Book Review

An Essay Book Review of *Parental Involvement and Academic Success* by William H. Jeynes

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Introduction

This book reports and interprets three related meta-analyses performed by the author dealing with the effects of parent influence on the academic success of their children. The first combines studies of elementary school student achievement. The second combines studies of urban secondary school student achievement, and the third focuses on studies restricted to minority student achievement.

Meta-analyses can use large numbers of individual studies and result in information from very large numbers of individual respondents. The elementary school meta-analysis reported in this book used 41 studies with more than 20,000 total respondents. The secondary school meta-analysis used 52 studies and more than 300,000 subjects, while the meta-analysis of K–12 minority student achievement used 27 studies with nearly 12,000 subjects.

Each meta-analysis attempted to measure both the overall effects of the degree of parental involvement and also the effects of different sub-components and specific activities which are included in the general term “parental involvement.” Jeynes cites additional meta-analyses focused on the question of which types of parental involvement are most effective in promoting student achievement (Fan & Chen, 2001; Jeynes, 2003, 2005). These analyses agree with the...
author’s finding that some forms of parental involvement (such as parental expectations, extensive parent–child communication, reading with children, and general parenting style) have more effect than others (such as checking homework and attending school functions).

The author describes the process by which studies were selected for inclusion in the meta-analyses, giving specific information about the procedures used to ensure that the quality of the individual studies is sufficient to justify their inclusion in the overall combination of studies analyzed. Because of the great importance of helping students make a good start in school, special attention is given to early education, with the author commenting (in his interpretation of findings) on the possibility that school personnel should provide parent education even before students enter formal schooling.

In discussing the development of parental involvement research, the author identifies previous family structure and family functioning research as having already established the hypotheses that children with greater and more consistent access to their parents have substantial advantages. This lays the foundation for asking whether parent participation in the child’s school experiences has now been found, based on previous studies, to be associated with higher academic achievement of children.

Both concepts being studied (parental involvement and student academic success) are complex and multi-faceted. As the author points out, the different expressions of parental involvement may include supervising and checking homework, attending school functions, communications with teachers, and communicating (often in subtle and implicit ways) high expectations for student academic achievement and high respect for education to their children. Breaking parental participation down into these components is a detailed and comprehensive way to look at this important factor in student achievement.

When educators and parents speak of their desires to have more parental participation, a good follow-up question is: “Which specific activities included in parental involvement do we value most, and why?” Jeynes provides his answer by identifying high parental expectations for student achievement and a family structure and culture that supports comfortable and frequent communication about school matters as the factors that matter most. There is an irony here. Forms of parent participation in which there is little contact with teachers are shown in this meta-analysis to be the most effective ones in increasing student achievement. Would an ideal parent–school partnership be one in which the so-called “partners” operate quite independently of each other?

As to the “why” part of the above question, Jeynes uses greater comparative improvement in standardized test scores and teacher grades as his rationale for giving special value and emphasis to these two factors. As our field develops
more comprehensive assessment techniques, such as performance measurements and student work-sample techniques, perhaps other factors may assume a greater importance.

**Summary of Findings**

The overall findings of the meta-analysis may be summarized as follows:

1. Greater parental involvement is associated with higher student achievement, and this is true for all racial, cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic groups, as well as being true for students in both elementary and secondary schools.
2. Because this study compares different types and components of parental involvement, as mentioned above, it is possible to “drill down” into these various types of parental involvement. Jeynes finds that subtle and implicit forms of parental involvement (i.e., parental expectations and parenting styles) have the strongest associations with student academic achievement.

**The Historical Decline of Parental Involvement as Presented in This Book**

The author argues that there is a long early history of high parent involvement in the schooling of their children, but that this pattern was interrupted when the ideas of John Dewey began to permeate the thinking of educators. Dewey’s concepts related to the professional responsibilities of teachers and the use of the schools to promote the continuation of an inclusive democratic society are presented as forces which have alienated teachers from parents and reduced the general level of parent involvement in schooling. This is a less positive view of the influence of John Dewey than the one held by many American educators.

In addition to his negative perspective on John Dewey, Jeynes mentions two demographic trends as also contributing to a decline in parental involvement in schools. These are (1) an increasing number of single-wage-earner families, and (2) limited English language proficiency of many parents of children in schools in this country.

Jeynes has kind and appreciative words to say about the efforts that single parents make on behalf of school success for their children. Nevertheless, he suggests that the potential benefits to the academic achievement of their children by single parents’ involvement is lessened by the time that they must spend in working to provide the basic economic necessities for their children. When
this is the case, it is especially important that schools and teachers find ways for single parents to communicate and cooperate with teachers. Sometimes this can be done through logistic arrangements of scheduling parent–teacher conferences and other school activities at convenient times for single and working parents to participate. Other accommodations may include welcoming parents to bring children with them to school conferences and activities and allowing non-parent relatives to participate when the parent finds it impossible.

The author’s discussion of the limiting effects of low levels of English language proficiency is troubling. Some parents who are in the early phases of learning English place a very high value on the educational success of their children in the English-speaking schools of this country. Their high levels of expectations and support for their children may compensate for their unfamiliarity with English vocabulary, grammar, and spelling. This is especially true in the light of the author’s finding that subtle factors including parent expectations and parenting style have substantial levels of association with student academic success.

An anecdote will illustrate this point. The reviewer was conducting a training session in Spanish for a Local School Council which included monolingual Spanish speakers. A team-building and communication skill-building activity asked the Council members to identify what, for them, represented a “highlight” of the school’s year to date. A mother replied that her “highlight” was being allowed to serve as a volunteer in the school’s cafeteria so that she could be in the same building with her young son and become familiar with the environment and school life her son was experiencing. This is just one mother’s report, but it shows that language barriers may be overcome and “subtle” forms of effective parent involvement achieved by those who are may lack complete English language fluency but place great value on their children’s education.

This illustration of the devotion of a Spanish-speaking mother reflects an ideal situation that is, unfortunately, not the reality in many U.S. families and schools. Nevertheless, in a global economy and multicultural domestic society, educators can serve children well by taking a positive view of the ability of parents and their children to master multiple languages and to have a working knowledge of cultures other than their own.

**Parent Participation in Children’s Education Prior to School Entry**

The author discusses the great importance of learning in the early preschool years when parents may be the main or only teachers their children have. This is another example of parent activities that influence the school success of their
children, but do not ordinarily allow for direct contact and communication between the parent and school personnel. The suggestion is made that schools may perform a valuable function by providing parent orientation and parent education even before the child enters school. Educators who feel that the school’s financial and staff resources are already stretched thin may wonder if this suggestion is feasible. Nevertheless, this suggestion should be taken seriously and studied thoroughly by policymakers and education funders. If children enter school at a higher level of cognitive functioning and with skills and attitudes that support rapid progress when they begin schooling, this may, indeed, be a good use of the resources we devote to education. In addition to the benefits experienced by the children, parents who have received the support and expertise of educators before their children’s school entry may become an effective cadre of parent participators as their children progress through later years of their schooling. Although parenting is one of the most important responsibilities that adults may have, there is presently little formal orientation and training to help parents perform optimally. The reviewer welcomes suggestions by Jeynes that educators can and should do more to support parents even before their children reach school age. This should, of course, be in addition to efforts to continue and disseminate successful programs to help parents of school-age children.

Studies of the beneficial effects of early childhood educator services to children and parents on student and parenting success deserve mention here. The Perry Pre-School Longitudinal Study (Parks, 2000) found that, although test-score advantages for students in this project (when compared with a demographically similar control group) eventually faded, participating children experienced long-term benefits in terms of higher rates of employment and income, along with lower rates of welfare status and incarceration. Another study (Campbell & Ramey, 1995) described the Carolina Abecedarian Project, also reporting positive, ongoing effects of educator interactions with preschool children and their parents. Yet another study (Reynolds, 2000) used a cost-benefit economic approach in examining the effects of the Chicago Child–Parent Centers, concluding that long-term social and personal benefits much outweighed the costs of this program.

A Summary of Recommendations by Jeynes

The final chapter of Parent Involvement and Academic Success has the title “What Do We Know and What Do We Still Need to Know?” Jeynes lists three things now known and confirmed by his meta-analyses:
1. The meta-analyses show that parental involvement has a very broad influence and is a strong positive force on student achievement, for all races, socioeconomic classes, and genders, as well as indicating that many component aspects of parent involvement have positive effects on student achievement.

2. Many of the programs studied in the meta-analyses designed to increase parental involvement, do, in fact, do so.

3. Some educators do not welcome teacher–parent partnerships, actively resisting parent involvement.

Four things that we still need to know are mentioned:

1. Are the most beneficial types of parental involvement those that are most frequently and intensively taught in parent involvement programs?
2. Are the subtle but effective practices of high parental expectations and communicative parenting as easy to teach as the more overt ones of reading to children, checking homework, and so on?
3. How does family structure influence parent involvement?
4. What attracts parents to become involved?

Further research is needed to give helpful answers to these questions.

Further Questions

Although the author provides separate chapters reporting on parent involvement in elementary and secondary schools, this reviewer would like to know more about patterns of parent participation at the high school level. Many parents who participate closely in the school experiences of elementary school students stop doing so when their children reach high school. What can be done to encourage more involvement by parents of secondary school students? Are the “subtle” factors of high parental expectations and supportive and communicative parenting styles ones which continue into high school, and are they enough to help students achieve well at this point?

The Audience for This Book

This book is written in a way that will be especially and directly helpful to researchers in this field. There are clear implications of the findings for both school personnel and parents, but more work needs to be done in the future to translate these findings into terms that provide concrete and readily understood guidance for practitioners and parents. Jeynes is aware of this need and devotes a part of his final chapter to the sub-topic of “What We Need to Do
With What We Know.” There is a Deweyan pragmatism in this section, emphasizing the thought that we are not mere spectators of what is known, but can become active participants in its effective use. Jeynes mentions the possibility of using technology in this post-industrial information age to find more and better ways to support parents in enhancing the educational achievement of their children. He stresses the great social significance of his topic with the motto, “A nation is only as strong as the families that constitute that nation.”

References


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