

**Research on Parent Involvement:  
Where We've Been and Where We Need to Go<sup>1</sup>**

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Parent involvement has been recognized at many levels as an important aspect of a child's education. In addition to research that has supported the role of parents in the education of their children for decades, more recently, education accountability legislation has resulted in an expanded interest in the role of the parent in their children's education. For example, in the United States, parent involvement is the eighth goal of the *National Education Goals of 2000*, is a key component of the *No Child Left Behind Act*, and many states have enacted state level legislation (e.g. South Carolina, Texas, North Carolina, California). While education policies in Canada have their focus at a provincial level, increased attention has been paid in recent years to the role that parents play in the education in the Canadian context.

To date there has been a rich literature on parent involvement including a number of theories put forward and research on the effects of parent involvement. While much has been written on parent involvement and there is a strong interest in the role of parent involvement in supporting positive effects on student it is our premise that there are some very important gaps in this literature, most notably, and unfortunately, very few studies in which parent involvement practices in the Canadian context are examined. Our primary goal is to highlight some of the important findings in the literature on parent involvement to date and to suggest areas where additional research and practice should focus in understanding parent involvement in the Canadian context.

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## **Defining Parent Involvement**

Defining the construct of “parent involvement” has been a challenge for many researchers. A review of the literature on parent involvement reveals that there is no consistent agreement on what is meant by the term “parent involvement” (Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 2001). Several different terms (e.g., home-school relationships, home-school collaboration, family-school involvement, home-school partnerships) are often used interchangeably to describe the relationship between the parent and the school (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Christenson, 1995; Christenson, Rounds, & Gorney, 1992; Epstein, 1996; Epstein & Dauber, 1991). Furthermore, there is not one operational definition of parent involvement consistently used in the literature (Christenson, 1995; Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Epstein, 1996). Baker and Soden (1997) reviewed 200 studies and found that some researchers have defined parent involvement as parent aspirations; whereas others have operationalized it as activities at home (helping with homework) and at school (attending events, meeting with teachers), or as parenting styles or behaviours. In their conclusions, many researchers point to the importance of clearly defining the construct *for the study at hand* and interpreting results in light of that definition (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Wandersman, Motes, Lindsey, Snell-Johns, Amaral & Ford, 2002). Current definitions of parent involvement are fragmented (Fantuzzo, Tighe, & Childs, 2000).

However, there are several elements that are common across definitions, theories, and empirical studies. These common elements, which are listed below, serve as a foundation for understanding *parent involvement* as discussed in this manuscript.

1. Parent involvement is a complex issue with multiple dimensions that include both parent and school behaviors.
2. Parent involvement exists on a continuum from school-centered activities to home-centered activities.

3. The philosophy of parent involvement entails parents, educators, and the community working toward the common goal of optimal education and development of students with shared responsibility for student outcomes.

A review of the literature on parent involvement indicates that parent involvement is historically organized into two primary categories: a) school-centered parent involvement, and b) home-centered parent involvement. ***School-centered parent involvement*** is characterized by parent activities at a systems level and includes activities such as participation in classroom, social, and service events (classroom level), attending PTA meetings (school level), and attending and participating in school board meetings (district level). These are activities which often first come to mind when school personnel define parent involvement and typically take place at the school building. ***Home-centered parent involvement*** is characterized by activities the parents do directly with their child, such as helping with their homework, providing a good breakfast in the morning, and attending one-on-one meetings with their child's teachers. These are activities often identified by parents as ways in which they are involved and typically take place away from the school building.

Within each of these two broad categories, several primary themes, which are helpful in organizing the literature on parent involvement and the subsequent measurement of parent involvement practices, emerge: a) ***attitudes*** about parent involvement; b) parent involvement ***behaviors***; c) ***barriers*** to parent involvement; and d) ***facilitators*** of parent involvement. With these issues, assumptions, categories, and themes in mind, the following definition of parent involvement was developed by Wandersman, et. al (2002) and help serve in organizing this review of the literature on parent involvement.

***Parent involvement*** is a multi-dimensional construct that involves the participation of parents in both school and home-centered activities that are designed to promote the optimal development. Parent involvement can include not only parent behaviors (e.g. going to PTA meetings, helping with homework), but also attitudes about involvement

(e.g. I believe my child's teacher wants my participation, I believe it is a part of my role as a teacher to work with parents), as well as barriers to (e.g. language differences, parent literacy), and facilitators of (e.g. flexible meeting schedules, location of the meeting) involvement. (p.4)

### **Theories and Models of Parent Involvement**

Models of parent involvement, such as those described by Gordon (1977), Epstein (1991), and Grolnick and Slowiaczek (1994), have attempted to provide frameworks that describe the construct of parent involvement. However, few of these theories and models take a developmental perspective. Research on parent involvement has included children from kindergarten to high school without adequate regard for what constitutes developmentally appropriate parent involvement (Fantuzzo, Tighe, & Childs, 2000). Differences in how a model or theory of parent involvement apply to the young or preschool age child, the child in the elementary years, the student in the secondary years, and finally the student launching into the university or work force are not well articulated. For example, parent involvement of adolescents, although similar to parent involvement during the elementary years, is distinct and unique. Catsambis (1998) reports that the most effective types of parent involvement at the secondary level are not those geared towards behavioural supervision, but rather those geared towards advising or guiding teens' academic decisions and maintains that "parents' educational expectations and encouragement are by far the most important type of family practice that affects all measures of senior achievement" (p. 24). Research findings report parent involvement typically declines (Eccles & Harold, 1996; Dornbusch & Glasgow, 1996; Izzo, Weissberg, Kasprow, & Fendrich, 1999; Walker & Hoover-Dempsey, 2001) or shifts (Catsambis & Garland, 1997) as students get older and cite low levels of involvement for parents of students in middle and high school grades, typically between the ages of 13-18 years. However, it is posited in this review that parent involvement does not actually decline or necessarily shift as students transition to secondary school, but rather that the present models and subsequent measures of parent involvement do not adequately describe or represent parent involvement for adolescents. Measuring the

same indicators of parent involvement across grades does not adequately capture the nature of the involvement of parents of adolescents (Amaral, 2003). Many measures of parent involvement currently used have not been empirically validated for, and do not provide evidence of, the appropriateness of items to the construct of parent involvement as it relates to parents of adolescents. Clearly, more information about the involvement of parents across students of many different age ranges is necessary to provide a greater understanding of the dimensions of parent involvement unique to the specific age.

Parent involvement is complex and multi-dimensional and is dependent upon child, teacher, and parent variables (Eccles and Harold, 1996). Moreover, in recent studies, Adams and Christenson (2000) suggested that the relationship between the key players - child, parent and teacher - influence parent involvement. Grolnick and Slowiaczek (1994) developed a model explaining this multidimensional nature of parent involvement through three process variables: behavioural, intellectual-cognitive, and personal. In this model, the child is viewed as an active processor of information rather than a passive recipient of input.

Historically, parent involvement measures have represented parent involvement by a small number of survey items that failed to adequately assess the multiple ways in which parents can be involved in their child's education (Parker, Piotrowsky, & Peay, 1987). It has been argued that a valid measure of parent involvement must assess the multiple dimensions of parent involvement according to the developmental level of the child (Fantuzzo, Tighe, and Childs, 2000). While most researchers now agree on the multidimensional nature of parent involvement, few have provided strong empirical support for this premise. This does not mean that multidimensional scales have not been developed; rather that although such scales may have been developed, the authors fail to provide the needed empirical support for the dimensions or factors (Adams, 1996; Adams & Christenson, 1998; 2000; Christenson & Carroll, 1998; Driggers, 2002; Simmons, 2001).

Recognizing the parent as the primary influence on the child's education and development, ecological models such as Epstein's (1987) theory of overlapping spheres have provided the conceptual framework for understanding home-school and community partnerships associated with parent

involvement (Fantuzzo, Tighe, & Childs, 2000). Epstein's (1987) theory identifies three spheres of influence or major environments, which simultaneously affect children's learning and development - family, school, and community. In the literature it is generally agreed that school, family, and community partnerships are necessary to improve children's opportunities for success; however, in practice, teachers, parents, and students have little understanding of each other's interests in children and schools (Epstein & Sanders, 2000). Most teachers do not know the goals that parents have for their children, how parents help them learn, or how parents would like to be involved. Conversely, most parents do not know much about educational programs in their children's schools or what teachers require of them. Thus, the role of parents in the ecological perspective becomes blurred and is ambiguous. Better data and more exacting analysis are needed to clarify the roles and responsibilities of the different participants in home, school, and community partnerships.

### **Benefits of Parent Involvement**

The benefits of parent involvement have been investigated and documented by a number of researchers and educational theorists (e.g. Chavkin 1989; Heid & Harris, 1989; Henderson, Marburger, & Ooms, 1986; Leitch & Tangri, 1988; Newman, 1997; Sutherland, 1991). It is important to keep in mind that the benefits of parent involvement have synergistic effects (i.e. what benefits students, benefits parents and schools as well). However, for the sake of simplicity, the findings are listed below according to whether the benefit most directly relates to students, parents, or schools, or communities. While these benefits are briefly highlighted in this review, the reader is encouraged to review Henderson and Mapp (2002) for a more detail discussion of many of the topics.

#### **Benefits of Parent Involvement for Students**

A primary focus of the research to date has been, and rightly so, on the benefits for students. These benefits include:

- Higher academic achievement, regardless of socio-economic status, ethnic/racial background, or parent educational level (Chavkin, 1989; Christenson, 1995; Christenson, Rounds & Franklin, 1992; Dauber & Epstein, 1993; Dornbusch & Ritter, 1998; Drake, 1995; Griffith, 1996;

Henderson et al., 1986; Ho Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996; Keith, Keith, Quirk, Cohen-Rosenthal, & Franzese, 1995; Prosis, 1990; Reynolds, 1992; Riox & Berla, 1993; Schurr, 1992; Simon, 2000). Gains in academic achievement are most likely to occur when parents help students in specific subject areas (Brandt, 1989).

- Better student attendance (Henderson et al., 1986) and lower drop out rates (Drake, 1995; Southwest Educational Laboratory, 2000).
- More successful transitions to higher grades (Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 2001; Trusty, 1999).
- Higher rates of homework completion (Brandt, 1989; Christenson, 1995).
- Improved student motivation (Christenson, Rounds, and Gorney, 1992) Improved social functioning (Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 2001), increased self-esteem (Christenson, Rounds, and Gorney, 1992) and greater perceived competence (Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994).

#### **Benefits of Parent Involvement for Parents**

Given the dynamic and interactive relationship between children and their parents, it is important to highlight and understand the benefits of parent involvement for the parent. Such benefits include:

- Increased understanding of the school (Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 2001).
- Increased interaction between parents and their child (e.g. improved communication about schoolwork) (Christenson, Rounds, & Franklin, 1992; Epstein & Dauber, 1991).
- Parenting styles may change in positive ways (Hornby, 2000; Prosis, 1990).
- Increased access to needed services like health and social services (Wynn, Meyer, & Richards-Schuster, 2000).
- Increased levels of self-esteem, self-efficacy, and empowerment (Batey, 1996; Davies, 1989; Griffith, 1998; Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Burrow, 1987; Hornby, 2000; Sutherland, 1991).

- Participation in their child's education may lead parents to further their own education (Haynes & Comer, 1996; Hornby, 2000).

### **Benefits of Parent Involvement for Schools and Communities**

While much attention has been paid to the benefits of parent involvement for the student and parent, an ecological perspective points to the importance of understanding the impact on the school itself and the larger community. Historically, some attention had been paid to the impact on school level variables including improved teacher morale (Leitch & Tangri, 1988; Prosise, 1999), sustained school reform efforts including increased accountability, and school improvement plans (Lewis & Henderson, 1997), higher level of teachers' sense of effectiveness (Desimone, Finn-Stevenson, & Henrich, 2000; Haynes & Comer, 1996), and mediation of tensions between school and community (Edwards & Young, 1992).

Often overlooked, yet still well documented are the benefits of parent involvement for the community. Community benefits include: increased community access to school resources and facilities (Davies, 1989), improved quality of life in the neighborhood (Lewis & Henderson, 1998); skill increases that can be transferred to address community needs and an increased exchange of physical and human resources among organizations (Shirley, 1997; Wynn, et, al, 2000); increased connections that lead to community development that includes attention to economic support, physical redevelopment and community building (Wynn et al., 2000); the nature of local power and politics change (Lewis & Henderson, 1998), as students, teachers and parents engage in learning activities that are relevant to local issues (Lewis, 1998).

### **New Directions for Research on Parent Involvement**

While the literature to date on parent involvement provides us with a strong foundation to systematically explore parent involvement practices in the Canadian, and in the case of our own research team, in British Columbia, we need to be good critics in our review of the parent involvement literature. Equally, in planning next steps for research on parent involvement in the Canadian context we must have an eye to not only carefully attempt replication of previous studies in the Canadian context but also to

address weaknesses in that literature as we move a research agenda forward on parent involvement in Canada. As we move this research forward several key areas warrant special attention.

#### **Examine Parent Involvement Across Grade Level**

As highlighted earlier, most of the research pertaining to parent involvement focuses on parents of students in the elementary grades while fewer studies focus on parent involvement at the secondary level. Research suggests that levels of parent involvement decline over time (Eccles & Harold, 1996; Dornbusch & Glasgow, 1996; Izzo et al., 1999) with parent involvement usually dropping when students enter the fifth and sixth grades (Griffith, 1998). Schools report offering fewer opportunities for parent involvement as children move towards high school (Nord, 1997). There are fewer opportunities for relationship building between parents and teachers as a child moves from elementary to middle to secondary years, which is important because the home-school relationship influences parents' attitudes and behaviors about parental involvement in their child's education (Adams & Christenson, 2000).

#### **Explore Parent Involvement of Parents from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Backgrounds**

Parents from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds are at risk for becoming the least involved in their child's education (Moles, 2000). This lack of involvement may be due to cultural differences between school and home that build walls between families and educators (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001). School staff may have the misconception that families from diverse backgrounds are apathetic, disinterested, or indifferent to their child's education (Chavkin, 1989; Winters, 1993) and as a result, may not work to engage these parents in activities at the school. Alternatively, these parents may feel as if they do not have anything to offer; however when their participation is sought they gain a sense of ownership about taking part in their child's education (Batey, 1996).

Lack of continuity between the culture of the home and that of the school may discourage parent involvement of parents from diverse backgrounds. Many administrators, teachers and school staff are from middle-class backgrounds and many educators themselves are not from diverse cultural backgrounds. Thus the school's customs, expectations, and experiences might not fit with the

background of the parents (Coleman & Churchill, 1997; Moles, 1997). The school environment is an important factor in deciding whether parents from diverse backgrounds are involved in their child's education. Some research points to parent perceptions that they were not welcomed in their child's school. Parents responded to the school environment by choosing to withdraw their participation from school-related events (Calabrese, 1990).

#### **Attend to Parent Involvement and Parents from Low Socioeconomic Backgrounds**

Low-income parents are less likely to become involved in their child's education than middle and upper-class parents (Lareau & Shumar, 1996). Socioeconomic status is more likely to affect school-based rather than home-based parent involvement (Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Brissie, 1989; Hickman, Greenwood, & Miller, 1995). Research has indicated that some school staff believe that the economic difficulties that poor parents contend with make it difficult to engage these parents in becoming involved in their child's education (Ascher, 1988). It is hypothesized that poor parents might not have high levels of involvement because they need relief for their immediate needs before they can assist their child in school (Ascher, 1988). School staff may treat low-income parents as if they lack the knowledge to contribute to their child's education (Bloom, 2001) therefore making low-income parents feel as if they cannot contribute to discussions regarding their child. Further, low-income parents may have doubts regarding their educational abilities (Chavkin & Williams, 1989; Lareau, 1987) and depend on teachers to educate their child (Lareau, 1987). Parents might feel as if their economic situation is being evaluated by the school as the reason students are not performing well in school (Bloom, 2001; Christenson & Sheridan, 2001).

#### **Examine the Role of Fathers in Parent Involvement**

There are few studies which examine the individual contributions mothers and fathers make to their children's education (Nord, 1997). In 1996, parents of kindergartners through 12<sup>th</sup> graders were asked the extent to which both mothers and fathers are involved in their children's schools. The data gathered was analyzed to determine the influence of the individual contributions of mothers and fathers to their child's academic achievement (Nord, 1997). In two parent families, fathers are much less likely than

mothers to be highly involved in their child's school. When fathers' from two parent families are involved, the strongest influence affecting fathers' involvement is the mothers' involvement. A father is more likely to become involved in his child's education when the mother participates in her child's education. Nonresident fathers are least likely to be involved in their child's education. Interestingly, fathers who head single-parent families have levels of involvement similar to single-mothers and, like mothers, father involvement in schooling declines as children become older. When fathers head single-parent families, their involvement improves students behavior in the classroom as evidenced by a reduction in reports of students being suspended or expelled from school. This is also true when nonresident fathers become involved. Further, families with an active male role model are more involved in their child's education (Leitch & Tangri, 1988) and fathers' involvement is facilitated when they have a social network (DeMoss & Vaughn, 1999).

#### **Examining and Developing Tools and Procedures to Help Us Better Understand Parent Involvement**

The literature points to the great challenge in developing a psychometrically sound survey instrument to assess parent involvement. In fact many of the studies reviewed do not even mention the psychometric properties of the instrument used and when properties are reported, they are often very poor (Amaral & Ford, 2005, Diggers, Ford & Simmons, 2004). This issue becomes of even greater concern when one looks at the use of parent involvement surveys with diverse populations (including, gender, socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic diversity). Such issues can lead to potential misinterpretation of survey findings. Several common themes regarding the psychometric properties of the survey instruments and studies reviewed emerge. Highlights are as follows:

- Defining the construct of "parent involvement" has proven to be a challenge for many researchers. In their conclusions, many researchers point to the importance of clearly defining the construct *for the study at hand* and interpreting results in light of that definition.

- The variability in the nature of the parent involvement programs themselves make defining the construct a challenging yet important aspect in evaluating the baseline in order to provide a program that best suits the school and homes of interest
- While most researchers agree on the multidimensional nature of parent involvement in their hypotheses and theoretical writings on parent involvement, few have provided strong empirical support for this premise. This does not mean that multidimensional scales have not been developed, rather that while such scales have been developed, the authors fail to provide the needed empirical support for the dimensions' or factors' relationships (Adams, 1996; Adams & Christenson, 1998; 2000; Amaral & Ford, 2005; Christenson & Carroll, 1998; Driggers, Ford, & Simmons, 2004; Driggers, 2001; Simmons, 2001)
- While some preliminary studies and writings lend support to the different nature of parent involvement across grade, age, community size, ethnicity, and SES more work is needed in this area.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

It is an exciting time to do work in the area of parent involvement. In this paper we have tried to briefly highlight the focus of the research on parent involvement to date. While the literature is clear, students do better when their families are actively involved in their education at multiple levels and in multiple ways. Further, students benefit when school and families are partners in the education of the student. This means not only a strong positive relationship with the classroom teacher, but also a strong positive relationship with others in the school environment. An ecological perspective in which the dynamic nature of parent involvement is considered across the child, home, school and community context is important in not only interpreting previous research but also in designing future studies. Such research must take a developmental perspective and acknowledge that these relationships change throughout the lifecycle of both the student and the family. We are reminded that there are often complex answers to even the most simple questions. Such complexity requires a strong interdisciplinary approach to not only conducting research on parent involvement, but also in implementing programs that effectively improve family-school relationships. Partners including parents, school personnel, university

researchers and indeed the voice of the students themselves will help move our understanding of parent involvement in the Canadian context forward. It is our hope that while we are able to learn from the previous research we too are able to move the literature forward with a strong developmental perspective that includes the voices of not only those “typically” involved but also the multitudes of diverse families we have in Canada as well as the voice of all persons in parenting roles and the students themselves.

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