Parental School Involvement and Children's Academic Achievement

Pragmatics and Issues

Nancy E. Hill[1] and Lorraine C. Taylor[2]

[1]Duke University and [2]University of North Carolina

ABSTRACT—*Developing collaborations between families and schools to promote academic success has a long-standing basis in research and is the focus of numerous programs and policies. We outline some of the mechanisms through which parental school involvement affects achievement and identify how patterns and amounts of involvement vary across cultural, economic, and community contexts and across developmental levels. We propose next steps for research, focusing on the importance of considering students' developmental stages, the context in which involvement takes place, and the multiple perspectives through which involvement may be assessed. Finally, we discuss enhancing involvement in diverse situations.*

KEYWORDS—*parental involvement; academic achievement; family-school partnerships*

Families and schools have worked together since the beginning of formalized schooling. However, the nature of the collaboration has evolved over the years (Epstein & Sanders, 2002). Initially, families maintained a high degree of control over schooling by controlling hiring of teachers and apprenticeships in family businesses. By the middle of the 20th century, there was strict role separation between families and schools. Schools were responsible for academic topics, and families were responsible for moral, cultural, and religious education. In addition, family and school responsibilities for education were sequential. That is, families were responsible for preparing their children with the necessary skills in the early years, and schools took over from there with little input from families. However, today, in the context of greater accountability and demands for children's achievement, schools and families have formed partnerships and share the responsibilities for children's education. Parental school

Address correspondence to Nancy E. Hill, Department of Psychology, Duke University, Box 90085, Durham, NC 27708-0085; e-mail: nancy@duke.edu.

involvement is largely defined as consisting of the following activities: volunteering at school, communicating with teachers and other school personnel, assisting in academic activities at home, and attending school events, meetings of parent-teacher associations (PTAs), and parent-teacher conferences.

It is well established that parental school involvement has a positive influence on school-related outcomes for children. Consistently, cross-sectional (e.g., Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994) and longitudinal (e.g., Miedel & Reynolds, 1999) studies have demonstrated an association between higher levels of parental school involvement and greater academic success for children and adolescents. For young children, parental school involvement is associated with early school success, including academic and language skills and social competence (Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994; Hill, 2001; Hill & Craft, 2003). Head Start, the nation's largest intervention program for at-risk children, emphasizes the importance of parental involvement as a critical feature of children's early academic development because parental involvement promotes positive academic experiences for children and has positive effects on parents' self-development and parenting skills.

Most of the literature focuses on parental school involvement in elementary schools. Parental school involvement is thought to decrease as children move to middle and high school, in part because parents may believe that they cannot assist with more challenging high school subjects and because adolescents are becoming autonomous (Eccles & Harold, 1996). However, few parents stop caring about or monitoring the academic progress of their children of high school age, and parental involvement remains an important predictor of school outcomes through adolescence. For example, one study demonstrated that parental school involvement was associated with adolescents' achievement and future aspirations across middle and high school (Hill et al., in press). Moreover, although direct helping with homework declines in adolescence, parental school involvement during middle and high school is associated with an increase in the amount of time students spend on homework and with an increase in the percentage of homework completed (Epstein & Sanders, 2002).

HOW DOES PARENTAL SCHOOL INVOLVEMENT MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

There are two major mechanisms by which parental school involvement promotes achievement. The first is by increasing social capital. That is, parental school involvement increases parents' skills and information (i.e., social capital), which makes them better equipped to assist their children in their school-related activities. As parents establish relationships with school personnel, they learn important information about the school's expectations for behavior and homework; they also learn how to help with homework and how to augment children's learning at home (Lareau, 1996). When parents are involved in their children's schooling, they meet other parents who provide information and insight on school policies and practices, as well as extracurricular activities. Parents learn from other parents which teachers are the best and how difficult situations have been handled successfully. In addition, when parents and teachers interact, teachers learn about parents' expectations for their children and their children's teachers. Baker and Stevenson (1986) found that compared with parents who were not involved, involved parents developed more complex strategies for working with schools and their children to promote achievement.

Social control is a second mechanism through which parental school involvement promotes achievement. Social control occurs when families and schools work together to build a consensus about appropriate behavior that can be effectively communicated to children at both home and school (McNeal, 1999). Parents' coming to know one another and agree on goals—both behavioral and academic—serves as a form of social constraint that reduces problem behaviors. When children and their peers receive similar messages about appropriate behavior across settings and from different sources, the messages become clear and salient, reducing confusion about expectations. Moreover, when families do not agree with each other or with schools about appropriate behavior, the authority and effectiveness of teachers, parents, or other adults may be undermined. Through both social capital and social control, children receive messages about the importance of schooling, and these messages increase children's competence, motivation to learn, and engagement in school (Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994).

FAMILY AND SCHOOL CHARACTERISTICS THAT INFLUENCE PARENTAL SCHOOL INVOLVEMENT

Parent-school relationships do not occur in isolation, but in community and cultural contexts. One of the biggest challenges schools have today is the increasing diversity among students (Lichter, 1996). Demographic characteristics, such as socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and cultural background, and other parental characteristics are systematically associated with parental school involvement. Overall, parents from higher socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to be involved in schooling than parents of lower socioeconomic status. A higher education level of parents is positively associated with a greater tendency for them to advocate for their children's placement in honors courses and actively manage their children's education (Baker & Stevenson, 1986). In contrast, parents from lower socioeconomic backgrounds face many more barriers to involvement, including nonflexible work schedules, lack of resources, transportation problems, and stress due to residing in disadvantaged neighborhoods.

Finally, because parents in lower-socioeconomic families often have fewer years of education themselves and potentially harbor more negative experiences with schools, they often feel ill equipped to question the teacher or school (Lareau, 1996). It is unfortunate that parents with children who would most benefit from parental involvement often find it most difficult to become and remain involved.

Involvement in school sometimes varies across ethnic or cultural backgrounds as well. Often, teachers who are different culturally from their students are less likely to know the students and parents than are teachers who come from similar cultural backgrounds; culturally different teachers are also more likely to believe that students and parents are disinterested or uninvolved in schooling (Epstein & Dauber, 1991). One study found that teachers believed that those parents who volunteered at school valued education more than other parents, and this belief about parents' values was in turn associated with the teachers' ratings of students' academic skills and achievement (Hill & Craft, 2003). Parental school involvement seems to function differently or serve different purposes in different ethnic and cultural groups. For example, African American parents often are more involved in school-related activities at home than at school, whereas Euro-American parents often are more involved in the actual school setting than at home (Eccles & Harold, 1996). This tendency to be more involved at home than at school may be especially true for ethnic minorities whose primary language is not English. Among African American kindergartners, parental involvement at school is associated with enhanced academic skills, perhaps reflecting the role of social capital (Hill & Craft, 2003), and the influence of parental involvement in schooling on achievement is stronger for African Americans than Euro-Americans among adolescents (Hill et al., in press).

Apart from demographic factors, parents' psychological state influences parental school involvement. Depression or anxiety present barriers to involvement in schooling. Studies consistently show that mothers who are depressed tend to be less involved than nondepressed mothers in preparing young children for school and also exhibit lower levels of involvement over the early years of school.

Self-perceptions also affect parents' school involvement. Negative feelings about themselves may hinder parents from making connections with their children's schools. Parents' confidence in their own intellectual abilities is the most salient predictor of their school involvement (Eccles & Harold, 1996). A factor that may be especially important in this regard is the experience of poverty. Poverty exerts direct effects on parents' mental health and self-perceptions through increased stress resulting from the struggle to make ends meet. Poverty also has indirect effects on children's early school outcomes because its adverse effects on parents are in turn associated with lower parental involvement in school.

Parents' own experiences as students shape their involvement in their children's schooling. As a parent prepares a child to start school, the parent's memories of his or her own school experiences are likely to become reactivated and may influence how the parent interprets and directs the child's school experiences (Taylor, Clayton, & Rowley, in press). Memories of supportive school experiences are likely to enhance parents' involvement and comfort interacting with their children's school.

In addition to characteristics of the parent and family, the school's context and policies influence parental school involvement. Teachers' encouragement of such involvement is associated with greater competence among parents in their interactions with their children and

more parental involvement in academic activities at home (Epstein & Dauber, 1991). There is increasing recognition of the importance of promoting *schools'* readiness for children (Pianta, Cox, Taylor, & Early, 1999). "Ready schools" (Pianta et al., 1999) reach out to families, building relationships between families and the school setting before the first day of school. The success of teachers' and schools' efforts to encourage parental school involvement suggests that parents want and will respond to information about assisting their children. For example, LaParo, Kraft-Sayre, and Pianta (2003) found that the vast majority of families were willing to participate in school-initiated kindergarten-transition activities. These practices were associated with greater involvement across subsequent school years, underscoring the importance of school-based activities that encourage family-school links.

KEY ISSUES FOR RESEARCH

The most significant advances in the research on parental school involvement have arisen from the recognition that context is important and there are multiple dimensions to parental school involvement. Whether parental school involvement occurs because a child is having problems in school or because of ongoing positive dialogue between parents and school makes a difference in how involvement influences children's academic outcomes (Hill, 2001). For example, a parent who volunteers in the classroom to learn more about the teacher's expectations for students and a parent who volunteers in the classroom to monitor the teacher's behavior toward her child are both involved in the school, but only the latter parent is likely to create distrust that may impact the children's attitudes toward the school and the teacher.

Parental school involvement does not reflect just one set of activities. Such diverse activities as volunteering in the classroom, communicating with the teacher, participating in academic-related activities at home, communicating the positive value of education, and participating in the parent-teacher relationship are all included in parental school involvement, and each is related to school performance (Epstein & Sanders, 2002; Hill & Craft, 2003). Research on parental school involvement is taking these diverse factors into account.

Despite the recent advances in conceptualizing and studying parental school involvement, there are still challenges. First, the multidimensional nature of parental school involvement has led to a lack of agreement about definitions and to measurement inconsistencies, making it difficult to compare findings across studies. In addition, whereas research typically examines the relations between types of parental involvement and achievement, the types of parental involvement may influence each other. For example, a high-quality parent-teacher relationship may strengthen the positive impact of a parent's home involvement on achievement. And volunteering at school may lead to an increase in the communicated value of education or change the way parents become involved at home. Issues concerning the reciprocal relations among different types of involvement have yet to be addressed.

The second research challenge is integrating various perspectives. Whom should we survey when assessing parental school involvement? Parents? Teachers? Students? Is one perspective more accurate than another perspective? In fact, multiple perspectives are important for understanding parental school involvement. Although few studies have examined the influence of different perspectives on our understanding of parental school involvement, some studies found that teachers', children's, and parents' reports of parental school involvement were only moderately correlated, but each was related to achievement, suggesting that each perspective is unique and important (Hill et al., in press). The vast majority of research on parental school involvement, like parenting research, in based on mothers' involvement. What are the roles of fathers and other relatives? Does involvement of other family members vary according to demographic background?

Some research suggests that teachers' or parents' perspectives may be biased. Teachers often evaluate African American and low-income families more negatively than Euro-American and higher-income families (Epstein & Dauber, 1991). Moreover, teachers who are not particularly supportive of parental school involvement may tend to prejudge minority or low-income parents (Epstein & Dauber, 1991). Such stereotyping often results in substandard treatment of students and of parents when they do become involved.

Much of our knowledge about parental school involvement is based on research in elementary schools. Parental school involvement declines as children grow up, and middle and high schools are less likely than elementary schools to encourage involvement (Eccles & Harold, 1996). Despite this decline, parental school involvement remains associated with academic outcomes in adolescence (Epstein & Sanders, 2002; Hill et al., in press). Thus, the third research challenge is to take into consideration developmental changes in parental school involvement. Parental school involvement may be different for a 7th-grade student selecting course tracks or 11th-grade student selecting colleges than for a 1st-grade student learning to read. Current measures of parental school involvement do not reflect these developmental variations. In fact, parents' involvement in schooling may not decline during middle and high school; rather, the research may show declining involvement only because the nature of involvement changes in ways that are not reflected in our measures.

FROM RESEARCH TO PRACTICE

Evidence strongly supports the potential benefits of policies and programs to increase parental school involvement across the school years and even before children start school. Most parents want information about how to best support their children's education, but teachers have little time or resources to devote to promoting parental school involvement, and some parents are simply "hard to reach." How do we help teachers facilitate parental school involvement? Most teacher training programs do not include courses on how to effectively involve parents. Linking research on parental school involvement to teacher training programs may go far to support family-school collaborations.

When parents cannot become involved, how can schools compensate for the loss of the benefits of involvement? Understanding the mechanisms through which involvement promotes academic achievement would point to logical targets for intervention. For example, if parental school involvement promotes achievement through its effects on the completion and accuracy of homework, then providing homework monitors after school might be an appropriate intervention strategy.

Impoverished families are less likely to be involved in schooling than wealthier families, and schools in impoverished communities are less likely to promote parental school involvement than schools in

wealthier communities. Consequently, the children who would benefit most from involvement are those who are least likely to receive it unless a special effort is made. Promoting parental school involvement entails more in disadvantaged schools than in wealthier schools. Compared with more advantaged parents, parents in impoverished communities often need much more information about how to promote achievement in their children, are overcoming more of their own negative school experiences, and have less social capital. Thus, programs and policies designed to promote parental school involvement in advantaged districts may be ineffective in promoting parental school involvement in high-risk or disadvantaged communities. Understanding each community's unique barriers and resources is important for establishing and maintaining effective collaborations between families and schools.

Recommended Reading

Booth, A., & Dunn, J.F. (Eds.). (1996). *Family-school links: How do they affect educational outcomes?* Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Epstein, J.L., & Sanders, M.G. (2002). (See References)

National PTA. (2000). *Building successful partnerships: A guide for developing parent and family involvement programs.* Bloomfield, IN: National Education Service.

REFERENCES

Baker, D.P., & Stevenson, D.L. (1986). Mothers' strategies for children's school achievement: Managing the transition to high school. *Sociology of Education*, *59*, 156–166.

Eccles, J.S., & Harold, R.D. (1996). Family involvement in children's and adolescents' schooling. In A. Booth & J.F. Dunn (Eds.), *Family-school links: How do they affect educational outcomes?* (pp. 3–34). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Epstein, J.L., & Dauber, S.L. (1991). School programs and teacher practices of parent involvement in inner-city elementary and middle schools. *The Elementary School Journal*, *91*, 289–305.

Epstein, J.L., & Sanders, M.G. (2002). Family, school, and community partnerships. In M.H. Bornstein (Ed.), *Handbook of parenting: Vol. 5. Practical issues in parenting* (pp. 407–437). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Grolnick, W.S., & Slowiaczek, M.L. (1994). Parents' involvement in children's schooling: A multidimensional conceptualization and motivation model. *Child Development*, *65*, 237–252.

Hill, N.E. (2001). Parenting and academic socialization as they relate to school readiness: The role of ethnicity and family income. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, *93*, 686–697.

Hill, N.E., Castellino, D.R., Lansford, J.E., Nowlin, P., Dodge, K.A., Bates, J., & Pettit, G. (in press). Parent-academic involvement as related to school behavior, achievement, and aspirations: Demographic variations across adolescence. *Child Development*.

Hill, N.E., & Craft, S.A. (2003). Parent-school involvement and school performance: Mediated pathways among socioeconomically comparable African-American and Euro-American families. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, *95*, 74–83.

LaParo, K.M., Kraft-Sayre, M., & Pianta, R.C. (2003). Preschool to kindergarten transition activities: Involvement and satisfaction of families and teachers. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, *17*(2), 147–158.

Lareau, A. (1996). Assessing parent involvement in schooling: A critical analysis. In A. Booth & J.F. Dunn (Eds.), *Family-school links: How do they affect educational outcomes?* (pp. 57–64). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Lichter, D.T. (1996). Family diversity, intellectual inequality, and academic achievement among American children. In A. Booth & J.F. Dunn (Eds.), *Family-school links: How do they affect educational outcomes?* (pp. 265–273). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

McNeal, R.B., Jr. (1999). Parental involvement as social capital: Differential effectiveness on science achievement, truancy, and dropping out. *Social Forces*, *78*, 117–144.

Miedel, W.T., & Reynolds, A.J. (1999). Parent involvement in early intervention for disadvantaged children: Does it matter? *Journal of School Psychology*, *37*, 370–402.

Pianta, R.C., Cox, M.J., Taylor, L.C., & Early, D.M. (1999). Kindergarten teachers' practices related to the transition into school: Results of a national survey. *Elementary School Journal*, *100*, 71–86.

Taylor, L.C., Clayton, J.D., & Rowley, S.J. (in press). Academic socialization: Understanding parental influences on children's school-related development in the early years. *Review of General Psychology*.