

## **Parental Involvement Research: Moving to the Next Level**

*William H. Jeynes*

The role of a quantitative parental involvement researcher is a very humbling one. To be an efficacious quantitative social scientist, one must put aside his or her own personal biases and go where the numbers dictate. The reality is that when the numerical results do not come out as one expects, one has a choice. Either the researcher must adjust to the results or insist that the numbers change to the presuppositions of the researcher. To be a person of integrity, the quantitative researcher must humble himself or herself and adjust to the numbers. Some theorists do not totally understand this, and when the results disagree with a particular theorist's perspective, this theorist might state, "I do not like the pattern of your results." But the theorist needs to understand that the response of the quantitative researcher will likely be, "I don't like them either, but I have to present the numbers whether I like the results or not."

Although my job is a humbling one and requires that I periodically re-think my views, the results that have emerged from my meta-analytic research have led me on an interesting journey. Through the various meta-analyses that I have undertaken, I have realized that parental involvement is considerably broader and more complicated than early parental involvement theories have acknowledged. To be forthright, these are not the results that I anticipated or even desired, but the meta-analyses have indicated this fact so explicitly that it is undeniable. And therefore it is clear that the research community needs to adapt to these realities. Based on the meta-analyses that I have undertaken, as well as the examination of nationwide data sets, it is clear that the following trends exist and are worthy of further examination. First, as I shared in a 2010 article in *Teachers College Record*, the subtle aspects of parental involvement (e.g., high expectations, communication, and parental style) are generally

more salient than more overt expressions of this involvement (e.g., checking homework, establishing household rules, and parental participation in school activities). Second, the elements of parental involvement programs that are most effective may or may not be identical to the components of parental involvement that are the most crucial. Third, as one would expect, parental involvement is higher in two-biological-parent families than it is in single-parent families. Given that meta-analyses essentially statistically summarize the existing body of research, what the body of research is indicating to the social science community is that there is a need to proceed to the next level in parental involvement research. It is patent that the research indicates that much more is known about parental involvement than was the case in the 1980s and 1990s. Nevertheless, it is also clear there are myriad more questions to be answered, and this is only possible if researchers and theorists open their minds to proceeding to the next level. Three issues are especially salient in this move toward the next level.

### **The Subtle Aspects of Parental Involvement Are Generally More Salient Than More Overt Expressions of This Involvement**

Based on the results of a series of meta-analyses, it appears that the nature of parental involvement may be considerably different than was previously conceived. For many years, educators, parents, and social scientists have conceptualized engaged parents as those who frequently attend school functions, help their children with their homework, and maintain household rules that dictate when their young engage in schoolwork and leisure (Domina, 2005; Epstein, 2001; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). That is, most individuals typically view parental engagement as a set of deliberate, overt actions (Kelly, 2004). Results from three meta-analyses have challenged the traditional image of parental involvement (Jeynes, 2003a, 2005a, 2007b). A meta-analysis statistically combines all the relevant existing studies on a given subject in order to determine the aggregated results of said research. The findings of these meta-analyses indicate that the most powerful aspects of parental involvement are frequently subtle, such as maintaining high expectations of one's children, communicating with children, and parental style (Jeynes, 2005a, 2007b).

Moreover, an increasing body of research suggests that the key qualities necessary for schools to foster parental involvement may also be subtle (Mapp, Johnson, Strickland, & Meza, 2008; Sheldon, 2005). In other words, whether teachers, principals, and school staff are loving, encouraging, and supportive to parents may be more important than the specific guidelines and tutelage they

offer to parents (Mapp et al., 2008; Sheldon, 2005). Some of the most salient components of parental involvement are as follows.

### **Parental Expectations**

Research indicates more subtle types of parental involvement may have a more puissant influence on student achievement than other involvement expressions, such as checking homework and maintaining household rules (Jeynes, 2005a, 2005b, 2007b). In meta-analyses undertaken by the author, the effect sizes for parental expectations were .58 and .88 standard deviation units for elementary and secondary school students, respectively. In contrast, the effect sizes for parent attendance at school functions and establishing household study rules averaged about .12 of a standard deviation (Jeynes, 2005a, 2007b). The concept of expectations requires a careful elucidation. It is not the notion that a parent pushes expectations upon their children, such as, “You shall live up to these standards” (Jeynes, 2010a, 2010b; Lancaster, 2004). Instead, the type of expectations that possess the greatest impact are those that are subtle but understood by the child (Davis-Kean, 2005; Lancaster, 2004), such as a general agreement between the child and the parents on the value of a college education, parental sacrifice to save for the child’s college, and the value of a personal work ethic (Jeynes, 1999, 2002, 2003b; Kaplan, Liu, & Kaplan, 2001).

### **Communication Between Parents and Children**

A second important subtle aspect of parental involvement is communication about school between parents and children (Afifi & Olson, 2005; Davalos, Chavez, & Guardiola, 2005; Jeynes, 2005a, 2007b). An overview of the research indicates this is an important part of parental involvement, although its impact may not be as significant as in the case of expectations (Jeynes, 2005a). Often a spirit of communication either exists between parents and their children, or it does not. Family communication typically takes years to develop, and its absence is one of the most common causes of family tension (Jeynes, 2007a; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2005). Open communication is usually a prerequisite for a home to have a loving atmosphere. The author’s meta-analysis indicated that the effects for communication were statistically significant at .24 and .32 standard deviation units for elementary and secondary students, respectively (Jeynes, 2005a, 2007b).

### **Parental Style**

Research indicates parental style is also a salient but subtle facet of involvement (Casanova, Garcia-Linares, Cruz, & Manuel, 2005; Jeynes, 2010b;

Lancaster, 2004). Research by Baumrind and others indicates that those parental styles with a combination of a strong expression of love and support and a beneficial degree of discipline and structure tend to provide the healthiest environment in which children can grow (Baumrind, 1971; Boehnke, Scott, & Scott, 1996; Jeynes, 2005a, 2007b). Moreover, evidence suggests that a teaching style high in love and support and one that concurrently provides clear behavioral boundaries and enforces those boundaries maximizes learning (Wentzel, 2002). The author's meta-analysis indicated that the effects for parental style were statistically significant and were .35 for elementary school children and .40 for secondary school children (Jeynes, 2005a, 2007b).

## **Schools Should Also Utilize Subtle Actions to More Completely Involve Parents**

Generally, if educators reach out in love consistently; possess high expectations of students; communicate clearly, sensitively, and frequently; and show respect to students and parents, then even if these educators do not expressly practice certain techniques to enhance parental involvement, their efforts will yield significant results. The body of research indicates that some of the key qualities that will attract parents to participate in school programs that encourage involvement are as follows.

### **A Loving and Supportive Environment**

Various studies indicate that the overall trend is that in those programs with a positive impact, the parents feel loved and valued (Mapp et al., 2008; Sheldon, 2005). Human beings have various traits in common, and one of them is to desire to be treated with love and kindness (Jeynes, 2006; Kennedy, 2001; Lamb, 1997). A school can run a parental engagement program with great efficiency, but parents can easily discern whether their participation is welcome and whether their input is warmly received (Jeynes, 2000, 2002, 2003a).

### **Love and Support in Parental Involvement Programs**

Teachers should also begin a parent-teacher conference with a warm comment to build bridges with the child's family. One can make a good argument that in order to build these bridges, the elementary school teacher, in particular, should visit the home of all of her or his students to be cognizant of each child's strengths and weaknesses and to build a partnership with the parents (Jeynes, 2006, 2010a, 2010b). School leaders can also encourage caring parental involvement to take place if they themselves are caring. School staff and instructors, in fact, should be examples to parents of the saliency of healthy

communication in the home. Bauch and Goldring (1995) posit that effective communication is one of five qualities that define a responsive school. Bauch and Goldring further assert that a common reason why students attending faith-based schools outperform their counterparts in public schools is because religious schools generally have more of an open-minded attitude toward parental communication and involvement.

### **Customer Friendly Educators**

This orientation should begin as early in the school year as is possible. A primary way that schools can show they are “customer friendly” is for elementary school teachers to visit the home of each of their students before the school year commences (Bailey, 2001; Garbers et al., 2006). The Pilgrims and Puritans were the first to engage in this practice, and this discipline was frequently maintained in American schools until the early 1960s (Jeynes, 2006). A copious number of school-based parental involvement programs report that home visitations have become a vital component of their outreach to mothers and fathers (Bailey, 2001; Lopez, Scribner, & Mahitivanichcha, 2001).

### **The Need for Parental Involvement Theories and Research to Go to the Next Level: Teaching Subtle Aspects of Involvement**

One of the most intriguing realities of parental involvement research is that the theories of parental involvement that emerged in the 1980s, especially, and also during the 1990s, preceded the most sophisticated research that was done on the topic. Part of this trend actually benefited parental engagement research, because the theories were needed in order to create more interest in parental involvement research. Consequently, most researchers in this discipline are thankful for the emergence of these theories. Nevertheless, one shortcoming of this series of events is that the theories were developed before quantitative research could provide an adequate foundation on which more advanced theories could be developed. This type of chronology often emerges in the social sciences. For example, Freud propounded his theories well before they could be subject to quantitative assessment (Neu, 1991). This development was positive in the sense that it stirred up a high degree of interest in psychology and, in particular, psychoanalysis (Crews, 1995). The disadvantage, however, is that when social scientists used quantitative analysis to test Freud’s theories, the vast majority of Freud’s theories were either disproved or substantially undermined (Crews, 1995; Neu, 1991). Quantitative analysis was also part of the process.

The quantitative and qualitative analyses of the past decade have reached a significant enough level so that we, as the academic community, need to examine the possibility of questioning current parental involvement theories as insufficient to explain some of the results that are emerging. In addition, there are an abundant number of new questions that are arising as a result of recent research that need to be addressed in order to take parental involvement research to the next level. There is a need for those in the research community to put aside their own desire for predictable order (in the case of statisticians) and the protection of their own theories in order to facilitate the quest for truth.

In the case of meta-analytic research, I think it is vital to acknowledge that the findings of the meta-analyses may answer many questions, but they introduce about as many questions as answers. For example, the meta-analytic findings reveal that the subtle aspects of parental involvement are even more robust than more overt expressions of this involvement (Jeynes, 2005b, 2007b). On the one hand, literally thousands of parents have told me how much these findings have changed them, when I share these truths at public gatherings. But I also know that school leaders, in particular, want to know more. As helpful as they believe these findings are, they want to also know the extent to which qualities such as high expectations and communication can be taught, so that they are also incorporated into parental involvement programs. I would love to be able to say that these subtle aspects of parental involvement, which are so salient in voluntary expressions of this engagement, are also by definition the most efficacious aspects of school-based family involvement programs. But the reality is that we really do not know. In addition, we really will not know the answer to this question until more American involvement programs incorporate these subtle aspects of parental involvement. Once schools incorporate subtle aspects of parental involvement into their programs, a key question can be addressed. That question is simply: "Are the subtle aspects of parental involvement as easy to teach as the more overt expressions of involvement?"

It is an exciting time to be a parental involvement researcher. The research has reached such a place that over time a new parental involvement theory or two is inevitable. In addition, new questions on family engagement are being asked that even 10 years ago few would have ever imagined. It is important to embrace these developments rather than resist them.

## **Understanding the Relationship Between Family Structure and Parental Involvement**

Many separate studies examine the relationship between family structure and school outcomes and between parental involvement and these outcomes.

However, little research examines the influence of family structure on parental involvement (Jeynes, 2002, 2003b, 2005c). There are a variety of reasons for this fact, but perhaps the most puissant of these is that of political correctness. McLanahan and Sandefur (1994) acknowledge that this desire to be sensitive to single-parent families (i.e., a facet of political correctness) is responsible for this reluctance to talk about the issue of single-parenthood. But they assert that in reality, it is insensitive *not* to discuss these issues. However, the most sensitive action social scientists can take with regard to single-parent families is to put what is “ethically correct” ahead of what is politically correct. These families need love and the outreach of schools, and to purposely eschew the discussion of the unique challenges faced by these families is do a disservice to them, as is failure to adopt a policy of support that will enable these children and their parents to succeed.

The reality is that, generally speaking, it is much easier for two parents to demonstrate a high level of involvement than it is for a single parent (Jeynes 2002, 2003a, 2005a). This statement in no way denies that there are myriad single parents who are doing their best to be engaged in their children’s schooling. What it does mean is that when “four arms” and “four legs” that love that child are available, it makes it easier for children to have a sense of parental involvement. To avoid talking about this reality may be politically correct, but as McLanahan and Sandefur (1994) note, it is insensitive and not loving, that is, it is “ethically incorrect.” Because when we fail to talk about these issues, it means that we do not propound and apply any useful solutions, and when this happens we do not help the ones who most need our love, compassion, and sensitivity.

Although there exists a general understanding among social scientists that there is a relationship between parental family structure and family engagement, partially due to individuals’ reluctance to talk about this fact, very little about this relationship is known beyond this very general understanding. For example, researchers know little about the relationship between certain specific family structures and parental engagement; such as, little is known about the level of engagement most frequently associated with step-parenting (Jeynes, 2005a, 2010b). Moreover, the academic community knows little about what qualities normally associated with living in a two-parent family are those most conducive to enhancing parental involvement. Is it the fact that there is more time available for rest and restoration? Is it that biological parents are more likely to have a propensity for being active parents than those caretakers that are not biologically related to the child? Does just the presence of another individual provide additional interpersonal resources that facilitate family involvement? To what degree do couples simply staying unified in marriage



reflect the type of family-based priorities that are also most likely to yield expressions of parental involvement? To the extent that social scientists fathom the answers to these questions, clearly involvement will be enhanced. Not only will theorists possess a better concept of how to best enhance two-parent involvement, but they will have a sense of how to best compensate for some of the disadvantages normally associated with single parenthood.

## Conclusion

It is beyond dispute that the findings that are emerging from parental involvement research are vastly different and more sophisticated than was the case even ten years ago. The social science community needs to make appropriate adjustments to these developments. First, we need to acknowledge what these developments mean for the definitions of parental involvement that are commonly used. There is little question that the engagement of parents in the schooling of their children is broader and more complex than most researchers previously believed. The recommendations that academics make to parents, educators, and policymakers need to change accordingly. Second, parental involvement programs should incorporate more of the subtle components in order to maximize the efficacy of these initiatives. Third, researchers should test to see whether the subtle aspects of parental involvement, which appear to be so potent in voluntary expressions of involvement, are also the most salient in school-based programs, which often compel families to become involved. Fourth, social scientists should design more effective ways of teaching mothers and fathers to express these more subtle forms of involvement. Fifth, both researchers and theorists need to procure a better understanding of the relationship between parental family structure and the educational participation of the father and the mother. Increasing one's knowledge of the relationship between the two will not only potentially enhance the effectiveness of two-parent families, but could give social scientists insight into how to best help single parents as well.

The last ten years have clearly yielded some major changes in the field of parental involvement, and this next decade is likely to produce more change. If the research community can demonstrate adequate flexibility, this will mean that exciting times are ahead. Indeed, it is a joy to be an active participant in this field and engaged in helping parents, schools, and children.

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William Jeynes is a senior fellow at the Witherspoon Institute in Princeton, NJ and a professor of education at California State University, Long Beach. He was the architect of the Korean economic and education stimulus package that helped it emerge from the 1997-1998 Asian economic crisis and often speaks for and works with U.S. and East Asian government officials. He has conducted a number of meta-analyses on parental involvement and other education and family issues that have gained a great deal of attention in the academic and government communities. He has over 100 academic publications, including 10 books. He may be contacted at [whjharvard@post.harvard.edu](mailto:whjharvard@post.harvard.edu)