

Researching parent-school relationships

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Summary

This resource sets out an introduction to some of the key themes within the research on parent-school relationships. It identifies different types of relationships and the influences and constraints on these. It highlights critical concerns with some of the research in the field as well as providing insights into the complexity of the debates. The resource should appeal to those new to the field of research into parent-school relationships and also to professionals who want to learn more about the issues.

Parent-school relationships: what are they and why study them?

Parent-school relationships, or parental involvement as it is often termed, became most prominent following the 1988 Education Reform Act. Prior to that, in spite of the recognition given by the Plowden Report (CACE 1967) to the importance of parental involvement in primary children's education, parents were usually kept at the school gate.

Parent-school relationships have evolved into what parents do *with* their children, such as help with homework, and/or what parents do *for* their children, such as choosing their school or providing learning resources. Several researchers have identified typologies of parental involvement, such as, in the UK, Vincent (1996). According to Vincent these include the parent as supporter, the parent as consumer, the parent as participant and the independent parent (p. 43).

The shift in emphasis or interpretation about what parent-school relationships are, or should be, is driven by socio-political factors and policy imperatives. It could be said that parent-school relationships have become a central part of the education system. Hence the importance for research to identify what the relationship is; how this relationship functions and whether it functions in the same way for all parents, and what influences the relationship.

Policy context (in England): educational choice and parents' roles and responsibilities

The 1988 Education Act instigated the marketization of the English Education System. Since then, Scotland and Wales have developed different systems and these will, therefore, shape their own practices, purposes and rationale for parental involvement. Parental involvement is clearly essential in the school choice process and in making this work in the competitive way that it was and is intended. Since 1988, parents have become much more engaged in choosing their children's schools and informing themselves about their local schools. This activity, however, tends to be undertaken mainly by well informed and financially well off middle class parents (see for example, Ball 2003). Research has shown that school choice policy and the emphasis on parent-school relationships/involvement, further advantages middle class parents and their children (e.g. Ball 2003; Reay et al 2011; Vincent and Ball 2006). Middle class parents, given their

knowledge of the education system and their social networks, are able to 'work the system' to the benefit of their children.

In relation to school choice, parental involvement also acts as a form of surveillance with respect to the school and teachers (McGhee-Hassrick and Schneider 2008), since once parents have chosen their desired school they are intent upon 'good standards' being maintained. Linked to this, parents have been further empowered through greater representation on the governing body and in principle at least, they have greater opportunity to move their child to another school if they are dissatisfied. One of the unintended consequences of this increased parental involvement is that it seems to have led to tensions, in that, teachers have felt their professionalism is being questioned, challenged and undermined (Crozier 2000; Vincent 1996).

The policy expectation on parents has also, however, led to the surveillance of parents themselves, either in terms of self-surveillance (Walkerdine and Lucey 1989), or by the school or/and the state (Gewirtz 2001). State surveillance has focussed more on Black and Minority Ethnic and white working class parents. The New Labour Government (1997-2010) initiated strategies to involve working class parents as part of their 'no rights without responsibilities' strategy. They instigated parents' classes and introduced severe legal penalties for parents whose children were frequently late for school or truanted, and these sometimes resulted in prison sentences (Gillies 2005). This policy pathologised and demonised working class and/or single mothers as feckless and uncaring. Furthermore, the focus on the parents masked the need to consider and address issues of poverty and the children's particular educational needs (Gewirtz 2001).

According to some research, one of the more positive elements in relation to involving parents and improving the educational experience of young children has been the Sure Start scheme (Ball 2002, National Evaluation 2008). Sure Start is a UK Government initiative applying in England. Its original aim was to tackle child poverty and social exclusion through improvement of childcare, early education, health and family support.

Parent-school relationships: key issues, tensions and dilemmas

Certain parent-school relationship discourses tend to assert unproblematically that the involvement of parents is 'a good thing' in itself. Research from this perspective, into parental involvement/parent school relationships, has focussed on 'how to do it', particularly in relation to primary school relationships and in advising parents on supporting their children's literacy and numeracy. This includes, for example, the work of Bastiani 1989, Macbeth 1989, Merttens and Vass 1993, Topping 1985 and Wolfendale 1992, 2000. In the USA the most well-known example of this work is Joyce Epstein's. Epstein developed a framework for an action and implementation strategy (Epstein 2009) and this has been drawn on internationally. This body of work is based on an assumption that parents are not involved and should be. Critics of this work argue that there is a need for more engagement with the notion of parental involvement and recognition of the social, economic and cultural factors that influence this.

Parents, teachers and school children all have a range of views on what the parent-school relationship might be and these often differ from each other's and indeed, from that of government policy. Also, 'parents' are most often represented as homogeneous, thus ignoring their raced, classed and gendered identities, whereas other research has overwhelmingly shown that mothers are the most active parents in relation to their children's school education (David 1993; Okpala et al 2001; Williams et al 2002). Recognising these differences is important, since parents' identities have influenced teacher attitudes in terms of facilitating or obstructing their involvement, especially with regard to class and ethnicity (Reay 1998). White middle class parents are seen to be the most favoured as their children are highly valued by schools intent on improving their league table position (Reay, Crozier and James 2011). However, Crozier (2000) found that middle class parents were also seen by teachers as interfering and pressurising. Nevertheless, these parents are perceived as 'involved' because they ensure that their children are acculturated as 'good' pupils in keeping with school values and expectations. Perhaps this points, in terms of the dominant discourse, to the true meaning of parental involvement: that it is primarily concerned with ensuring parents prepare their children for a pre-determined form of school 'readiness'.

White working class and Black and minority ethnic parents have had the least success in becoming involved in and developing their relationships with schools. These parents are frequently described as ‘hard to reach’, yet research has shown that it is the schools themselves which are ‘hard to reach’ (Crozier and Davies 2007; see also, Bhatti 1999, Cork 2005). Moreover, this research has shown that white working class and Black and minority ethnic parents do not have the most ‘useful’ social capital (networks and contacts), or educational capital (knowledge of the education system), to forge effective relationships with schools. More recent research into the relationship between Black middle class parents and schools also identifies ‘race’ as a key issue in limiting the parents’ efficacy in relation to their children’s schools. Whilst these middle class parents behave in similar ways to their white counterparts, the research shows that the parents feel racist attitudes and behaviours limit their involvement (Archer 2010, Ball et al 2011, Maylor & Williams 2009).

Conclusion

Research on parent-school relationships is therefore divided in its focus between how to do it and who is enabled to develop these relationships and become involved. However, the multiplicity of research highlights the significance today of the role of parents and that parental involvement is not about how many times you visit the school but has a deeper relationship to the family and its ability to generate economic, social and cultural resources in order to develop successful school relationships. These processes of developing parent-school relationships are a further example of the way education helps to reproduce differentiated social class and also to some extent raced/ethnic relations within society more broadly.

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Wolfendale, S. & Bastiani, J. (Eds.) (2000). The contribution of parents to school effectiveness. London: David Fulton Publishers

Further resources

Organisations that focus on parent-school relationships:

In the UK - The Parents in Education Research Network (PERN) is a network of individuals and organisations concerned with the promotion, dissemination and application of research about the participation and effects of parents, families and carers in the education of children – in the home, in the school, in the community and more widely. PERN@canterbury.ac.uk

A European wide organisation: ERNAPE is an association of networks organised by areas. Each network is autonomous. ERNAPE holds a conference every two years and produces an on-line open access journal: *International Journal about Parents*. www.ernape.net

Further reading:

For US critical perspectives on barriers to parent-school relationships see for example:

Brantlinger, E. (2003) *Dividing classes: how the middle class negotiate and rationalize school advantage*. New York: RoutledgeFalmer

Lareau, A. (2003) *Unequal childhoods. Class, race and family life*. Berkley, LA and London: University of California Press

For research on parent-school relationships relating to children with special educational needs, see for example:

Dyson, A. & Robson, E. (1999). *School, family, community: mapping school inclusion in the UK*. Published for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation by the Youth Work Press Agency: Leicester

Todd, L. (2007) *Partnership for inclusive education*. London and New York: Routledge

Literature reviews on parent-school relationships include:

Carpentier, V. & Lall, M. (2005) *Review of successful parental involvement practice for 'hard to reach' parents*. London: Institute of Education

Desforges, C. & Abouchaar, A. (2003) *The impact of parental involvement, parental support and family education on pupil achievement. Report Number 433*. London: Department of Education and Skills

Harris, A. & Goodall, J. (2007) *Engaging parents in raising achievement. Do parents know they matter? Research Report DCSF-RW004*. Warwick: University of Warwick

Challenging stereotypes of working class parents/families, their educational engagement and relationships:

Siraj-Blatchford, I. (2011) Learning in the home and at school: How working class children succeed against the odds. *British Journal of Educational Research* 36(3): pp. 463-481