

In Search of the Elusive Magic Bullet: Parental Involvement and Student Outcomes

Kim O. Yap and Donald Y. Enoki

Background

Parental involvement in education has been the focus of much research attention. While it is generally accepted that parental involvement in education is desirable, there is little agreement on how it may best be implemented. Evidently, it is seldom implemented in a way that is satisfactory to all stakeholder groups (e.g., students, parents, teachers, and school administrators). This paradox stems in part from the fact that parental involvement comprises a wide range of processes, events, and conditions. In addition, stakeholder groups entertain a diversity of goals, ranging from improved student achievement to increased community support for schools. Their varied perspectives produce different beliefs about what forms of parental involvement are most helpful in achieving the respective goals.

Intuitively, there seems little doubt that parents play a critical role in their children's cognitive development and school achievement (Scott-Jones, 1984). There is, in fact, an abundance of evidence that parental involvement can have a positive impact on the process and outcomes of schooling (Edmonds, 1979; Walberg, 1984). McLaughlin and Shields (1986), for example, reported that parents can contribute to improved student achievement through their involvement in (a) the selection of appropriate reading materials, (b) targeting educational services, and (c) the use of particular pedagogical strategies. Clark (1983) found a correlation between achievement in reading and mathematics and the number of books at home.

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The National Institute of Education (1985) has identified other home-based achievement correlates: (a) providing a regular place and specific times for school work, (b) providing access to libraries and museums, and (c) availability of parents themselves as educational resources.

Becher (1984) found that reading to children enhances their receptive and expressive vocabularies as well as literal and inferential comprehension skills. According to the author, the act of reading to the child establishes reading as a valued activity, develops shared topics of interest, and promotes interaction among family members. Similarly, Sider and Sledjeski (1978) found that parents who read for their own enjoyment model reading as a valued activity and their children have more positive attitudes toward reading and school achievement. Other research suggests that parents can help most effectively in providing home reinforcement of school learning by supplementing school work at home, and monitoring and encouraging their children's learning (Armor et al., 1976; Brandt, 1979; Melargo, Lyons & Sparks, 1981; Sinclair, 1981; Walberg, 1984; Weilby, 1979).

However, parental involvement in the instructional process has seldom been emphasized. Griswold, Cotton, and Hansen (1986), for example, identified the least popular parental involvement activities to be monitoring homework, providing input on homework, and stimulating discussions at home. Much more popular were parent committees, parent-teacher meetings, and workshops on parental involvement. In fact, most parental involvement activities are only tangentially, if at all, related to children's cognitive development and school achievement. It is, therefore, not surprising that to many school people, the impact of parental involvement on children's school achievement has largely been unclear (Paddock, 1979; Fullan, 1982).

Regardless of what roles parents may play to enhance their child's education, a range of conditions can impede parental involvement. Examples include:

Narrow conceptualization. Teachers and school administrators often view parental involvement only in terms of attendance at parent-teacher conferences and other formal meetings. This narrow conceptualization is partly due to a mechanistic interpretation of earlier federal mandates for parental involvement. This interpretation emphasizes the role of parents as decision makers and advocates. Little attention is paid to the role of parents as active partners (with school) in the child's education.

Inappropriate attitudes. There is a tendency for school administrators and teachers to undervalue parental involvement, particularly involvement from working class or non-traditional families. Teachers may have different expectations of parents based on class or cultural differences. For example, they often see single parents as less responsible for their child's education when these parents actually spend more time with their child on learning

activities at home than married parents (Epstein ,1985). Some teachers believe that low-income parents will not or cannot participate in the child's school work, or that their participation will not be beneficial (Epstein, 1983). There is in fact evidence that teachers tend to initiate contact with upper middle class parents more often (than lower class parents) and for a wider variety of reasons (Mager, 1980).

Lack of teacher preparation. Historically, parental involvement as an integral part of the educational process has received little or no attention in teacher training programs. As a result, teachers are often uncertain about how to involve parents in school or instructional activities. In some cases, allowing parental involvement is seen as relinquishing teachers' role as experts on educational matters. When parents are involved in classroom activities (e.g., serving as aides), teachers are concerned that the parents (a) will not follow instructions, (b) may not know how to work with children, and (c) may not keep their commitments (Powell, 1980).

Parental occupational limitations. Parents' occupations may limit their availability for involvement activities. Their work schedules may make it difficult or impossible to attend meetings or to serve as a volunteer. Low wages may force parents to work more than one job, limiting their availability to be involved in learning activities at home. Limited financial resources may reduce their ability to create a supportive home environment or to provide materials which their child needs to be successful in school.

Cultural characteristics. The home culture can, in some cases, deter parental involvement. For example, the home culture may differ from the school culture, making effective school-home communication difficult. The home culture may hold educational institutions in such high regard that it is not considered appropriate for parents to interact with educators or raise questions about school events. As a result, parents may be reluctant to initiate contact with school, perceiving such activities as questioning the decisions or actions of experts.

Clearly, a major challenge facing the education community is to identify effective parental involvement practices which can be adopted by parents, teachers, and school administrators. Identification of practices directly related to student achievement would be particularly helpful.

Chapter 1 Parental Involvement

Parental involvement has been a congressionally mandated component of the Chapter 1 (now Title I) program since its inception. For nearly three decades, requirements for parental involvement have changed, but some form of parental consultation has always been an important part of Chapter 1 programs. Indeed, parental involvement has served as a means of ensuring

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that high quality instructional services are provided to educationally disadvantaged students participating in Chapter 1 programs. Chapter 1 legislation (i.e., P. L. 100-297, the 1988 Hawkins-Stafford Elementary and Secondary School Improvement Amendments) placed great emphasis on parental involvement as a means of maintaining and improving educational services to disadvantaged children.

The Honolulu School District offers Chapter 1 services at 21 elementary and secondary schools in the district. The district's goal of parental involvement in Chapter 1 is to create a working relationship between home and school in the education of disadvantaged children. Success in this partnership requires that parents accept responsibility to provide educational experiences for their children and that school personnel assist parents to become active partners in the educational process.

Purpose of the Study

Ultimately, the goal of parental involvement is to improve student achievement. While parental involvement could have considerable value (e.g., galvanizing community support for education) that may not directly accrue to student performance, the primary purpose of this study is to identify specific parental involvement practices that contribute to positive student outcomes.

Data Collection and Analysis

Home-Based Activities

To gather data on home-based parental involvement activities, a questionnaire survey was conducted with a random sample of ten Chapter 1 schools, stratified to include elementary, intermediate, and high schools. The sample included six elementary, two intermediate, and two high schools. Within each school, Chapter 1 classes were used as the primary sampling units to facilitate the conduct of the questionnaire survey and other data collection activities. A survey questionnaire was developed to collect data from students on such home-based activities as:

- Reading to child
- Encouraging child to read
- Visiting the library with child
- Providing books at home
- Keeping aware of child's reading progress
- Providing a place for child to study

- Setting aside a specific time for child to study
- Helping child to do his/her homework when necessary
- Caring about what child does in Chapter 1 and the regular school program

Survey data were collected from a total sample of 328 students in grades three through nine in April and May 1992. Student responses on frequency of parental involvement activities were converted to a three-point scale as follows:

- 3 = Always
- 2 = Sometimes
- 1 = Never

Student Outcomes

The study included the following measures of student achievement:

- Reading achievement
- School attendance
- Grade point averages for language arts

These variables were selected because they were widely used as measures of success for Chapter 1 projects. The student outcome data were collected for the sample students from school and project files for the 1991-92 school year.

Reading achievement was measured by the Metropolitan Achievement Test (Reading Comprehension), using a metric called normal curve equivalent (NCE). NCE scores range from 1 to 99 and have a mean of 50.

School attendance data consisted of number of days absent for the 1991-92 school year.

Grade point averages (GPAs) for language arts for the 1991-92 school year were converted to a five-point scale as follows to accommodate different grading systems used in the sample schools:

- 5 = A or E (Excellent)
- 4 = B or S+ (Satisfactory plus)
- 3 = C or S
- 2 = D or S-
- 1 = F or N (Not Satisfactory)

Descriptive and correlational analyses were conducted to determine the extent of parental involvement in the instructional process and its relationships with the student outcome measures. Individual students were

used as units of analysis. Descriptive statistics included percentages, means, and standard deviations on parental involvement activities and student outcomes. Correlation coefficients were computed between parental involvement activities and student outcomes.

Findings

The students came from a diversity of cultural backgrounds, with the majority being Asians or Pacific Islanders. Close to one-half of the students were from families with an annual income of \$20,000 or less. The student survey results (summarized in Table 1) suggest that there was a moderately high level of home-based parental involvement activity. The data show, for example, that:

- A majority (66%) of the students reported that their parents read to them at least sometimes.
- More than two-thirds (79%) said they were encouraged to read to their parents at least sometimes.
- One-half indicated that their parents visited the library with them at least sometimes.

On the other hand, the data also suggest that a significant proportion of the parents never read to their child (34%), encouraged their child to read to them (21%), or visited the library with their child (50%).

Achievement Correlates

As shown in Table 2, the NCE data reflect a performance pattern consistent with the national trend, with higher scores in the spring (32.7 for 1991 and 34.3 for 1992) and a decline in the fall (24.1 for 1991). The other outcome data provide a generally positive picture of performance in GPAs for language arts and school attendance. The GPA and attendance data suggest that the average student in the study sample received a B in his or her language arts class and was absent 7.5 days during the 1991-92 school year.

Several significant correlations were found between student performance as measured by a norm-referenced test and parental involvement activities. Specifically, the data (summarized in Table 3) show that NCE scores from the Metropolitan Achievement Test were correlated with the following items:

- My parent cares about what we do in my Chapter 1 class.
- My parent encourages me to read.

Activity	Extent of Involvement		
	Never	Sometimes	Always
My parent reads to me.	33.9	57.9	8.2
My parent encourages me to read to him/her.	21.0	50.6	28.3
My parent visits the library with me.	50.0	42.4	7.6
My parent encourages me to use the library.	21.0	41.4	37.6
My parent provides books in my home.	9.9	35.8	54.3
My parent keeps track of my progress in school work.	4.4	32.7	62.9
My parent makes sure that there is a place for me to study at home.	10.4	32.0	57.6
My parent sets aside a specific time for me to study at home.	22.2	42.5	35.2
My parent helps me with my homework when necessary.	11.7	43.2	45.1
My parent cares about what we do in my Chapter 1 class.	6.7	39.4	54.0
My parent cares about what happens at my school.	3.8	28.5	67.7
My parent knows what we do in Chapter 1.	15.5	52.8	31.6

- My parent keeps track of my progress in school work.
- My parent makes sure that there is a place for me to study at home.

The correlation coefficients range from low 20's to high 20's. It is noteworthy that no significant correlations were found between parental involvement activities and GPA in language arts or school attendance.

Discussion

The study shows that in the Honolulu School District, there is a moderately high level of parental involvement in the instructional process. More importantly, significant relationships appear to exist between home-based parental involvement activities and student achievement as measured by

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a norm-referenced test. While the relationships do not appear to be very substantial, they are in the expected direction.

A 1993 review by Wang, Haertel, and Walberg shows that the policies at the program, school, district, state, and federal levels have limited effects on student outcomes compared to the day-to-day efforts of the people (e.g., parents) who are involved in students' lives.

The authors conclude that:

...state, district, and school policies that have received the most attention in the last decade of educational reform appear least influential on learning. Changing such remote policies, even if they are well-intentioned and well-founded, must focus on proximal variables in order to result in improved practices in classrooms and homes, where learning actually takes place. (p. 280)

The present study provides further support for that conclusion. To the extent that parental involvement has its inherent value in a participatory democracy, it seems appropriate that Chapter 1 programs should continue to involve parents in program planning and implementation. However, a great deal more attention should be focused on parental involvement in the instructional process. For example, more resources should be devoted to the development and promotion of home-based reinforcement activities. To this end, schools can further enhance parental involvement by:

- promoting parental involvement in the instructional process,
- increasing home-based parental activities to reinforce student learning, and
- developing programs to raise literacy skills of parents, particularly among recent immigrant families.

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