts decreasing. It's already decreasing. (LP4)

All respondents reporting high levels of parent involvement had more flexible definitions of parent involvement that focused on the effort parents expended to be involved and the quality of the time spent in the home and in the school to support the child. For example, one of these respondents recognized specific challenges to parent participation, saying, "I know some of it is transportation because some of the parents don't have cars. That's a big one. We don't have any buses that come by our school, so that's one. Another one is TV is on at night, and we can't compete." Despite these barriers, she felt every effort to attend a parent night or daytime activities should be recognized; she described parents in her program as "very involved" because of the effort they expended (HP1).

Another respondent reported similar challenges but expressed a flexible definition of parent involvement and a favorable view of parents and their levels of engagement in her program:

It's just been a challenge [with transportation]. But the families have really stepped up and been really good about "bringing other children with me," so we've been able to work internally linking one family with another family willing to transport children with them. But we are then seeing families every day now that, because they are there to pick-up and drop-off, we get a lot more parent involvement than other programs. (HP2)

For this respondent, parent involvement included any efforts to collaborate or to get children and other parents involved in the program.

Another respondent extended the definition of parent involvement to include participation in committee work. Her program had a Parent Action Committee that included the program director and community members; its purpose was to work within the community to support families. She reported having invited parents to participate and noted that:

All our [Parent Action Committee] meetings are held in Spanish ... and when I'm at the meetings, [the parents] work really hard that I understand and it's a working relationship and it's not just us telling. I've handed this [responsibility] to the parents, and we're starting a recycling program. (HP3)

This respondent felt the engagement in community activities would not only support the families and the children in a positive way but would also have a positive impact on the community. The parents in her program were taking the lead on a recycling program and were engaged in committee work that directly impacted programming for their children and their community. She considered this kind of work to be parent

involvement even though some of its related activities did not directly affect children or the program.

A respondent who had commented favorably about parents' efforts noted that she considered parents to be very involved when they created support networks with other families outside the classroom. These parents did not necessarily participate directly in early childhood program activities, but their social networks in the community provided a structure to keep parents connected to the program (HP1). She stated, "We try to network families together and we try to connect them with play groups and that sort of thing. It's very interactive" (HP1). She considered such interactions outside the preschool program to be parent involvement because the activities supported children's learning and development.

Such flexible perspectives focused on parents' efforts to be involved even if they could not attend every possible activity and on the quality of their networks and interactions. Respondents who defined parent involvement broadly and who described high levels of parent involvement in their programs were more likely to express a positive view of their participants than those with narrower definitions.

Influence of Program and Family Contexts

Analysis of interview data indicated that program and family contextual factors are associated with the extent to which parents are involved in their children's education and may influence how administrators understand parent involvement. Even administrators with broader definitions of parent involvement (e.g., parent involvement as any home, school, or community activity aimed at supporting a child in school) noted that their programs faced barriers that inhibited some forms of parent involvement. For instance, three respondents reported that their preschool programs were in rural areas without access to public transportation, making it difficult for families to attend school activities (HP1, HP2, HP4). Another administrator's state-funded program was housed within a private for-profit child care center, which she felt created an incorrect perception of the program as simply a child care and not an educational setting, which resulted in parents showing little dedication to or interest in parent engagement activities hosted by the center (LP3). Two respondents reported that their programs served ethnically diverse populations, but their staff did not reflect that diversity or understand the families' needs. Both reported that their staff faced challenges in building trust and communicating with the families and indicated that this cultural disconnect might affect some parents' levels of involvement in their programs (HP5, LP3).

Several respondents noted that individual family circumstances such as unemployment and overall limited resources affected parents' engagement in school activities and in learning activities with children at home even when they know the value of being involved. "Employment has been the issue," one administrator said. "Our low [socioeconomic status] families are the most hit since their hours are being cut. ... A lot of our families work evenings and that has been difficult. A lot of them have very limited resources" (LP1).

Faced with such challenges, parents had to attend to priorities other than school-related activities (HP3, LP1, LP4, LP5). A respondent who had reported high levels of involvement offered her perspective on why some parents might be less engaged:

I think that many of our parents are very involved in their own lives, their own difficulties, their own problems, and it manifests itself, at least on the surface, as parents who don't care. I still believe that parents do care, but some are better equipped. They were dealt a better hand in life and [are more] emotionally equipped to respond to their children. (HP4)

Another respondent who reported low involvement and whose program was on a military base commented on the impact of family circumstances on parent involvement:

It's the timing. We are fighting a war right now. Many people are deployed so on base, people are doing the work of three or four people in their place and they just don't have the time to break away for parent[-child] events, but they know the importance of being with children. (LP5)

Correlation of Understanding of Parent Involvement to Other Factors

Analysis revealed some correlations between participants' understandings of parent involvement and several other factors mentioned in their interviews. For example, participants who recognized challenges faced by families tended to also report having policies that were sensitive to parent needs. Although some respondents seemed to imply that they avoided interaction with parents, others indicated that they believed their personal understandings of parent involvement and their attitudes toward the parents might positively influence parent engagement. Several reported that they developed relationships with parents regardless of level of involvement, and some indicated that they believed that parents who felt a strong relationship with a program were more likely to put additional effort into attending family involvement activities (HP1, HP3, HP4, LP1, LP5).

The challenges to parent engagement reported by interviewees, such as low family income, limited resources, unemployment, and isolation, were similar across programs. Those who held broad understandings of parent involvement, however, were more likely to report that their programs made extensive efforts to engage families despite the challenges. The flexibility of respondents' definitions of parent involvement was also

associated with whether they described parents in generally positive or negative terms. Interviewees who defined parent involvement more broadly generally expressed more positive perspectives on parents' willingness and ability to support their children in school. For example, one respondent who reported high levels of parent involvement spoke at length about how parents did their best to participate, which she believed demonstrated how much they cared for their children even if they did not attend every school event (HP1). This respondent expressed the idea that the program has a responsibility to adapt its expectations and resources in order to support parents as much as possible.

We noted that interviewees with broader definitions and more positive views of parents were more likely to have reported higher levels of parent involvement in the original *Evaluation* survey (Hilado et al., 2011). Some respondents labeled the parents who did not attend parent engagement activities as proud, lazy, negligent, or irresponsible (HP2, HP4, LP5). Those with narrower definitions and understandings of parent involvement tended to express more negative views of their participants. Those with broader, more flexible definitions and understandings of parent involvement tended to perceive parents as more involved. Moreover, the perception of higher levels of involvement tended to be (but was not always) associated with a more positive view of parents. Respondents who indicated high levels of parent involvement and held more positive views of parents also reported better relationships with participants (HP1, HP2, HP3, HP4, HP5) and greater ability to adapt their practices to fit families' involvement needs (HP1, HP3, HP4). Those with the less flexible understanding of parent involvement were less likely to see a need to adapt their practices. For example, LP4 stated "there was [parent] involvement, but now it's just decreasing. It just always goes down. I don't know. It's just the way it is." She and several other interviewees expressed a general sense that their programs had done everything possible to support and engage parents. This perspective did not appear to lead to more proactive approaches; the status quo—low levels of parent involvement—persisted.

Discussion

Initial questions for this study were 1) "What understandings of 'parent involvement' are expressed by administrators of Illinois preschool programs?" and 2) "Are different understandings of parent involvement associated with particular reported program practices and with administrators' perceptions of participating families?" Our analysis indicates that, in fact, administrators of Illinois preschool programs have a variety of understandings or definitions of parent involvement. Our findings also suggest some correlations among participants' understandings of parent involvement, the parent involvement practices they reported, and their expressed perceptions of families served by their programs.

Varied Understandings of 'Parent Involvement'

Respondents' understandings of parent involvement showed a similar range to that found in the research and professional literature and in education policies. Some participants used a narrow definition of parent involvement, limited to parent participation in parent-teacher conferences, parent education programs, and volunteering in the classroom. Other administrators had broader definitions that included any activity in support of a child in school, the home, or the community, such as traditional parent involvement activities (e.g., conferences, volunteering), completing "homework," serving on committees, or participating in networks of parents in the community.

Program Contexts, Family Characteristics, and Understandings of Parent Involvement

Regardless of understanding or definitions of parent involvement, participants reported that program factors and particular family characteristics affected the extent to which parents were involved in their children's preschool programs. Some programs in rural areas were unable to provide transportation to help families get to parent involvement activities. Some were serving specific populations whose needs and challenges affected involvement, such as military families awaiting a parent's deployment or low-income families facing challenging unemployment and limited resources. Some correlation was noted between participants' awareness of the possible role of such contextual factors and their operating definitions of parent involvement.

Consistent with the literature, for the 10 administrators participating in this study, holding a broad definition of parent involvement was consistent with offering a wide range of opportunities for parent engagement. We found that participating administrators with more inclusive understandings of parent involvement tended to view the families served by their programs in a relatively positive light. They reported parent involvement practices that were flexible and recognized a wide range of parental efforts to support children in and outside of the school setting, and they viewed lower parent involvement as evidence of a need to be more collaborative and flexible to support family engagement. Administrators with narrower definitions of parent involvement and more negative views of parents whom they saw as less engaged tended to place responsibility for low involvement on the parent rather than the program; they were likely to also express less willingness to make changes to involve families because they believed that regardless of their efforts, the status quo of low involvement would be maintained.

Recommendations for Future Research

Despite efforts to define effective parent involvement and identify its indicators, more research is needed to identify parent involvement formats and implementation strategies that are effective across settings. For example, there are very few resources to guide preschool programs interested in increasing parent involvement levels through innovative programming and outreach. Additionally, this study did not examine the development of participants' understandings of parent involvement; further research is needed to determine how these understandings develop and how other factors (e.g., federal and state policies or family and program contexts) might affect them. Future research might also focus on the implications of administrators' conceptualizations of parent involvement for the quality of program/family relationships and for families' experiences in their children's early childhood settings.

Policy Implications

The diversity of understandings about parent involvement noted here is an issue with implications for policy at both the federal and state levels. Federal definitions of parent involvement have become the basis for education policies across the country, thus some similarities in parent involvement guidelines can be found across states. At the same time, Illinois also provides tailored definitions and guidelines for parent involvement in state-funded programs. For example, some Illinois programs related to children birth to 5 years old, including Prevention Initiative programs (for birth to 3) and Preschool for All (for ages 3 to 5), have unique working definitions and understandings of parent involvement that may not align with those used in other states. Guidelines for best practices in supporting parent involvement must recognize the existing diversity in definitions and understandings at the national, state, local, and program levels.

Training for early childhood professionals on parent engagement strategies must acknowledge the range of definitions, helping administrators to consider characteristics of the program and the families to ensure that parent involvement goals and expectations are realistic and appropriate to those being served. Programs should be accountable for engaging parents and improving programs to meet the diverse needs of the families they serve. When programs struggle to find ways to engage families, technical support should be available to help administrators identify challenges and develop realistic strategies for supporting parent involvement with their children's development and learning. In turn, administrators need guidelines for defining parent involvement, as well as training on how to understand and engage parents in a manner that considers program and family characteristics.

Limitations

This study examined the perspectives of 10 early childhood preschool program administrators in Illinois, thus the breadth of possible opinions among administrators is not entirely reflected in the sample. Additionally, important contextual factors vary among programs and among families; what works well in one center may not be useful in all programs. Despite these limitations, the sample used in this article was chosen because of their expert views on administering preschool programs for children at-risk for school failure. Their insights provide an entrée to thinking about the issues presented in this article and a launch point for further research and dialogue. We present no child or family outcome data; however, our findings suggest possible directions for future research on potential correlations between particular definitions and practices of parent involvement and outcomes for children and families.

Conclusion

Research supports the importance of parent involvement during the early years. Despite its recognized value and the policies in place to encourage it across early childhood programs, varying definitions and understandings of parent involvement among program administrators may result in mixed messages regarding expectations for programs and families. Goals and implementation protocols for parent involvement vary from program to program. More research is needed on the potential impact of administrators' understandings of involvement and their perceptions regarding families on children's and families' experiences.

One purpose of early childhood programs is to prepare young children to begin school. Parent involvement is a critical component of preparation for school readiness; thus it is worthwhile to examine how to support parent engagement beginning at the programmatic level. This support can begin with a solid understanding of what parent involvement optimally entails, awareness on the part of administrators of the importance of positive, empowering expectations for involvement, and openness to adapting those expectations for children and families who most need the support.

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