PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT AND THE THEORY OF PLANNED BEHAVIOR

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The “Theory of Planned Behavior” provided a specific theoretical framework to evaluate the impact of attitudes, norms, and controls on parental involvement in a local school district. The “new knowledge” that resulted from the measurement of these constructs affirmed that regardless of the perceived level of parental involvement, virtually all parents believed that engagement in their child’s education was important (attitudes). Parents also shared a variety of “good intentions” in wanting to participate in a range of scheduled school activities. In addition, the same obstacles (or “controls”) to these “good intentions” were shared between parents deemed “involved” and parents deemed “not involved.” There was a significance difference in norms, however. Parents perceived as “not involved” were more likely to note that friends and neighbors were not actively involved—and a majority of parents were unable or unlikely to be actively involved. This provides a rationale for a norm-based initiative that might increase parental involvement.

Introduction

The literature related to parents and schools is rife with articles that convey a convincing and positive connection between parent involvement and academic achievement (Henderson & Mapp, 2002), school attendance (Sheldon, 2007), graduation rates (Harvard Family Research Project, 2006), educational aspirations (Greenwood & Hickman, 1991), positive classroom behavior (Cotton & Wikeland, 2001), enrollment in more challenging curricula (Heymann, 2000), and favorable attitudes towards school (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Trusty, 1996; Astone & McClanahan, 1991). Long term social and financial benefits, such as improved health outcomes, decreased welfare dependence, and reduced crime are also correlated with increased parental involvement (Haveman & Wolfe, 1995). Augmenting these findings is research that indicates that the earlier in a child’s educational process parent involvement begins, the more powerful the effects (Cotton & Wikeland, 2001).

Many of these investigations parallel the original observations of Henderson and Berla (1994), who reviewed 66 studies of parental involvement and overwhelmingly concluded that parents play a crucial role in the instructional experiences of their children. Although this conclusion may strike some as mere “common sense,” it is important to mention that these data represent more than just a correlation. There are some clear paths through which such involvement improves student success. A review of the literature suggests that when parents/guardians are involved, teachers give more attention to students, teachers
tend to identify potential learning problems at earlier stages, parents and teachers are able to coordinate efforts to aid individual students and provide family services, communities prioritize to build and maintain better physical facilities, schools recruit and retain quality staff and administration and schools are more likely to obtain new funding for after-school programs and other innovative supports (Zill & Nord, 1994; Epstein, 1995; Mediterra & Fruchter, 2001). Thus, it is not an overstatement to suggest that when parents “show up,” they have enormous potential to positively impact the intellectual, emotional, and physical development of their children, school, and community. Hence, there is perhaps no topic on which there is greater agreement than the need for parental involvement in a child’s education (Epstein, 1995).

The consensus that parents are associated with a range of enhanced school outcomes is mirrored by legislative policies that mandate increasingly specific, research-based programs of family involvement. In fact, for the first time in the history of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, there is a definition of parental involvement that is designed to facilitate the development of parent involvement practices. Most recently, NCLB outlined a cascade of school, district, and state requirements that are intended to involve parents in ways that close the achievement gap between disadvantaged minority students and their peers. Specifically, these policies hope to promote student achievement via shared accountability between schools and parents. Some of these provisions include “expanded public school choice and supplemental educational services for eligible children in low-performing schools, local development of parental involvement plans with sufficient flexibility to address local needs, and building parents’ capacity for using effective practices to improve their own children’s academic achievement” (U.S. Department of Education, 1994). Connected to these well-intentioned policies is a simple message from former U.S. Secretary of Education, Rod Paige, who states, “Schools can’t improve without the help of parents” (Paige, 2002, p. A-13).

Undoubtedly, the involvement of parents is vital to the success of our schools. So, why aren’t more parents involved? The rewards of parent involvement are so clear. There is a well-established body of research that supports the assertion that parents can influence students learning and educational success. There is more and more interest in developing school-based comprehensive programs and partnerships. And, there is increased governmental support for school-home partnerships. It thus becomes important to ask the question, “what... education?” What are some of the barriers to becoming an involved parent in a child’s education?

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995, 1997) addressed this very question in their studies of parents’ motivations for involvement. One important conclusion put forth by these authors was that parental involvement is related to “role construction” – that is, the belief that a parent “should” or “should not” be involved in their children’s education. The authors broadened this notion with the assertion that such beliefs are often shaped by the parent’s personal
experiences with schooling and the parent’s personal perceptions about schooling. Thus, if parents believe that “good parenting” means that they should take an active role in their children’s education (role construction) then there is a greater likelihood that parents will take an active role in their children’s education.

Other constructs have been explored in recent years. Green and her colleagues (2007) associated a parents feelings of self-efficacy for helping their child succeed in school, parents’ perceptions of ‘being invited’ to participate in school related activities, and parents’ perceived time and energy for involvement as additional predictors of involvement.

**Purpose of the Study**

With these questions in mind, we proposed a program of research on parental involvement. The first phase of our study involved basic research. We used a framework adapted from the *Theory of Planned Behavior* (Aijzen, 1991) to isolate any perceived barriers to parental involvement. The second phase of the study used the knowledge gained from our basic research to develop a collaborative, targeted intervention that was designed to increase parental involvement at the local school level. Our third phase will take the form of program evaluation, ongoing assessment, continuous improvement, and the eventual empowerment of parents so that a “domino effect” can be created and long range benefits can be achieved.

This article addresses the first phase of our study. We began with the question, “Why don’t more parents participate in their child’s education?” and argued that the answer to this question should be viewed as part of a “solution,” rather than as part of a “problem.” This fundamental shift in thinking promised no magic recipe for creating an engaged parent. It could, however, broaden our knowledge base by illuminating the attitudes, beliefs, and expectations that frame parental involvement. In other words, we sought to advance our own theoretical understanding with a research-based bridge that could generate a host of successful family-school interventions.

**Barriers to Parental Involvement.**

Research indicates that just about all parents care about their children, want them to achieve, and believe that parental involvement is critical to a successful educational experience (Epstein, 2009). Unfortunately, these convictions often go “astray.” In some instances, an unwelcome school atmosphere may create a barrier that discourages participation. Teachers may feel that families are not valuable resources in educating students; or that finding time in their “busy” school day is not possible (Grant & Ray, 2010). These perceptions may be exacerbated by increased legislative pressures that compel teachers to focus exclusively on “academics” so that they can meet higher academic standards (Saunders, 2001). In addition to this shift in focus, there is also a general lack of teacher preparation in the arena of family-school relationships (Lightfoot, 2003). Many teacher education programs do not provide pre-service teachers with opportunities to interact with families in their field experiences, meaning that a teacher candidate may have had...
little practical experience in working with parents – and may thus be hesitant to engage with families (Grant & Ray, 2010). Additional research regarding teacher perceptions points to a lack of trust for parental motives (Adams et. al. 2009) or simply “general negative attitudes” about families (Edwards & Young, 1990, Goddard et. al. 2001, Hoy & Sweetland, 2001).

Other barriers to participation are family-specific. What is perceived as an “unwelcome school environment” may discourage some parents from getting involved (Arias & Morillo-Campbell, 2008). Other barriers may be a parent’s own negative school experiences – thus creating significant apprehension about “re-entering their child’s school environment” (Finders and Lewis, 1994). Additional sentiments that create a negative mindset for parental involvement include a lack of trust in the school, low self-esteem and feelings that involvement won’t ‘make a difference.’ (Henderson and Mapp, 2002). Other reported barriers to participation include occupational limitations, scheduling conflicts, and financial restrictions (Yap and Enoki, 1995).

It is equally important to mention that on some occasions, parents misunderstand their role in their children’s education because they don’t comprehend (or can’t decipher) the concept of involvement as defined by the ‘American school’ (Quichocho & Daoud, 2006; Wang, 2008). An example of this is found in a study conducted by Yap and Enoki, (1995) who characterize some home cultures as holding the school in such high regard that it is not considered appropriate for parents to interact with educators. Howard and Reynolds (2008) take this deference to a more impassioned level in their study of middle-class, African-American parents. They described African-American parents as feeling a “sting of race and racism” in their interactions with the school environment, thus limiting their enthusiasm for such parent-school interactions.

These barriers are exacerbated by another challenge to parental involvement – a challenge that is probably the most difficult to describe. What does parental involvement actually mean? We see it everywhere in the literature – We know it is a good thing. However, like many terms that line the school improvement landscape, parental involvement is open to various interpretations. To some, it may simply mean attendance at parent-teacher conferences. To others it might be the creation of a home environment that supports learning. Simply stated, there is no simple answer to the question because there is little consensus about what constitutes ‘being involved.’ Is baking cookies for the annual book fair less compelling than helping a child with his daily homework?

Long and Greene (2008) argue that the concept of parent involvement is under-specified. “It is not always clear what policymakers and others mean when they refer to parent involvement, the conditions that might foster parent involvement, or what factors might help children flourish in school” (p. 3.) So, while perhaps theoretically noble, there are a number of empirical problems that confound the study of parent involvement. As a construct, it is complicated, encompassing a wide range of parent/child/school/community needs, abilities, processes, and interests. These
amorphous moving parts are embraced by a definition that lacks clarity...and are underscored with a subtext that is composed of personal, intergenerational, economic, and cultural barriers. Perhaps it is time for researchers to acknowledge the verity that “...there is no more complex and tender geography than the borderlands between families and schools (Lightfoot, 2003, xi). At the same time, it is critical that these important subtexts be examined as closely and as thoroughly as possible.

The Problem and Theoretical Framework

In the spring of 2008, we engaged in a conversation with our local District Superintendent regarding the lack of parental involvement in our local Midwestern school district. This particular school district has an enrollment of about 6,300 students divided into 9 elementary schools, two junior high schools, and one high school. Approximately fifty percent of the district’s families are considered low income (that is, students from families receiving public aid) and the district’s graduation rate is 77%.

During this conversation, we discussed the different types of engagement opportunities for parents. These included, but were not limited to attendance at parent conferences, informal parent–teacher interactions during the school year, parent participation at “before-school” and “after-school” events, and parents simply being present in the school buildings. His observation (supported by District data) was that parental participation across the district was about 40%. This low participation rate was referred to as a “problem.”

To increase our understanding of this “problem,” we interviewed the district’s “key players” (principals, teachers, parent coordinators, and PTA representatives) and examined a variety of district programs and interventions. We reviewed attendance figures for parent conferences, Open Houses, fun nights, etc. – and discovered that these appraisals sometimes led to more confusion than understanding. For example, it was reported that the percentage for fall parent conferences was high because “Principals and teachers dog parents even after conferences are over to get them in...Many of the schools are pretty fierce about getting as close to 100% as possible.”

From these discussions, it was easy to acknowledge the fact that any study of parental participation would be rather 'thorny.' Nonetheless, we decided to pursue the issue further.

As a construct, we quickly realized that parental involvement was somewhat grueling to describe. We could not absolutely explain what it ‘looked like’ – or how it was demonstrated or if it could be accurately measured. However, we did know how important it was to “own” and “value” the distinct perspectives that made this construct so problematic. We also knew that these distinct perspectives had the potential to make our conversation much more interesting and relevant.

An upshot of this understanding was a desire to view parent involvement through more constructive eyes; to ‘re-characterize’ it as a positive conversation that would provoke us to think more widely. Consequently, during the summer of 2009, we
engaged in a literature review that focused on studies related to parent involvement in low-income elementary school settings. As expected, this examination exposed the benefits and complexity of parent involvement. It also provided us with a context for "solutions." It did not take us long to conclude that additional research could serve as a window to other dynamic, deliberate, and culturally responsive interventions that might foster parents’ engagement in their children’s education.

The Theory of Planned Behavior

To focus our understanding – and provide a framework that would illuminate this issue more clearly, we used Ajzen’s, ‘Theory of Planned Behavior’ (1991) to structure our inquiry. Ajzen’s psychological model of decision-making asserts that the most important determinants of intentional behavior are an individual’s attitudes and beliefs, subjective norms, and perceived controls. According to Ajzen, these three classes of influences function as a predictor for human behavior (Figure 1).

Theory of Planned Behavior

(Ajzen, 1991)
These three classes of influence provided a foundation for our study:

1. **Attitudes and beliefs about the roles of parents in education.** Some parents may believe education is the school’s responsibility, that they are unqualified to help, or they may not have considered the possibility of getting involved. Other parents might have a sense of empowerment and believe they can make a positive difference in their child’s education.

2. **Subjective norms about the roles of parents in education.** Parents may not be involved because they lack examples of parental involvement. They may come from a culture in which parents were never expected to be involved, or simply may not have had role models that provided examples of parental involvement. Other parents might have seen their neighbors get involved and/or remember their own parents’ contributions to the school experience.

3. **Perceived behavioral control over one’s own level of involvement.** Parents with higher incomes might be more likely to have flexible work hours and access to other resources, such as childcare. In low income families, it is possible that parents have more restrictive jobs. Additional obstacles to participation might be the availability of transportation and/or childcare.

It would follow that if parents evaluate participating in their child’s school activities as “positive” (attitude/belief), and if they think their friends want them to participate in their child’s school activities (subjective norm), then they are more likely to do so. Conversely, if parents evaluate participating in their child’s school activities as “negative” (attitude/belief), and think their friends aren’t interested in participating in school activities (subjective norm), then they are less likely to do so. If parents ‘do not’ have transportation (perceived control), then these attitudes and norms might become affected, resulting in even fewer opportunities for involvement.

Although there is no perfect correlation between behavioral intentions and actual action, empirical studies have demonstrated a relationship between these two variables (Alt & Lieberman, 2010). This is what provides a foundation for our investigation. We propose that a greater understanding of the attitudes, norms, controls, and intentions that frame parents’ decisions to “participate” or “not participate” in their child’s education will lead to potential interventions and organized initiatives that might promote more parent involvement. Our methods were characterized by two “phases.”

**Methods**

During the fall term of 2009, we asked 76 elementary teachers to administer a “parent involvement” survey to the parents they perceived as “involved.” Participating teachers were from one of five elementary schools in this local school district.

Since the definition of “involvement” can be vague and amorphous, we decided to limit our definition of involvement to what teachers could “see” or “interact”
with. Our definition included the following criteria:

- Parents who attend parent conferences
- Parents who contacting their child’s teacher during the school year
- Parents who participate in activities at their child’s school during the school year
- Parent who participate in events before or after school, or even on the weekends.

We asked participating teachers to consider these conditions and to make their best judgment regarding which of their student’s parents were “involved parents.” The parents meeting these criteria would receive the survey. Upon distribution and consent, some parents chose to complete the survey at their child’s school during parent conferences; in other instances the surveys were taken home and returned to the researchers via a self-addressed and stamped envelope. The opportunity to win one of fifteen $25 gift certificate to a local grocery store served as an incentive for parent participation.

The Survey

The survey was comprised of four parts: The first section of the survey consisted of 7 statements about parental involvement. Parents were asked to rate each statement based on how much they ‘agreed’ or ‘disagreed’ with each item. A five-point likert scale, with response options that ranged from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree,” was used to differentiate responses. These 7 preliminary statements were constructed by the researchers to reflect parental attitudes and norms.

1. The most successful schools have consistent parental involvement.
2. Schools, not parents, are responsible for educating children.
3. My child’s education will benefit if I am involved with the school.
4. It is important to meet and keep in touch with my child’s teacher.
5. Most parents at my child’s school are actively involved.
6. My friends and neighbors are actively involved in the school.
7. The majority of parents at my child’s school are unable or unwilling to be actively involved with the school.

For example, statements such as, “The most successful schools have consistent parental involvement.” and “My child’s education will benefit if I am involved with the school.” were associated with parental attitudes. In contrast, the statements, “My friends and neighbors are actively involved with the school.” and “The majority of parents at my child’s school are unable or unwilling to be actively involved with the school.” were characterized as perceived norms.

The second section of the survey asked parents to identify any items that might interfere with their ability to be involved. These were the “perceived controls” of the survey. Such barriers to participation included transportation, work schedule and childcare. Subsequent to these, were the statements, “I am unaware of how to get involved” and “I feel uncomfortable or unwelcome.” These statements were
included so that the researchers could isolate additional obstacles to parental involvement. A section entitled, “other” allowed parents to fill in their own perceived barrier to involvement.

The third section of the survey addressed parental intentions (i.e. how the responding parents planned on being involved during the school year). The statement, “I plan to become involved during the school year by doing the following...” was followed by events such as Open House, PTA meetings, and parent-teacher conferences. A final section that asked for identifying information such as number of children, ethnicity, and language spoken in the home completed the survey. A “blank” space for additional comments was also provided.

Phase I: Parents Perceived as Involved.

At the time of the survey, total enrollment at the five participating schools was 1,681 students. However, the population for this study consisted of parents/guardians deemed “involved” by the teachers in the five participating schools. Using the criteria established by the researchers, teachers distributed the survey to approximately 710 of the 1,681 parents. (Again, it is important to mention that the population for this study is a “best guess” estimate, based on information obtained from each building principal, teacher, and the District Superintendent.) Of those parents solicited, 231 responded, yielding a response rate of 32%. Because the purpose of the initial phase of the study was to examine a “control” group of participating parents across varied school settings, results were not reported for individual schools.

Phase II: Parents Perceived as Uninvolved

During the second segment of the study, the same survey (using the same criteria) was administered to a second set of parents/guardians. In this segment of the study, survey responses from parents who were deemed by teachers as “not involved” were solicited. Again, the opportunity to win one of fifteen $25 gift certificates was used as an incentive. Because we anticipated a low response rate, we sought participants from three additional district elementary schools. As a result, 38 more teachers were included in the study. In this new aggregate of 114 teachers in eight elementary schools, the teachers’ “best guess” estimates (based on the rubric that was provided) identified 153 parents as “non-participating.”

A self-addressed, stamped envelope was used to facilitate convenience. Of the 153 surveys that were distributed to parents identified as “not involved,” 70 were returned, yielding a response rate of 46%.

Results

During this ‘initial phase’ of our study, we examined differences (in terms of attitudes, norms, perceived controls and intentions) between those parents/guardians who were deemed “involved” and those who were not. It did not surprise us that virtually all parents believed that it was important for them to be involved in their child’s education. Similarly, most parents had “good intentions” in regards to participating in a variety of school events. Interestingly, however, we found a significant difference for norms —
t (295) = 2.683, p=.009. Our findings indicated that the parents perceived by teachers as “not involved” had a different sense of other parents’ involvement. They were more likely to note that friends and neighbors were not actively involved—and that the majority of parents at their child’s school were unable to be actively involved.

There were not significant differences for attitudes, controls, or intentions. (*It appears that the lack of significance for attitudes was due to a small effect size and not Type II error—the sample size was large and the measure was reliable. However, the control measure may need revision for the next phase of our research.*)

These measures were also entered into a binary logistic regression equation with participation as the dichotomous dependent variable. With norms as the only significant predictor, the equation accounted for approximately 3.3% of the variability in participation. Additional analyses examined control issues. Transportation was significantly more of an issue for those who did not participate 2 (n = 297, 1) = 12.941, p=.001. However, there were not differences for the other issues that might prevent participation. Work schedule affected a lot of people (about 200) but did not discriminate among participants/non-participants. Finally, only 17 people indicated that they were “unaware” of how to get involved.

In conclusion, these preliminary results suggest that regardless of the perceived level of parental involvement, virtually all parents believed that engagement in their child’s education was important (attitudes). Parents also shared a variety of “good intentions” in wanting to participate in a range of scheduled school activities. In addition, the same obstacles (or “controls”) to these “good intentions” were shared between parents deemed “involved” and parents deemed “not involved.” That is, both groups of parents in our study reported that work schedules and childcare hampered their ability to participate.

These similarities clearly contributed to a greater understanding of parental motives, needs, and goals. What was especially compelling, however, was the possibility that social norms were the defining variable in determining what parents “would do” or “would not do” with regard to parental involvement. From the results of our investigation, it was quite apparent that the perception of participation as a social norm might actually increase the likelihood of parental involvement.

The premise that a full understanding of human behavior requires an authentic understanding of human motivation is not a new one. Thus, in order to create an ‘action’ that is deliberate, frequent, voluntary, and reliable (such as participating in your child’s school) one must look at the incentives that are precursors to that behavior (i.e. school involvement). The results of our study clearly indicated that “social norms” were the best precursor to such involvement.

*Social Norms*

Coon and Mitterer (2010) define norms as “...widely accepted (but often unspoken) standards for appropriate behavior” (p. 532). These customary rules of behavior are often based on perceptions of what others think and do. In terms of parental involvement, we argue that such social
norms give parents a “rule of thumb” for how they should behave. It follows that once an expectation that other parents are involved is established, a particular motivation towards involvement is more likely to emerge. Social norms, can consequently become a legitimate psychological force that determines whether or not parents participate in their child’s education.

As mentioned previously, Hoover-Dempsey et al (2005) also allude to the importance of social norms in their studies of parental involvement. This particular study fits in nicely with the extensive work they have done. In some respects, our results based on Ajzen’s, delineation of individual attitudes and beliefs, subjective norms, and perceived controls aligns with Hoover-Dempsey’s thesis that active role construction is a means to improve parental involvement. Certainly, additional investigations are warranted so that this important link (i.e. that of role construction and its function and effects) can be understood more thoroughly.

**Significance of the Study**

The verity of social normative pressures structuring individual goals and perceptions has been widely reported in the literature (Lewis, 1969; Coleman, 1990; D’ Andrade, 1990). There are also a multitude of research studies (previously mentioned) that examine the positive effects of parental involvement on a child’s education. With regard to this relationship, it follows that parental involvement may not necessarily be an exclusive private endeavor, but a social one. Given this understanding, our task becomes one of “re-forming norms” so that the gap between parental intentions and actual behavior becomes achievable (...in theory and in practice).

The “Theory of Planned Behavior” (Ajzen, 1991) provided a specific theoretical framework that allowed us to evaluate the impact of attitudes, norms, and controls on human behavior (in this case, ‘parental participation’). The “new knowledge” that resulted from the measurement of these constructs was consequential, yielding several important outcomes:

1. It affirmed parents’ and guardians’ positive attitudes about school involvement
2. It clarified the dissonance between parents’ professed attitudes, values, and intentions and their actual behaviors.
3. It provided a rationale for a norm-based initiative that might increase parental involvement.
4. It offered support for a long-term, collaborative relationship between higher-education and the local community.

This investigation is much broader than the theoretical interest of any particular discipline. It is the beginning of a long-term association with parents, teachers, students, and administrators in our local community. Previously, there was very little information about the actual context that influences a parent or guardian’s decision to participate at school. Perhaps this triangulation of theory, research, and experience will provide such a context. If we are able to re-frame the family-school relationship and encourage new social norms,
the potential for increased parental involvement is possible. By utilizing the academic resources we have available, we may be able to provide an evidence-based intervention that promotes parental involvement.

**Implications for Future Research**

This leads us to the second phase of our study. It is here that we will recognize the capacity of parents more deliberately by exploring the impact of “social norms” on parental participation. Data obtained from “Phase I” of our investigation will provide a comprehensive, evidence-based context that will be used to develop a specific “norm-based” intervention that targets increased parental involvement. A pre and post analysis of parent/guardian participation rates will also be more rigorously evaluated. Finally, data regarding “behavioral intentions” will be compared with data that addresses “actual behavior.”

It is vital that we remain focused on the relationship between parental participation and student achievement. Parents are essential to the education of their children. It is the foundation on which all our work will rest.

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