

Parental involvement to parental engagement: a continuum

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Based on the literature of the field, this article traces a continuum between parental involvement with schools, and parental engagement with children's learning. The article seeks to shed light on an area of confusion; previous research has shown that different stakeholder groups understand "parental engagement" in different ways. Other literature makes it clear that the greatest benefit is derived from the furthest end of the proposed continuum, that is, parental engagement with children's learning. The continuum gives examples of each stage of the movement along the continuum. The continuum is illustrated not only in prose but as a diagram. The article concludes with a discussion of the agency of parents and schools in the movement along the continuum.

Keywords: parental engagement; parental involvement

Aim

The aim of this article is to present a model for the progression from parental involvement with schools to parental engagement with children's learning. Such a model is necessary due to the increasing importance placed on, and understood about, parental engagement with children's learning, and the difficulty schools have reported in supporting this engagement.

Overall this model is a continuum because the process it represents is not a simple progression. Schools may find themselves at different points of the continuum with different activities, or with different cohorts of parents. One reason parental engagement is never "complete", never something that can be ticked off a list and considered "done" is that each new academic year brings new cohorts of parents; children change as they age, and parental engagement with their learning needs to adapt to these changes (Goodall, 2012).

The continuum proposed here moves from parental *involvement with school* to parental *engagement with children's learning*. This movement represents a shift in emphasis, away from the relationship between parents and schools, to a focus on the relationship between parents and their children's learning. It represents a change in relational agency, with the relationship being between parents and schools, and the object of the relationship being children's learning.

Involvement and engagement

Involvement may be defined as "the act of taking part in an activity or event, or situation" (Macmillan Dictionary 2009–2012b) while engagement may be defined

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as “the feeling of being involved in a particular activity” or “a formal arrangement to meet someone or to do something, especially as part of your public duties” (Macmillan Dictionary 2009–2012a). If we take these two definitions together, “engagement” would seem to encompass more than just activity – there is some feeling of ownership of that activity which is greater than is present with simple involvement. This means that parental engagement will involve a greater commitment, a greater ownership of action, than will parental involvement with schools.

It is important to state at the outset that engagement with children’s learning may not equate to – and should not be judged on the basis of – engagement with the school. Many parents, particularly those from ethnic minorities or those facing economic challenge, find engagement with schools difficult, but still have a strong desire to be involved in their children’s learning and educations (Cooper 2009; Crozier 2001; Crozier and Davies 2007; Kim 2009; Turney and Kao 2009). Further, Smith (2000), Hughes, Wikeley, and Nash (1994) and Vincent (1996) have highlighted the concern that a lack of consideration for the needs of families, such as times of meetings and facilities available, is a significant barrier to the active engagement of some parents. Such mismatches affect parental engagement with schools but may or may not impact on parental engagement with children’s learning.

This article uses the current literature to propose a continuum between parental involvement with schools, at one end, and parental engagement with children’s learning, at the other. This is proposed as a continuum rather than as a simple line. We do not wish to present parental involvement with schools as wrong, or as a starting point to be left behind. Rather, we wish to present the process as a continuous one, with parental engagement with children’s learning as a goal, which is constantly supported by the other points along the way. The continuum charts the movement in relationships between parents and schools.

The continuum we present here is not a straight pathway, nor is it meant to be seen as such. Rather, it is an attempt to describe a messy web of interactions, so that schools in particular can gauge their own work, and discern where they can move forward to the benefit of their students. It is not expected that there will be a simple, clear progression from point one to point three; equally, it is important that point three is reached only when individual schools – and cohorts of parents – are ready. Schools will not be at point three for every interaction with parents, as will become clear. What we wish to highlight, however, is the existence of this end of the continuum, and its appropriateness in certain situations.

Further, we present a model, rather than a solution. Crozier and others have warned against one size fits all interventions for supporting parental engagement; not all parents are the same, have the same needs, face the same barriers or share the same conceptualisation of parental engagement (Crozier 1999; Crozier 2001; Crozier and Davies 2005, 2007; Goodall, forthcoming).

Another point of consideration here is the approach of teachers to the engagement process. Rudney (2005) explains that as busy practitioners teachers can often make assumptions about groups of parents based on very little actual knowledge about them or their situation; this is particularly the case when parents and teachers do not share the same worldviews, experiences or social capital (Horvat, Weininger, and Lareau 2003; Kao and Rutherford 2007; Kim and Schneider 2005).

In the next section, we will set the context, by examining what the terms used here mean, and why such a distinction between them is important. In the main body

of the article, we will discuss the different levels in the framework. In the final section, we will make recommendations for the use of the framework and for further research in this area.

Context – agency

Epstein, for so long an advocate of parental involvement and the author of a very influential framework (Epstein 1992; Epstein 1995; Epstein and Sheldon 2000; Epstein 1991) now suggests that the term should be abandoned. She and Sheldon suggest that it should be replaced by “School, family and community partnership” as this emphasises the shared responsibility for children’s learning (Epstein and Sheldon 2006). To quote from the old proverb, it really does take a village to raise a child. There is empirical evidence to support the value of community-based learning, and of increasing the positive relationship between home and school (cf., Feiler et al. 2006a; Lamb-Parker et al. 2001; Mckay et al. 2003).

While we do not dispute the value or indeed necessity of community support for learning, in this article we wish to concentrate on the triad of child, parent and school. We do this to highlight the concept of agency, which, following Emirbayer and Mische (1998), we define as a process of social engagement informed by the past and oriented toward the future and the present and encompassing the possibility of choice and action. In relation to the continuum presented here, agency relates to the capacity of parents to act (in a beneficial manner) in relation to their children’s learning. The continuum we propose shows an acknowledgement that the agency for parental engagement is not, as much of the literature would seem to suggest, with the school, but rather with the parent. Or, better yet, it is negotiated between schools and parents. In the model discussed here, the change in agency would suggest that both parents and school staff undergo a re-interpretation of both their own, and the other’s role and agentic positions, as the move along the continuum.

It is only in acknowledging where this agency lies that we can attain a truly equitable relationship between home and school. Groves and Baumber (2008) speak of parents as co-educators being at the forefront of regenerating schools. Of the five key issues they raise as underpinning the culture and ethos of a school, four of them have parents at the core. They also clearly recognize developing parental social capital as a key contributor in raising attainment amongst pupils.

Bryk and Schneider (2002) discuss the lack of “relational trust” that can exist between parents and teachers, due to the social distance between teachers and poor parents, explaining that neither party has a full understanding of what each other is trying to achieve. With reference to the model of agency, we would propose that the agency is primarily the one that both parents and schools have with children’s learning. This learning is the object of the relationship. But there is also a vitally important relationship between parents and schools, the nature of which will shift as they travel along the continuum.

Context – parental engagement with children’s learning

Current research makes clear the value of parental engagement with children’s learning. It is not our intention here to argue again for the value of parental engagement; rather, we use current research to support our argument. Such engagement can boost children’s self-esteem, increase motivation and engagement with learning

and can lead to increased learning outcomes (Fan and Williams 2010; Fan, Williams, and Wolters 2011; Joe and Davis 2009; Kennedy 2009; Kim 2009; Lopez and Donovan 2009; Goodall and Vorhaus, 2011). Following Kim, we define parental engagement as “parents’ engagement in their children’s lives to influence the children’s overall actions” (Kim 2009, 89). This definition is deliberately chosen to avoid the equation of parental engagement with learning with parental involvement with schools. As mentioned earlier, there is evidence that some parents may either choose not to be involved with schools or may face significant barriers in doing so; this does not, however, reflect a lack of desire to be involved in their children’s learning (Kim 2009; Levine 2009). A broad understanding of parental engagement would lay the foundations for schools to offer appropriate support to all parents to support their children (Goodall and Vorhaus, 2011).

To be most effective, parental engagement needs to be rooted in the home, in an attitude that fosters learning in the home, as this has been shown to be most positively related to children’s achievement (Desforges and Abouchaar 2003; Sylva et al. 2003). In a series of telephone surveys, Peters, Seeds, Goldstein, and Coleman (2007) found that parents are aware of the importance of engaging with their children’s learning, yet have decreasing confidence in undertaking this role. Using interviews with staff, evidence was found that schools still see parental engagement as primarily focused on the school, with parents supporting the school (Harris and Goodall, 2008).

As schools and parents move along the continuum, there is a move from information giving (on the part of schools) to a sharing of information between parents and schools. This is a move from the prioritisation of the school’s needs and desires to joint decisions between parents and schools. As can be seen, the continuum does not represent a transfer of all agency from schools to parents but rather a more equitable distribution of agency with regard to children’s learning, between parents and schools, to a change in the relationship among all three actors in the process.

Note that here we say, “equitable” rather than “equal”. The aim here is not some chimera like “equal” distribution of agency, as demonstrated by some sort of score card. Rather, the aim is a distribution of agency so that parents and schools can work together with young people to support the best possible outcomes. This notion of an equitable relationship is keenly supported by Digman and Soan (2008) with all parties suggesting that a non-judgemental, supportive relationship must exist between parents and school in order for effective engagement to occur.

The next section will detail the points on the continuum, giving a description, examples and benefits for each. As this section proceeds, the overlap between the points will become clear; the difference between one point and another is often to be found in the way an action is carried out, rather than in the action itself.

The continuum

First point: parental involvement with the school

Characteristics

This point on the continuum is characterised by the agency of the school; school staff predominate in the relationship with parents. The school is in control of the relationships and the flow of information; information is given to parents but not sought from them. Parents may be involved in activities, but those activities are instigated and controlled by the school. For the most part, these activities will take place in and around the school.

Examples

An example may be found in the transition process. Hargreaves and Wall (2002) describe the common practice of parents and students being invited to a formal meeting and tour of the school where they witness secondary students engaged in suitably demanding activities. They link this approach directly to high levels of stress and anxiety that both parents and pupils feel about the transition process, especially in the case of parents who struggled with their own education.

Another example of this point on the continuum would be a parents' evening in which parents move from teacher to teacher, having a very short time with each. There is little conversation beyond introductions; parents may have the opportunity to say little other than "hello" and "thank you". The meetings between staff and parents are set up for a one way flow of information, from teacher to parents. The timing does not allow for much, if any, discussion of the report given, or for in-depth questioning from parents (Walker 1998). The aim here is to "tell" parents information rather than to engage them in dialogue. Lawrence-Lightfoot (2004) describes such events as "highly ritualized" and cites Andrew Green in his explanation that such events only exist on a superficial level and therefore are of little value to the participants involved. Moss, Petrie, and Poland (1999) go further by explaining that the parents' knowledge of their child is essential information that should be embraced rather than disregarded (Figure 1).

Another example of this point on the continuum may be found when parents are asked into classrooms to hear children read. This activity is at point one when the agency is that of the school: individual parents are asked by staff to come into the classroom and their work here is seen as "helping the teacher" (cf. Kim 2009) rather than being of value in itself. Contrast this to the very clear benefits that have been seen to be derived from supporting parents to teach their own children to read, which has been shown to be up to twice as effective as having parents listen to children reading (Sénéchal and Young 2008).

Benefits

While clearly not the ideal in all situations, there are still benefits to actions at this point in the continuum. This is often the beginning point for schools and parents; it is a useful foundation from which to work, but not the optimal end of the journey. The most obvious of the situations in which this point arises is the transfer of information – there are things that parents need to know, such as calendar dates, curriculum themes and topics. A chart of the different sorts of information can be

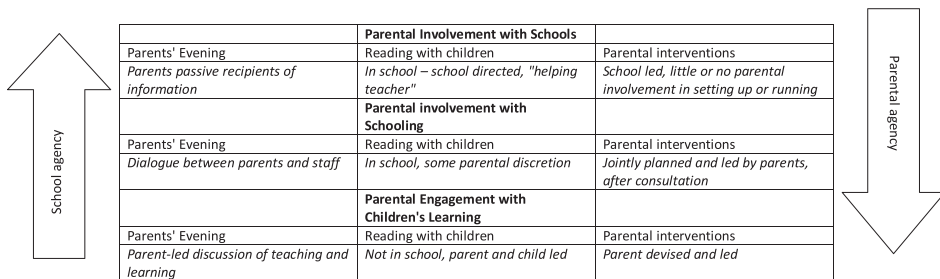


Figure 1. Continuum: from involvement to engagement.

found in the Engaging Parents to Raise Achievement report (Harris and Goodall 2007, 64).

Second point: parental involvement with schooling

Characteristics

The next level on the continuum can take place either in school or in the home, and is characterised by an interchange of information between parents and school staff. The focus of this interaction is schooling – the processes which surround learning. Hughes and Greenhough describe this process as one which “aims to recognise and exchange ‘funds of knowledge’ between teachers, parents and children ...” (2006, 471). They also suggest that “home-school knowledge exchange activities cannot be seen as the simple transmission of depersonalised knowledge from one party to another. Instead, they need to be seen as complex communicative activities in which the participants actively represent their practices and interests, and interpret these representations in terms of their particular purposes and agendas” (Hughes and Greenhough 2006, 471). The value of this interchange is extolled by Graham-Clay (2005) who suggest that these interchanges of knowledge will serve to build up trust and better relationships.

At this point on the continuum, agency in relation to supporting children’s learning is shared between parents and the school. This point also represents the furthest along the continuum that schools can direct; at this point, schools can still initiate and guide discussions and interventions, in conjunction with (not just “with the help of”) parents.

Examples

Parent teacher meetings may also be used as an example of this point on the continuum – but these meetings will be of a different type and character than those discussed earlier. At this point, information flows both from the school to parent and from the parent to school. This requires much more time for each meeting, as real dialogue takes more time than simple reporting. While information would be given by the member of staff, reporting on progress, behaviour and attainment, information would also come from parents to staff, about home life and influences on the child. More importantly, parents and staff would share control of the flow of information: parents would have the chance – and time – to ask questions and probe answers.

This sort of exchange requires a shift in relationships. Parents are no longer passive recipients of information but are now partners in the construction of a fuller portrait of the student, and acknowledged contributors to the student’s academic future. This shows the shift in relationships, thus a shift in agency between the school and the parents. The shift here is the greater involvement of the parents with the object, which is the learning of the child. Here, schools and parents are working to acknowledge and understand the support of others, to the end of supporting the learning of the child. A clear example of this can be seen in the Home School Knowledge Exchange Programme (Feiler et al. 2006b) which was based on an exchange of knowledge between home and school.

Another example, this time taking place in the home, is parental assistance with homework, assuming the homework has been set by the school. Parents exercise their choice to become involved in the learning of their child, but the nature, direction and

content of that learning is set by the school. Here, the nature of parental engagement with children's learning is becoming apparent, as the interchange is between the parent and the child, rather than between the parent and the school.

Benefits

The main benefit from this point on the continuum is a fuller picture of the young person for all parties, as that picture is informed by knowledge from both school and home. This point also represents authentic dialogue between parents and schools (see diagram of types of communication in Harris and Goodall 2007, 64). This sort of dialogue can increase the trust between parents and the school (Lopez, Scribner, and Mahitivanichcha 2001) and begin to break down some of the barriers to parental engagement. Crozier and Reay (2005) identify the direct relationship between individual knowledge and the perceived position of all parties in a dialogue. They highlight the importance of sharing knowledge that is accessible to all participants during conversation, therefore promoting an even base of power and a sense of partnership.

One of the greatest barriers to engagement can be parents' own experiences of education (Harris and Goodall 2007; Harris and Goodall 2008). Shah (2001) observes that parents can feel labelled by assumptions teachers make based on the quality of the dialogue parents engage in, or worse still absence from the event altogether. Shah likens the experience felt by parents as to that of a child in an unfamiliar environment, even suggesting that such situations can provoke personal feelings that the parent had experienced themselves as a child in school. De Carvalho (2000) takes this argument further and questions the value of parental engagement to those parents who perceive that they have had a sub-standard education themselves. He explains that expecting to engage parents in something they see as being of little value, such as school, is unrealistic. This highlights the importance of showing parents, as well as school staff, that it is parental engagement with children's learning, rather than parental interaction with schools, which holds the greatest chance of benefit for the child. This dialogue can begin to build some of the bridges between parents and schools, which have been destroyed by that previous experience.

Point three: Parental engagement with children's learning

Characteristics

This point is characterised by the greatest exercise of parental agency. Parents actions may be informed by the school, or based on information provided by the school, but the choice of action and involvement remains with the parent. This point is mainly shown by what Desforges and Abouchaar call "at home modelling of relationships and aspirations" (2003, 86). This may take place through homework, but at this point on the continuum, parents will be far more involved in forming the nature of that homework – it is likely to arise from conversations between parents and school staff, or to be based on the wider understanding of the student gained at the second point on the continuum. Parents at this point are engaged with the learning of their children not due to dictates from the school but because of their own perceptions of their role as parents (Peters et al. 2007).

Examples

As mentioned earlier, examples of this point on the continuum can happen in school, for example, within activities such as the FAST programme (Lexmond, Bazalgette, and Margo 2011) or sporting events, where parents may take the overall lead. But as this point is characterised by familial attitudes and parental agency, activities are more likely to take place away from school.

Examples here may be more difficult to pin point, because as we have seen, this point on the continuum centres around parental attitudes toward learning. Specific examples would include parents providing learning opportunities for their children, whether they relate to school (extra tuition) or other forms of learning (dance, or music lessons), along with other activities which provide opportunities for learning, such as scouting or guiding, membership of sports clubs, religious tuition.

“Learning” here is understood in its widest sense, and parents have been involved at this point on the continuum since the birth of their children, teaching them to speak, to walk, to interact with others. This learning of course continues throughout the child’s life, first and foremost through the medium of conversation (Goodall, 2012). This points on the continuum, more than the other two, expresses an attitude as much as actions: the attitude towards learning in the home. Research has made clear the value of parental aspirations and interest in learning.

Benefits

The benefits of parental engagement with children’s learning are well rehearsed in the literature, as shown in the context section. These benefits can include raised achievement, raised self esteem, increased motivation and engagement, and importantly, raised aspirations (Desforges and Abouchaar 2003; Lopez and Donovan 2009; Sylva et al. 2003; Goodall and Vorhaus, 2011; Harris and Goodall 2009).

A question of agency

As one examines the chart of the continuum, parental agency increases as one goes further down the levels; school agency decreases in the same manner. That is, agency undergoes this shift in relation to action and responsibility. One might also say that there is a shift in the relationship (between parents and school) in relation to the object (the learning of the child). At the earliest stage of the continuum, it may be perceived that the responsibility for children’s learning lies with the school, or largely with the school. However, the relationships between the school and children’s learning shifts as one moves along the continuum. By the third phase, it is clear that parents and schools share this responsibility. A shift in agency, has occurred, a movement to a more equitable situation, and one that previous literature has shown to be of positive value for children.

This does not mean that school agency decreases overall, but only in relation to parental engagement with children’s learning – an area where agency should rightly reside with the parents. Their engagement with their children’s learning begins from the earliest days of teaching a child to speak, to walk, to interact with others. This is (sometimes slowly) transferred to schools as staff take over as educators, and, as is often the case, allowing parents a share in a process staff see as rightly theirs. Parental involvement, at the upper levels of the continuum, happens on the school’s terms; one might speak of a hegemony not of knowledge but of learning. Often,

interventions to support parents' support of their children still seek to retain the agency for learning and teaching, allowing parents to "help the teacher" rather than to engage in the process themselves.

The argument of this article is not that there should be tension between the school's agency for teaching and the parent's agency for engagement in their children's learning, but rather that the two should work together, each being recognised as valuable in its own right, rather than as solely an adjunct to the other.

The continuum shown in Figure 1 moves from the starting point of parental involvement with schools to the far more effective point of parental engagement with children's learning. This movement from point to point need not be dramatic, and indeed may not even be overly noticeable to those engaged in the process.

This is shown in the example which accompanies each level, that of parents' evening. As the participants move through the continuum, roles shift, so that parents, who merely receive information at the first level, move through levels of partnership with school staff until eventually the discussions are parent-led.

In the same way, locations shift. In the first instance, the location of interaction is the school; in the final stage, it will be wherever parents and children discuss learning or engage in learning activities. This could be the school, but it is far more likely to be other locations such as the home, or during recreational activities or even in supermarkets or cars. As seen earlier in the discussion of the literature, this moves parental engagement to the places it is most likely to have greatest benefit (Desforges and Abouchaar 2003).

The second activity given in the continuum, reading with children, shows both the change in location and the movement in agency. Research has shown the gains to be made by training parents not just to listen to their children read but to teach them to read (Sénéchal and Young 2008). This of course, requires a change of mindset on the part of many staff, a move from seeing "teaching" as the sole preserve of school staff. This represents a significant shift away from what might be called the "hegemony of education" being held only by school staff to an understanding that the learning of children needs support from all involved. To give the best support to that learning, the agency of parents must be acknowledged and fostered.

In the final section of the continuum, agency belongs to the parents, supported by schools. This point on the continuum has moved away from a narrow conception of parents-supporting-schools, to the much broader concept of parental engagement in children's learning (Kim 2009).

As we have pointed out, this is a continuum, not a journey: it is not expected that schools will start at the beginning and move to the end, nor yet that parents will follow the same path. Rather, we offer the continuum as aspirational, so that work with parents can move from school directed (which is useful) to fully engaged (far more useful to students).

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