

The Impact of Parents' Background on their Children's Education

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Parents have become so convinced that educators know what is best for their children that they forget that they themselves are really the experts.

-Marian Wright Edelman

Literacy is not a luxury; it is a right and a responsibility. If our world is to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century we must harness the energy and creativity of all our citizens.

-President Clinton on International Literacy Day, September 8th 1994

Parental involvement in the form of 'at-home good parenting' has a significant positive effect on children's achievement and adjustment even after all other factors shaping attainment have been taken out of the equation.

-Charles Desforges, 2003 in DfES Research Report 433

Introduction

Today's children are fundamental to society because they are our future; they hold the key to change, and in turn a successful future, in their hands. Therefore, it is society's duty to provide them with a complete education that teaches them how to work together successfully, how to question what is in front of them, and how to be catalysts of change. This education starts with what children learn from their parents and from what they learn in the first few years of their lives. This initial education impacts the rest of their lives, and inherently society's future. In his research, William Teale concludes that "Home background plays a significant role in a young child's orientation to literacy [and to education]. But home background is a complex of economic, social, cultural, and even personal factors." (Teale 193) According to most research done on the parental involvement in their children's education, the most influential of these four interconnected elements described by Teale are the personal backgrounds and the economic backgrounds of parents. These two components also largely contribute to the home environment that they provide for their children. With this information, it is important to note that parents are one of the most influential yet significantly underrated factors in their children's education, and society should encourage more parental participation in public education.

The Influence of Parents' Personal Backgrounds

Parents have an enormous influence on their children's education for several reasons, but most importantly because they are their children's first teachers. As Joseph Sclafani writes, "The influence of teachers is actually reciprocal and to some extent dependent on what your child brings to the classroom... These same teachers also form

impressions based upon other information such as your child's previous year's grades and test scores, and his or her family background and the family's level of involvement" (Sclafani 84). Children's brains are like sponges the first couple years of their lives and they absorb in everything surrounding them. Therefore, what they learn from their parents in the first couple years of their lives will impact children for the rest of their lives. It is important that children learn how to be excited about learning from an early age. Parents are the ones who need to instill this excitement in their children. But how can parents create this enthusiasm in their children? What qualities do parents need to possess in order to successfully motivate their children in school? Research shows that parents with a personal, educated background have a much easier time preparing their children for school compared to parents lacking this background.

The education that children receive is very much dependent on the education that their parents received when they were children. Research shows that the literacy of their parents strongly affects the education of their children. Teale found in his studies that "children experience literacy primarily as a social process during their preschool years." (Teale 192) Parents strongly affect this social learning process because they are the biggest influence at this early stage in their children's lives. One of the reasons why it strongly affects their children's education is because "parents who have gone beyond a high school education are found to be more involved with their infants and children than those who did not finish high school...many less educated parents simply have more unmanaged stress in their lives, and this stress interferes with ability and opportunity to interact with their child" (Sclafani 88). Typically, parents who have finished high school and gone on to receive additional schooling understand the pressures and stresses of

school and are more equipped to handle them with their children when they go through school. Parents who have obtained further educational opportunities also have less stress in their lives because they most likely making more money while spending less time making that money than those who, unfortunately, have not been able to finish high school for one reason or another.

It is unfortunate that less educated parents are less likely to be involved in their children's education process because "[r]esearch repeatedly demonstrates that schools and school districts do better when parents are engaged as equal partners in the decision making that affects their children and their schools...Only through this richer level of engagement will parents and the public at large better understand their vital connection to quality public education" (Glickman 229). Parents with less education do not participate as often in their children's education to some effect because they do not realize the importance of their interaction with schools and they are probably intimidated, just like they were in high school. Even though parents of low-income families participate less in their children's education, according to Neuman, "most parents – even low-income and culturally and linguistically diverse parents – possess the attitudes and at least the sufficient early literacy skills and knowledge to help their children get on the road to literacy" (Neuman 221).

Additional research that shows that uniquely the mother's education has a significant impact on her children's learning process. Benjamin Ann says, "[T]he mother's education is one of the most important factors influencing children's reading levels and other school achievements...Generally, traditional research has revealed that more highly educated mothers have greater success in providing their children with the

cognitive and language skills that contribute to early success in school.” (Ann 1) This is because stereotypically, the mother is more involved in her children’s education, and therefore has more influence on it. Another good point that Ann makes is that “children of mothers with high levels of education stay in school longer than children of mothers with low levels of education.” (Ann 1) Again, this conclusion is reinforced by all the other research that convincingly shows that parents who have completed levels of higher education will be more involved in their children’s education.

The Influence of Parents’ Economic Background

Not only are children’s educations influenced by the personal, educational background of their parents, but these personal experiences are highly connected to their economic background. Along with their ability to educate their offspring, the economic status of people plays a huge role in their own education. Parents with lower incomes often have to work longer hours to earn their small salaries. This leaves less time for them to spend reading to their children and getting more involved in their kids’ learning process. There is also, typically, more conflict in homes of lower incomes because there are more tensions caused by stress within the family. Sclafani argues, “Parents who expressed more conflict at home over child rearing and family rules failed to provide a consistent message to their children, resulting in poorer school performance. Parents’ behavior that was indifferent or neglectful also was correlated with negative school outcomes.” (Sclafani 87) It is not always true that lower-income parents are neglectful parents, but it is easy to slip into that stereotype under extreme pressure.

There are also conflicts that arise between parents and teachers. These problems occur more frequently between parents of lower socioeconomic status and their

children's teachers. Which one "wins out" when it comes to students' education? Which one has the best interests for children? Susan B. Neuman has looked at past research and she found that there is an "inevitable 'distrust and enmity' that exists between teachers and parents. Although both want what is best for the child, each has a different conception of what constitutes 'best...' conclud[ing] that 'parents and teachers are natural enemies, predestined each for the discomfiture of the other'" (Neuman 221). This enmity seems to be especially true between low-income parents and teachers. For some reason, research shows that there is more conflict between parents of low-income and their children's teachers compared to parents of higher incomes. Neuman reveals, "Lareau (1996) writes that 'the emphasis on family involvement in education [is] shrouded in sentimental enthusiasm...[M]any working-class and lower-class parents do not accept, nor comply, with crucial aspects of the model of family-school involvement...'" (Neuman 221). It seems ironic that the public schools that need the most help from anywhere they can get help, specifically support from the community and parents, receive the least amount of help.

Even though most research shows that low-income families are less involved in their children's education, there is still some research that proves that social status has a small impact on the successfulness of their children's education. Disregarding social class, nearly all children in the United States will almost always have some interactions with literacy in their early years of education with their parents before officially starting school. Teale observed that "low-income children provide additional evidence for the contention that virtually all children in a literate society like ours have numerous experiences with written language before they ever get to school." (Teale 192)

Positive parental involvement starting from the beginning of their children's lives and continuing on in public schools needs to be encouraged so that children's education is improved. But how can it be ensured that society will head in this positive direction? How can parents contribute to the creation of a brighter future for children today?

Recommendations for Parents on How to Overcome Personal and Economic Challenges and to Help their Children with School

Most research that has been done on parental involvement in schools shows that low-income families are less involved in their children's education, and because of this lack of participation, their children are less likely to be successful in school. Considering this statement, society should focus on how to alleviate some of the stress in the lives of these families, and how to help students of all backgrounds thrive in school.

One idea that has already been proposed is the concept of establishing workshops to develop the relationships between parents and their children. These workshops could help parents of lower-incomes and of less privileged educational backgrounds to learn how to help their children succeed in school. Ann writes, "During the last decade, educators and policy makers have become increasingly interested in the notion that educationally disadvantaged parents and children are a learning unit and that family and intergenerational literacy programs are a promising approach to supporting parents in their role as first teachers." (Ann 3) Programs, such as these, not only help parents learn how to teach their children, but they also put an emphasis on the importance of parental involvement in the public school system. Parents would be learning how to be good teachers, and additionally they would discover the hardships of being a teacher and

perhaps become more willing to work with their children's teachers, instead of against them.

There have also been programs suggested specifically for mothers and ways they can improve their children's education. In his research, Ann found that "[t]he Intergenerational Literacy Action Research Project (ILAR), conducted by Wider Opportunities for Women, involved mothers participating in community-based programs that provide women with basic-skills instruction and job training. The study revealed that 65 percent of the children benefited from their mother's participation in the adult education and training programs." (Ann 3) Although this type of program may seem time-consuming, the benefits received after the process greatly outweigh the initial costs. The burden of attending classes on how to be a good first teacher to your children dissipates as soon as a child is excited about learning.

Another solution to the challenges of parents, which may seem oversimplified, is returning to reading to children every night instead of watching television or playing video games. Sclafani says, "A parent should begin reading to a child as soon as possible...Books provide interesting visual stimuli to infants, which forms the basis for future interest in books and reading. Keeping a child in age-appropriate books is one of the best investments any parent or grandparent can make." (Sclafani 89) Today, there is more and more emphasis on the use of television, video games, and computer games in the education of children and less and less emphasis on the simple act of reading. Parents need to go back to the basics of "provid[ing] a warm, supportive home environment that supports exploration and self-directed, autonomous behavior, [and that] will greatly increase the chances of having an academically successful child." (Sclafani 88) An

emphasis on the parental involvement in education is the key to their children's successful education because they are their first teachers, and therefore establish the beginning of the learning process.

Conclusion

One of the biggest problems with children in today's society is youth apathy. Parental involvement in school can help solve this problem by emphasizing the importance of a good education, and getting their children excited about learning. "[F]or most children to succeed in school, their parents' interest in their learning is of paramount importance. But this interest ought to be with what happens on a daily basis, because this is how the child lives, and this is how he understands his life. The essential ingredient in most children's success in school is a positive relation to his parents." (Bettelheim 55) Parents' personal educational backgrounds and economic backgrounds have a significant effect on their children's education. However, if parents are a positive influence in their children's everyday lives, and most importantly in their everyday education, the future of our society will look brighter and brighter everyday.

Annotated Bibliography

Ann, Benjamin L. "Parents' Literacy and their Children's Success in School: Recent Research, Promising Practices, and Research Implications." Education Research Report, August 1993.

This research report focuses on the program developments created to improve the education of parents, specifically mothers, in order to improve the education of their children. It examines specifically how the literacy skills of mothers impact the literacy skills of their children, and the report finds that they are strongly interconnected.

Bettelheim, Bruno. A Good Enough Parent: A Book on Child Rearing. New York: Alfred A. Knoff, Inc., 1987: 55-69.

This book helps to teach parents how to raise their children to be successful, functioning adults in society. The section on parental involvement in education focuses on the need for parents to be interested in their children 'right now.' Their interest in their children needs to be an interest on a daily basis for their children to be successful in their studies.

Desforges, Charles and Alberto Abouchaar. "The impact of Parental Involvement, Parental Support and Family Education on Pupil Achievement and Adjustment: A Review of Literature." DfES Report no. 433, June 2003.

This report analyzes the impact of parental and community involvement in public schools. The key finding of this report is that there are multiple ways for parents to be involved in their children's education process. Good parenting skills are essential to a child's education. The more parents are involved, the higher the level of attainment of their children is and vice versa.

Glickman, Carl. Letters to the Next President: What We Can Do about the Real Crisis in Public Education. New York: Teachers College Press, 2004.

This is a book of compiled letters addressed to the President from different people regarding several issues debated in public education today. It addressed the concepts of schools for all, learning for all, teaching for all, standards for all, and education for all. These letters include the raw emotions of American people about our current public school system. The problems are presented, along with possible solutions. Every letter is emotionally touching because of the reality of each story.

Hochschild, Jennifer and Nathan Scovronick. The American Dream and the Public Schools. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.

This book examines several issues over which there has been much debate and controversy for years. These issues include desegregation, school funding, school reform, school choice, and separation versus inclusion. By looking at these issues separately, there is a debate between creating schools for the general good of the whole and creating schools that emphasis the success of the individual.

Neuman, Susan B. and David K. Dickinson. Handbook of Early Literacy Research. New York: The Guilford Press, 2002.

This book looks at the new theories being created about early literacy in children. In the section specifically about home and community influences, the function of schools for low-income families in the twenty-first century was one of the main focuses. It was found that parental involvement seemed to help improve the achievement of children in schools, particularly in the area of literacy.

Sclafani, Joseph D. The Educated Parent: Recent Trends in Raising Children. Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 2004.

The different trends in raising children are highlighted in this book. The section specifically about parents as teachers and their influences on education examines the idea that parents are the expert teachers in their children's lives. Parental behavior and parental involvement in school both hugely impact the education of their children, along with their own educational achievement. It also offers ideas for improving the current public education system, emphasizing that parents need to take back their responsibility in the role of educating their children.

Sirotnik, Kenneth A. "Parents and their Children: A Study of Congruence on Attitudes about School." A Study of Schooling: Technical Report Series. California: Graduate School of Education, 1981.

This study examined the relations between parents and their children specifically pertaining to schooling, school evaluation, school problems, and other school issues. The analysis was based on parents and students from twenty-five secondary schools. The report looked at being able to predict a child's mind based on their parents' minds based on observed percentages of response agreement between parents and their children.

Teale, William H. and Elizabeth Sulzby. "Background and Young Children's Literacy Development." Emergent Literacy: Writing and Reading. New Jersey: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1986.

In Teale's section of the book, he examines the correlation between literacy development and home background. He determines that literacy is dependent on both cultural and social elements. He then analyzes the possible solutions involving home and school interventions.

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