

**Parent Involvement in Children's Education:
Implications for School Outcomes among Children at Risk**

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Introduction

Parent involvement in children's education has been largely conceptualized as occurring on two fronts: at home and at school. At home, parent-school involvement includes participating in educational activities such as helping with homework or engaging in educational activities. Some scholars conceptualize certain restrictions, such as monitoring television viewing and internet access as forms of parent-school involvement (Dauber and Epstein, 1993; Muller, 1995). At school, a broad spectrum of parent behaviors such as participation in activities within the classroom, becoming actively involved in policy making, and attending sporting events are classified as parent-school involvement (Dunst, 2002; Epstein and Sheldon, 2002; Lewis and Forman, 2002). Research also shows that certain school practices encourage parent-school involvement (Vaden-Kiernan, 2005) which is particularly relevant for children at risk whose parents face barriers in getting involved in their child's school. Much of the research on parent involvement in children's education supports the notion that involvement promotes academic success (e.g. Barnard, 2004; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). Parent involvement has been found to be related to children's grades in school, test scores and grade retention (Desimone 1999, Henderson and Mapp 2002; Jimerson, Egeland and Teo, 1999; Miedel and Reynolds, 1999; Simon 2004 for example).

Furthermore, in an era of *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) with a state commitment to ensure that all children receive a high quality education, the role of the parent has become all the more important. *No Child Left Behind* requires schools to develop ways to get parents more involved in their child's education and in improving the school. Title I of NCLB (Section 1118) outlines requirements for schools, districts, and states to create partnerships between parents and

schools. In this context, the intergenerational transmission of economic resources, human capital and cultural capital through parental involvement for the benefit of the child is particularly relevant¹. Furthermore, there is an increasing need for parents of disadvantaged children to stay on par with parents of more advantaged children to ensure that they are not disadvantaged in terms of school outcomes.

Using data from the National Household Education Surveys Program: Parent and Family Involvement Survey (NHES: PFI), a nationally representative survey of parent and family involvement in children's education conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) in 1996 and 2003, this study examines trends in parent involvement in the school and at home over the past decade particularly focusing on parents of children at risk. These trends will shed light on whether human capital investments in children and the transmission of cultural capital to children through parental involvement have increased over the past decade and whether the changes have been similar for children in high-risk families as well. Further analyses will examine the relationship between parent involvement and school outcomes over time for children belonging to families at different levels of risk after controlling for the mediating role of school practices in ameliorating the expected negative effects of the risk factors.

A national survey such as the NHES: PFI is appropriate for an analysis of this nature since it covers all age groups of school going children. Moreover, because similar questions were asked at both time-points, 1996 and 2003, an analysis of trends over time is possible. In addition to building on past research on parent involvement using NHES: PFI data, such a study will be useful to inform policy on the role of current school practices in parent involvement and its impact on children at risk. It will emphasize the need for strategies to build involvement among

¹ In this paper, we treat parent involvement as the means by which cultural capital (as defined by Bourdieu (1986) and further explained by Perreira, Harris and Lee (2006) and Portes (2000)) is transferred to children.

parents of at-risk children, particularly by changing school practices, so that there are not dire consequences for their children's academic success.

There is a vast research literature on parent involvement. The next sections discuss patterns in parent involvement as they vary by parent and school characteristics, barriers that parents face in being involved in schools and school practices to involve families.

Parent Characteristics as Contributors to Level of Involvement

The transmission of human and cultural capital from parents to their children is translated in the form of parental involvement in children's education and varies according to family characteristics such as family type, race, ethnicity, income, education etc.. For example, research shows that levels of home supervision and school participation are considerably higher in two-parent families than in one-parent families (Nord and West 2001). After controlling for other family background characteristics, biological mothers in stepfather families have been found to be less involved in their children's schools than biological mothers in two-biological parent families. Interestingly, their involvement is less as compared to that of mothers in mother-only families as well. Similarly, stepmothers are less likely than biological mothers regardless of family type, to show low levels of involvement in their children's schools.

Ethnic group differences in the home involvement of parents are also prevalent. For example, research shows that Asian and Pacific Islander parents have lower levels of home discussion, school communication, and school participation with their children than White parents, but higher levels of home supervision (Muller and Kerbow 1993; Sui-Chi and Willms 1996). Results from NHES: PFI 2003 indicate that a greater percentage of Asian parents reported participating in out-of-school activities such as going to a public library in the last month as

compared to White, African-American or Hispanic students (Vaden-Kiernan and McManus 2005). White parents have especially high levels of involvement, but only in areas highly related to social activities such as talking about current school experiences, knowing the parents of their children's friends, and volunteering at school. African-American mothers talk with their children about high school program planning, participate in PTO, and enroll their children in computer classes at high rates. They also monitor homework and contact the school about academic matters more frequently than other groups. However, parent involvement for all groups declines as children get older.

Other parent characteristics are also relevant. Parent involvement is higher among more educated parents. The percentage of students whose parents had attended a general school meeting was higher in households where parents had completed higher levels of education (Vaden-Kiernan and McManus, 2005). This relationship was also true for out-of-school activities with children such as playing sports, active games and exercising.

Barriers to Parent Involvement in Schools

Some parents also face barriers to their participation in schools. Three of the most prevalent barriers to parent-school involvement include economic problems, ethnicity-related issues (e.g., language), and parental education. Not surprisingly, Mexican migrant workers were often deterred from becoming actively involved in their children's education because they faced all of these challenges (Lopez, Scribner, and Mahitivanicheha 2001). The lack of bilingual communication and general communication problems with teachers is a factor responsible for the low level of participation by Hispanic parents (Lynch and Stein 1987). Although school administrators and teachers may not be able to change the economic situation of families, school attempts to break down economic barriers to parental involvement by establishing a relationship

with the family can have important consequences for improving student attendance (Epstein and Sheldon 2002). Cultural differences between Asian American parents and teachers have also been found to affect their involvement in their children's education (Yao 1993). Cultural differences also dictate what kinds of involvement are most effective in producing positive educational outcomes (Anguiano 2004). For example, traditional parent involvement and parent involvement in school policy making are more strongly related (positively) to high school completion for Asian Americans than European Americans, Latino or Native Americans.

School Practices to Involve and Support Families

School practices play an influential role on the extent of parental involvement. Appropriate school practices can encourage parent involvement in children's schools. Other published results from the 1996 and 2003 NHES: PFI surveys show that there is a positive relationship between school practices done "very well" and the frequency of parent involvement at school (Vaden-Kiernan, 2005). Parental attitudes toward school are positively influenced by schools' programs of partnership and suggest that different types of school practices result in different parent involvement behaviors. For example, parent reports of involvement at home are positively influenced by school practices that assist parenting and facilitate interactions with teens on learning activities at home. Parent reports of involvement at school are most strongly influenced by school practices that encourage volunteering and participation in school decision making. The results remain constant when controlling for family and student background characteristics, academic performance, parent employment, and educational background. Therefore, modifications in school practices where schools have an active relationship with parents and families can play an important role in breaking the barriers to school involvement

among certain disadvantaged groups. There may be a need for home visits and other direct interaction with parents in order to gain their confidence. This has been found to be true among parents who are migrant workers and others faced with poverty and homelessness. Effective methods of increasing attendance include, among other factors, establishing a contact person at school for parents to work with, providing workshops for parents, referring students to a counselor, and the use of after-school programs (Epstein and Sheldon, 2002).

Research Framework, Data and Methodology

This research study analyzes data from two waves of the NHES: PFI surveys fielded in 1996 and 2003 to examine trends in the transmission of human and cultural capital to children in the form of parent and family involvement in education with a particular emphasis on parents of children at risk. The analysis is restricted to data from parents of children enrolled in schools and in grades kindergarten through 12th grade and will attempt to answer the following research questions:

- 1) Has the extent of parental involvement in children's education changed over time? How has children's exposure to risk affected parental involvement in their education, both at home and at school?
- 2) How is parental involvement in children's education related to school outcomes and how has this relationship changed over time?
- 3) What is the mediating role of school practices in this relationship?

These research questions will be examined with particular emphasis on families at risk, to observe whether increases in parent involvement have maintained the same pace and whether they bear the same relationship for this at-risk group particularly in an era when parent

involvement is becoming increasingly important. We expect that even in a relatively short period such as the past decade, parents and family members are spending more of their time being involved in their children's education, either by participating in activities in school or at home. With a greater role played by schools in encouraging all parents of children to be involved, we expect an increase in parent involvement among children in families at risk. However, it is very likely that parents at risk spend less time involved in their children's education as compared to others, particularly because of constraints such as single parenthood, low education, low income levels, and unemployment or employment offering little flexibility. Therefore, although parental involvement may have a positive relationship with school outcomes for all children, including those in at-risk households, we expect the relationship to be stronger in households facing little or no risk. These expected findings, however, need to be viewed with caution. This analysis is constrained by data from a cross-sectional sample at each time point which make causal inferences harder to make. There is a possibility that higher levels of parental involvement may be a result of poor school outcomes rather than result in greater school outcomes.

Statistical Analysis Method

With the above-mentioned objectives, this study will use descriptive and analytical methods to examine the trends in parent involvement in children's education over time. Parent involvement in education is defined in terms of involvement in school activities (such as attending a general school meeting, parent-teacher conference, a class event or volunteering in school) as well as activities outside school (such as telling child a story, teaching letters/words, playing a game/sport, working on arts/crafts, discussing high school courses). Low involvement for both are defined as participation in 0-1 activities by either parent, moderate involvement (2 activities), or high involvement (3 or more activities). Differences in parent involvement trends

will be examined for children based on their level of risk in order to observe whether trends in parent involvement for children at greater risk have moved at the same pace as for those at less risk. Similar to the definition used in past research (Zill et al., 1995), a child is at risk if he/she bears one of the following characteristics, namely, low maternal education, poverty, mother's minority-language status, unmarried motherhood, and single parenthood. The intensity of risk exposure is defined in terms of exposure to one risk factor, two risk factors or three or more risk factors.

The analytical models will use survey regression techniques in a two step model. Based on the nature of the dependent variables which are ordered from low to high, ordered logistic regression methods will be used. Using the statistical software STATA9, a cross-sectional time series model using appropriate weights and controlling for time period will examine the following research questions.

a) The relationship between the child's exposure to risk and the level of parent involvement in school and at home. There will be two dependent variables, the level of parent involvement in child's school and at home, both of which are defined as ordered categories ranging from low to high as explained above. The main predictor variable will be child's exposure to one, two, three or more risk factors.

b) The relationship between the level of parent involvement and child's school outcomes. In these regression models, the level of parent involvement in child's school and at home will be the predictor variables. The dependent variables (school outcomes) will be the child's overall letter grade, parents' perception of child performance during the school year, and whether the child repeated a grade. Variations in this relationship will be examined for children exposed to different levels of risk by using interaction terms.

Moreover, the role of school practices (such as improving parents' understanding of parenting and child development, communicating with parents, encouraging volunteering, helping parents help children learn at home, practices to involve parents in decision-making) as a mediating factor in this relationship particularly for school involvement will also be examined.

All the regression models will control for time period and other socio-economic characteristics such as child's race, gender, and grade.

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