



Parent involvement : factors influencing parent and teacher perceptions and practices for six types of involvement in Montana public schools
by Cheryl Strasburger Johannes

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education
Montana State University
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Abstract:

The purpose of this study was to determine whether certain parent factors and teacher factors explain and contribute to the variation of parent and teacher perception of a school's program of parent involvement in Montana public schools. A six-part typology (Epstein, 1993) defined the types of parent involvement as: 1) parenting information, 2) communication between home and school, 3) utilizing parent volunteers, 4) helping parents to help with homework, 5) decision-making and leadership, and 6) relating community services and resources for families. The theory underlying this study is the overlapping sociological empathetic influences on child development created by the home, the school, and the community.

The findings showed a difference in the types and magnitude of perception between parents of high school students and parents of elementary/middle school students. Evidence pointed to certain factors explaining a significant amount of variation in some of the types. Parents at both levels perceived the need for better communication. Variables that most often explained a significant proportion of the way parents view the school program of involvement were parent view of the school and parent perception of the school's effort to involve parents. Other variables that explained variation in the ways parents view the school's parent involvement program were parent perception of child's success in school, gender, and income level. Variables which did not offer much explanation of the way parents perceive the school parent involvement program were education level and adults in the household.

For the teacher data, the identified variables did explain variation in some of the types of school program of parent involvement for teachers at all levels. There were differences between high school teacher perceptions of the school parent involvement program and the elementary/middle school teacher perceptions.

Conclusions and recommendations support the need for school-home collaboration.

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PERCEPTIONS AND PRACTICES FOR SIX TYPES OF INVOLVEMENT
IN MONTANA PUBLIC SCHOOLS

by

Cheryl Strasburger Johannes

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APPROVAL

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This thesis has been read by each member of the thesis committee and has been found to be satisfactory regarding content, English usage, format, citations, bibliographic style, and consistency, and is ready for submission to the College of Graduate Studies.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine whether certain parent factors and teacher factors explain and contribute to the variation of parent and teacher perception of a school's program of parent involvement in Montana public schools. A six-part typology (Epstein, 1993) defined the types of parent involvement as: 1) parenting information, 2) communication between home and school, 3) utilizing parent volunteers, 4) helping parents to help with homework, 5) decision-making and leadership, and 6) relating community services and resources for families. The theory underlying this study is the overlapping sociological empathetic influences on child development created by the home, the school, and the community.

The findings showed a difference in the types and magnitude of perception between parents of high school students and parents of elementary/middle school students. Evidence pointed to certain factors explaining a significant amount of variation in some of the types. Parents at both levels perceived the need for better communication. Variables that most often explained a significant proportion of the way parents view the school program of involvement were parent view of the school and parent perception of the school's effort to involve parents. Other variables that explained variation in the ways parents view the school's parent involvement program were parent perception of child's success in school, gender, and income level. Variables which did not offer much explanation of the way parents perceive the school parent involvement program were education level and adults in the household.

For the teacher data, the identified variables did explain variation in some of the types of school program of parent involvement for teachers at all levels. There were differences between high school teacher perceptions of the school parent involvement program and the elementary/middle school teacher perceptions.

Conclusions and recommendations support the need for school-home collaboration.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Nearly every country has developed a system of family support that has served to cushion the effects of change in the family structure. Many European countries have made social provision for child care, parental leave, and health benefits, which Europeans consider essential adaptations to conditions of modern life. In America, the traditional celebration of family self-sufficiency and rugged individualism, along with a traditional antipathy to government interference may have impeded some needed adjustments to change (Coontz, 1989). In the United States, political leaders and educators have talked a great deal about the importance of parent involvement in the education of youth, perhaps more than any other Western nation. In the early twentieth century, Theodore Roosevelt opined that the nation's future rested on the right kind of home life. Lyndon Johnson declared that a goal of the Great Society was to strengthen the family. Richard Nixon vetoed a child care bill on the grounds it would weaken the family. Ronald Reagan succinctly put it: "Strong families are the foundation of society" (Coontz 1989).

Elkind (1995) emphasizes that schools have undergone a transformation in keeping pace with the changes in society. Schools in postmodern society have continued the historical trend of gradually assuming parental functions. The theory of the two working collaboratively has for the most part been overlooked. Recent trends suggest that school policies and practices have not kept pace with the needs of the changing family (Swap, 1993; Levin, 1987).

During the current era of school reform and change, attention is focusing on parent involvement in the education of children. While educators look for solutions to the multi-faceted problems faced daily in classrooms, they generally have not considered partnerships with parents as an approach to diminish many of these problems. Research (Coleman, 1966; Bronfenbrenner, 1974; Comer, 1986; Moles, 1987; Henderson and Berla, 1994; Epstein, 1987, 1987b, 1990, 1991, 1995; Epstein and Dauber, 1991; Swap, 1992, 1993) has shown that any amount of parent involvement will positively impact a child's success rate in school; yet, often those parents whose children are struggling the most are the absent ones in the school-home relationship. Although parents and teachers are engaged in complementary socio-cultural tasks, they often find themselves in conflict with one another. According to Kagan and Schraft (1983), this adversarial relationship emerges out of their roles as defined by the social structure of society. Collaboration between schools and families is not the dominant model for the management of schools or the practice of teaching (Swap, 1993; Noddings, 1988). Kidder (1989) in *Among School Children* points out that teaching has been and continues to be an isolated and isolating experience. Seeley (1985) describes this system of managing schools as fundamentally flawed.

The essential trouble is the nature of the system itself, a system that has become beguiled by a "delivery system" mentality. Public education today is a professionalized, bureaucratized, governmental enterprise attempting to deliver education as a service. The system is faulty because it is designed to deliver something that cannot be delivered. The system is failing and will continue to fail until education is rediscovered as a dimension of human development dependent on personal motivation, initiative, and relationships, not on systems and "service delivery." (p.4)

Schools need to look at parent involvement in new ways. These ways can serve to build partnerships between the home and the school that are two-way in terms of helping one another to provide educational opportunities for children. A closer examination of the

relationship that exists between the school and the home and ways of maintaining and/or strengthening that relationship is needed.

The purposes of this study were to contribute to research about parent involvement in public schools in Montana and to provide educators with data about parent perceptions of schools' efforts to involve or not involve them and about which involvement practices may be more effective for diverse family groups.

Problem Statement

The problem of this study was to determine what proportion of the variability in the dependent variables of parent perceptions of a school's program of six types of parent involvement was explained by a set of independent variables and whether those variables helped to predict a type of parent involvement. The six types of parent involvement were 1) providing parenting information, 2) communicating with parents, 3) utilizing parent volunteers, 4) helping parents to help child with homework, 5) involving parents in decision-making and leadership, and 6) informing parents about community services and resources to help families. The independent variables for parents were perception variables of parents' views of the school, the parents' perceptions of their child's success in school, the parents' perceptions of the school's effort to involve parents, and the demographic variables of gender, adults in household, levels of education and income.

Conceptual Framework

Developmental psychologists widely accept ecological theories of human development; however, these theories are not always put into practice when intervening for children (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Garbarino, 1982; Werner, 1990). Events and experiences that occur in the lives of individuals or families (their ecology) influence the ecological emphatic perspective. These individuals and families can understand and

influence these events and experiences to promote healthy modes of development and learning. This concept uses the following framework for approaching the study of families: all human systems are comprised of elements that enable them to function; human systems are connected to other systems in a transactional manner; the elements within a human system influence each other; human systems strive to maintain their integrity through a needs-resources balancing process (Swick, 1987). Using this perspective, ecological theorists see a child's behavior (as well as the family's) as a part of a set of interrelated systems that have a powerful influence on each other (Garbarino, 1982; Swick and Graves, 1993).

In the 1980s, Epstein (1995) found that older sociological theories stressed that social organizations would be most effective if they set separate goals and worked efficiently and effectively on unique missions. Epstein and her colleagues did not find these theories supported by the data. She has developed a theory of overlapping spheres of influence (See Figure 1) in which the contexts of family, school, and community create an environment that directly affects how well a child learns in school and how successful he/she is in life. This social organizational perspective posits that the most effective relationship of families and schools contain overlapping shared goals and missions concerning children.

Figure 1. Overlapping Spheres of Influence Model Developed by Joyce Epstein

This ecological emphatic concept and the theory of overlapping spheres form the framework for this research. Epstein's six-part typology of parent involvement clarifies the term parent involvement.

Definition of Terms

Classroom Structure - The scheduling and grouping of students in a classroom, i.e. self-contained in which the students have most of their classes taught by one teacher throughout the school day, semi-departmentalized in which the students have one teacher for more than one class and have other instructors for other core curriculum courses, and departmentalized in which the students move from one teacher to another teacher for instruction.

Communicating - The using of effective forms of school-to-home and home-to-school exchanges of information and interaction about home observations of children's behavior

and attitudes, school observations of children's behavior and attitudes, and children's social and academic progress.

Family Involvement - Broader context of parent involvement which includes other members of a family. Involvement may include members of varying family structures and extended family as well.

Learning at Home - Information and ideas that families can use to help students at home with homework and other activities, decisions, and planning that create positive learning environments.

Middle School - The grouping of grade levels sixth, seventh, and eighth or seventh, eighth, and ninth for instructional purposes based upon the developmental needs of that age group to facilitate easier transition into the high school setting.

Parenting - The skills and information that families need to establish home environments to meet basic family obligations and to support children as students.

Parent Involvement - The contacts, interactions, and patterns of influence that occur between individuals at home and individuals at school who have responsibility for the education of a child living in both environments.

Partnership - The collaborative relationship that occurs when parents, teachers, and students share a joint interest in working together to create an appropriate environment to promote student success.

Permeable Family - The changing nature of the unit in which a child resides due to the current trend of having adults entering the unit and later leaving the unit due to divorce, separation of parents, remarriage, death of a family member. This can also refer to the increasing numbers of adults in a child's life in terms of child care providers, specialized staff in schools, and agency workers.

Shared Decision-making - Parents and schools working together to decide appropriate curriculum and programs for children.

Student Success, also referred to as Achievement - Parents' perception and report of their child's grades in school, their child's progress in school, and their child's attitude toward school.

Typology - The study of types; framework of types.

Volunteering - The unpaid services of parent help and support for school purposes either in the setting of the school or at a school-related activity away from the school or completing a task for school in the home.

Type I Involvement - Parenting activities which help all families establish home environments to support children as students.

Type II Involvement - Using effective forms of school-to-home and home-to-school communications about school programs and children's progress.

Type III Involvement - Recruiting and organizing parent help and support.

Type IV Involvement - Providing information and ideas to families about how to help students at home with homework and other curriculum-related activities, decisions, and planning.

Type V Involvement - Including parents in school decisions and developing parent leaders.

Type VI Involvement - Identifying and integrating resources and services from the community to strengthen school programs, family practices, and student learning and development.

Questions to Be Answered

1. What proportion of the variance in parent attitude toward each of the six types of parent involvement is explained by the individual and the combined effects of factors of parent

gender, parent education level, number of adults in household and parent perception of the school's effort to involve parents, parent perception of the school, and parent perception of their child's success in school at the elementary level and at the high school level?

2. What is the interrelationship between parent attitudes toward each of the six types of parent involvement and parent self-reported practices of each of the six types of involvement?

3. What proportion of the variance in teacher attitude toward each of the six types of parent involvement is explained by the individual and combined factors of teacher education level, years of experience, number of students taught per day or classroom structure, gender, teacher perception of parent strengths, teacher perception of importance of parent involvement, and perception of support from others for parent involvement at the elementary level and at the secondary level?

Assumptions of the Study

1. All parents who responded have children who were enrolled in public schools in Montana.
2. All teachers who were employed in K-12 public schools in Montana and are members of the Montana Education Association.

Significance of the Study

The study contributes to the knowledge base of parent involvement in public schools in Montana. The data helps to explain the influence of a set of perception factors and demographic factors upon different types of parent involvement. Educators and parents in public schools can use the data to make decisions regarding parent involvement practices in their schools.

Review of Relevant Research and Theory

Historical Review

The balance among the environmental contexts that influence children's lives has shifted throughout history. This section will present a generalized view of the interactions between families and schools during the development of the public school systems.

In the Colonial Period, English common law required a person to be a part of a family, either the family of origin or one to which the authorities assigned him/her. The family was responsible for teaching the child how to make a living, to respect and obey constituted authority, to participate in community tasks, and to perform his/her religious duties (Sinclair, 1983). If the family did not have the capacity to do this, then the child was apprenticed or bonded to another person or family who could assume this responsibility. From the earliest establishment of schools in colonial New England, government steadily increased its control over the form, content, funding, and clients of schools (Perry and Tannebaum, 1992).

During the 1800s, many unsuccessful efforts failed to establish a national public school system (Perry and Tannebaum, 1992). According to Sinclair, every state established common schools to teach basic skills. Many children attended when their parents believed that they could be spared from their work at home, on the farm, or in other places where children were employed (Sinclair et al., 1983). The schools were not graded and when a child could not attend, it was expected that he/she would start at the place in his/her studies where he/she had left off when last in school. With the *Kalamazoo Case* (1874), compulsory attendance regulations and child labor laws began making an impact on families sending their children to schools supported by tax dollars (Perry and Tannebaum, 1992).

Until the Industrial Revolution, the home had assumed a major responsibility for the care, education and training of children. This was possible because the occupational skills that most young people had to learn were relatively simple. As the demands for better trained workers increased, the need for instruction outside the home became apparent. As knowledge expanded and more skills were necessary in the workplace, full-time teachers were needed to prepare youths for their roles in society. Communities came to accept education and training as their responsibilities (Kellaghan et al. 1993). In 1892, a movement by the National Education Association to standardize the high school curriculum was an effort to exercise professional control over educational content (Levine, 1982).

In the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, American education became more of a situation of the home against the school and parents against the teacher as political and social forces were moving together (Sinclair et al., 1983). Seeley (1989) suggests that parents may have signaled that they were unwilling to be involved in their children's schooling. Some researchers dispute this, citing evidence that parents have always wanted to be involved (Berger, 1991; Epstein, 1987; Swap, 1992). The increased professionalization of teaching may have had the unintended consequence of reducing parental responsibility for children's education and parent involvement in the educational process (Christenson and Conoley, 1992).

Between the 1940s and the 1980s, changes in the family have increased dramatically. Schools have attempted to keep pace. Nostalgic recollections of times when home-school relationships were stronger and more reliable are illusory. Sara Lawrence Lightfoot (1978) maintains that home-school relationships are inherently in conflict because tensions exist between the particularistic concerns of parents and the universalistic concerns of schooling. Tensions in contemporary society are evident as parents' rights and power

are becoming new dynamics in the American public education system.

Changing Families in America

Psychological and social changes have resulted from new life-span events, such as increased longevity, negotiating psychosocial identity within more complex family arrangements, and relating to the more intense needs of children as they experience higher educational and social expectations (Hamburg, 1992). Hamburg reports that the effect of this change is felt most critically within the family system. Families provide the vision, energy, and structure by which the change process is negotiated (Skolnick, 1991). When the stresses promulgated in society overwhelm families and create a high risk for dysfunction, the result can be loss of vision, energy, and structure for society at large. The increase in family stress since the 1950s has been significant. Increases in family dissolution, child abuse, teen parenthood, alcohol and other drug abuse, and other family pathologies are cause for alarm (Gibbs 1990; Hewlett, 1991).

The number of single parent families has increased. Since 1960, premarital childbirth to women under 20 years of age has been a national concern. Three quarters of a million unwed teenage females become pregnant each year (1995 National Kids Count Data Book). This translates into a 400 percent increase in out-of-wedlock births. Evidence shows that the mothers, the children born, and couples who marry as a result of a premaritally conceived child experience economic disadvantages both in loss of earning power and loss of human potential.

The divorce rate in the United States has quadrupled (Bennett, 1993). The percentage of children in single-parent families climbed from just under 10 percent in 1965 to nearly 22 percent in 1989 (Kilbourne, Decker, Romney, 1994). Single parents accounted for 27 percent of all family groups with children under 18 years old in 1987, a

proportion more than twice as high as it was in 1970 (U.S. Bureau of Census, 1988). The 1995 National Kids Count Book reports single parenthood figure to be 25.3 percent in 1992 with every state recording an increase in this measure between 1985 and 1992. More than half of today's children are likely to spend some of their childhood in a single-parent home (1994 Current Population Survey, March). In Montana, that figure is reported to be 23.1 percent in 1992 with the trend showing an increase in the past five years (1995 Montana Kids Count Book).

Swick and Graves' (1993) findings on family environments point to other factors which have impacted today's families. New challenges such as AIDS, drug abuse, increasing crime, and increasing mental health problems are confronting families. The juvenile violent crime arrest rate reflects an increasing number of youths between the ages of 10 and 17 arrested for homicide, forcible rape, robbery, or aggravated assault since 1985 (1995 Montana Kids Count Report).

Cowan and Cowan (1992) describe aspects of current familial social arrangements. In recent decades, there has been a steady ripple of revolutionary social change. Birth control technology has allowed parents to control the number of children. Smaller family units live more isolated lives, often feeling cut off from extended families and friends. Mothers of young children are entering the work force earlier and are more educated, and worthy of their attention and effort thereby holding higher expectations for those students (Alderman, 1990).

This section has described various identified factors that interact differently with teacher characteristics and family characteristics. According to Seeley (1985), successful educational partnerships do exist in some classrooms and schools. However, partnership for education is limited. Partnership occurs when parents have little education (1995 National Kids Count Data Book). George Mason University professor Roger Wilkins (1995) posits that "Poor children need families, and in a culture where almost half the marriages

end in divorce, the very least the most vulnerable citizens need for a chance to form and keep families is a real shot at earned income. But America is going through a profound economic upheaval that is pinching middle-class people, doing severe damage to unskilled whites, and devastating unskilled blacks.”

Based upon a growing body of research, there is an effort nationwide to involve men more directly in their children’s education at school and in the home. Fathers or father figures play an important role in the positive cognitive, emotional, and social development of their sons and daughters (Nelson cited in 1995 Kids Count Data Book). Traditionally, women have held the role of providing most of the interaction with children in the home especially when the children are young. This responsibility has extended into the context of the school where mothers are most often the parent connected with the school. The research consistently shows that the impact of involving fathers or any significant male figure in a child’s life is beneficial (Levine, Murphy, Wilson, 1993). Levine et al. state that “children benefit from warm and nurturing relationships with men, and men are most likely to develop those sorts of relationships in environments which value, support, and encourage them” (p. 9).

Choices about how to create life as a family are much greater now than they were thirty years ago. Men and women are having a difficult time regaining their balance as couples after they have babies, partly because radical shifts in the circumstances surrounding family life in America demand new arrangements to accommodate the increasing demands on parents of young children. New social arrangements and roles simply have not kept pace with these changes, leaving couples on their own to manage the demands of work and family (Skolnick, 1991).

Society is dealing with a large number of complex youth problems. Nearly half a million students drop out of public schools in the United States (Kaufman, Frase, 1990). This amounts to an annual economic impact of billions of dollars in lost tax revenues, in

welfare payments, and crime prevention (Caterall, 1986). Careful study of the dropout phenomenon reveals symptoms of deeper, underlying societal problems. Annual estimates of adolescent behavior present some startling statistics:

Three quarters of a million children are physically abused.

Almost half a million young people attempt suicide and 7,000 succeed (Capuzzi and Cross, 1989).

Nearly 150,000 youth run away from home (Willis, 1986).

During 1993, twenty-three percent of everyone arrested for a violent crime was under age 20 (Peck, Law, and Mills, 1989).

Arrests for teenage drug addiction have increased sixty-fold since 1963 (National Kids Count Book).

Treating these problems as though there are singular solutions will not suffice. The answers are complex, costly, and long-term.

Other factors outside the home impact the development of children. Seventy-three percent of parents want to limit their children's television viewing (Finnery, 1993), but studies show that children watch three or more hours of television a day (Puma et al, 1993). Academic achievement drops sharply for children who watch more than ten hours a week or an average of two hours per school day (U.S. Department of Education, 1987). The quality of the programs being watched may have such negative effects on children as less sensitivity to pain and suffering of others, greater fear of the world around them, and increased likelihood of being aggressive or harmful to others (Murray and Conneborg in *Strong Families, Strong Schools*, 1994).

Elkind (1995) points out the school is a mirror of society and of the family. As society has changed over the past fifty years, the school has reflected those changes in the family and in the larger society. The shift from modern to postmodern times is evidenced

