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Involving Parents for Good

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There is little debate that families, and in particular parents, typically have the most significant impact on the learning and development of children, including their character (Arthur, n.d.). Furthermore, it is quite clear that parent involvement in student learning has a significant impact on academic achievement. This has been demonstrated repeatedly in individual meta-analytic studies (e.g., Fan & Chen, 2001) and in Hattie's (2009) exhaustive review of a large set of such meta-analytic studies. Nonetheless, when it comes to actual practice in schools and classrooms, leveraging the additive influence of parents is often under-utilized, misused, or neglected. Polls frequently find that teachers do not feel supported by parents, and this is particularly true in inner-city schools. In part this is due to a misunderstanding of the importance of parental involvement in education in general and character education in particular. It is also likely due to a misunderstanding of the complexity of the ways parents can be most positively influential on the learning and development of their children and adolescents. In other words, parents (and teachers) may not know that parent involvement is a truly "value-added" proposition for effective schooling, and even when they do, they may not know how to do it optimally (even at times doing it in a counter-productive way).

First, we will present evidence-based conclusions about parental influences on academic achievement. Then we will turn specifically to what is known in a parallel sense about the role of parents specifically in promoting character development in schools. Finally, based on the research we have reviewed, we will offer guidance on how parents and schools can best work in tandem to optimally support student character development (and learning).

Parental Involvement and Student Academic Achievement

As noted above, there is little debate about whether parental involvement in schooling can significantly and positively impact their children's academic outcomes. Henderson and Berla (1994) argued that parental involvement in a child's education is the single best predictor of a child's success in school, impacting a broad range of outcomes such as academic achievement, attendance, behavior in school, academic motivation, and graduation rates (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005a). However, understanding the ways in which parents can positively impact, negatively impact, or have no significant influence on student learning is usually less well understood.

In an excellent review of meta-analyses, Hattie (2009) concludes that optimal parent involvement includes three key elements. First, parents need to have high aspirations and expectations for their children's academic success. This turns out to be the single most important influence on student academic achievement. Furthermore, it is the role of the school to work with parents to instill those aspirations and expectations. Hattie reports a study with Clinton showing that when students begin school nearly all parents think school is very important and about two-thirds of them expect their students to succeed. By the time students leave elementary school, those expectations and aspirations have greatly declined and parents wanted their students mainly to get a job. In both the parenting and education literatures (e.g., Berkowitz & Grych, 1998, 2000; Wentzel, 2002), high (but scaffolded) expectations by parents and teachers is a significant factor in student learning and student development. Hence, holding expectations and aspirations, but also articulating them as goals for children while providing the supports required for maximal fulfillment of those expectations is key to effective parent involvement in schooling. This

aligns nicely with some of key models in positive psychology, especially the notions of mind set (Dweck, 2006), learned optimism (Seligman, 1998), and mental contrasting with implementation intentions (Oettingen & Gollwitzer, 2010). In particular Dweck's notion of a growth mind set suggests that cultivating a perspective that one can change for the better greatly impacts future development and performance, hence cultivating a growth mind set in parents about their children is an important strategy for parent involvement.

Secondly, parents need to know and use the language of schooling. There is a specific vocabulary of education and in particular to the individual school and even classroom. The more parents and schools are using the same terminology, the better students do at school. Often, this is difficult because the school itself does not clearly have a commonly agreed upon and understood language of schooling in general and specifically about character development and education. Lovat et al. (2009) found that having a common language about values education was related to the success in positively impacting student character development. Schools need to openly discuss their pedagogical philosophies, policies, and practices and reach agreement on the language and concepts they endorse and implement. These in turn need to be shared clearly with all stakeholders, clearly including parents.

Third, not any parental involvement is impactful or even helpful. Ideally parents need to be actively involved in students' learning. Hattie cites a meta-analysis by Senechal (2006) on student literacy acquisition, in which parents teaching specific literacy skills was twice as impactful as listening to their children read, which, in turn, was much more impactful than reading to children. Schools need to reflect on the ways they are involving parents and load more heavily on those ways that research has shown are most impactful. This does not mean parents should not read to children. Rather it means schools need to encourage and

support those strategies that are most impactful (like promoting higher expectations and aspirations and working to prevent the decline in such as children get older).

While these three strategies are the ones that research suggests will have the greatest impact on academic outcomes, Hattie (2009) lists a set of less effective strategies: (1) involvement in early childhood interventions (where parental involvement seems to add little to the intervention), (2) talking to children about schooling, (3) listening to children read, as noted above, (4) checking homework, and (5) attending school functions.

It is not harmful for parents to employ those strategies, merely less impactful than using the prior three strategies. However, Hattie (2009) also identifies an approach that is actually counter-productive and, while intended to promote better academic outcomes, actually can reduce such outcomes. As Hattie (2009) noted, "Of as much interest are those family variables that negatively relate to achievement. These factors included external rewards, homework surveillance, negative control, and restrictions for unsatisfactory grades" (p. 69). Parents who use a supervisory approach to student schooling and homework tend to be least impactful in promoting student learning and can actually undermine it under certain conditions, especially for adolescents. Ineffective behaviors include setting rules about homework, setting rules about television watching (and likely any other media consumption), monitoring and controlling time with friends, and creating home environments specifically structured for doing homework.

Of course, there are demographic variables that impact the influence of parent involvement. Age of child, SES, ethnicity/race, and family structure all pay a part, but they are far less impactful than parental expectations and aspirations and other factors listed above.

Parental Schooling Involvement and Student Character Development

Unfortunately far less is known about the impacts of parent involvement in schooling on student character development. This can happen in two ways. First, parent involvement in school generally, or simply for academics, can have a positive effect on character development. For example, in a study of home visiting as a specific school to home connection strategy, the strongest effects were on social-behavioral outcomes such as interpersonal functioning and self-esteem (Sweet & Applebaum, 2004). The second is parental involvement specifically in character education functions of the school. In a review of 33 effective character education programs, 26 were found to have some aspect of family and/or community involvement (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005b). The level and type of such involvement varied widely, although three main types of involvement were observed: parents as audience; parents as clients; parents as partners (cf. Berkowitz & Bier, 2005a for a fuller explication of each).

Parents as clients. This is the least active way that parents are involved, and probably the most common. Schools routinely try to keep parents informed about what is happening at the school, including in character education. In this day of social media, it has become very easy to do this by maintaining a school and/or classroom web page and by sending social media messages through Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc. These are simply the more recent technological versions of a paper school newsletter, a long-standing vehicle for communicating with parents. Given Hattie's (2009) finding that a significant factor in parent effective involvement in school is having a shared language about schooling, informing parents is one way to support the language of schooling in family discourse. While it is certainly generally advisable to keep parents informed about the school, and

about character education, this is a relatively ineffective level of parent involvement by itself, as it is relatively passive and Hattie reports that more active modes of involvement are more impactful.

      <u>Parents as clients</u>. Schools are and should be seen and leveraged as community resources. The idea of the "lighted schoolhouse" that stays open after school hours to serve the community is an enlightened way to understand and leverage the public resource that a school actually is, rather than narrowly limiting the school to serving students during school hours. After all a school usually has athletic facilities, computer labs, a nurse's clinic, an auditorium, food preparation facilities, and of course "meeting" rooms. These can be leveraged to serve parental (and broader community) recreation, learning, health, and social needs. Schools frequently teach parents. They may directly teach school-related knowledge and competencies (e.g., how to help children with homework), but they may also teach parents life and occupational skills and knowledge (e.g., literacy, computer literacy, help with paying taxes, etc.). Schools need to understand what parents need and want and then to work to provide those resources and services to them. Again, the argument is not that schools should not treat parents are clients (and as an audience for messages), but rather that schools should not stop there. One part of the argument is that both these modes have a hierarchical construal of the relationship between school and families. In both cases, school is the higher order entity and family the lower order entity. In the case of parents as audience, schools know and parents need to know. In the case of parents as clients, schools have expertise and resources to provide to parents who are in need of them. In the latter case, however, such needs can benevolently determined by the school, more collaboratively negotiated between school and parents, or parents can be empowered to determine this themselves or at least take the lead in this process.

Parents as partners. A more democratic and egalitarian way of construing the

relationship of parents to school is partnership. When Hattie (2009) refers to more active

modes of parental involvement in schooling, he is referring, at least in part, to partnerships

between school and family. Parents directly teaching academic competencies such as

literacy skills is not only one of the most effective parent strategies for positively impacting

academic outcomes, but it is a form of parenting for character. According to Berkowitz and

Bier (2005a), "Ideally, character education involves a partnership of stakeholders helping

students develop socially in positive ways" (p. 66). This unfortunately is often

uncomfortable for schools. Both parents and schools often see a division of labor; i.e.,

parents take care of the home and schools take care of education. There is often antipathy

between school and home with each blaming the other for failing to optimally serve the

child's best interests. Schools may devalue the competency of many parent to act as

partners, and many parents are intimidated by schools. Even if there is no antipathy, there

is typically a gap in perspective between school staff and parents about a wide array of

issues relevant to effective character education, including approaches to fostering character

in children and adolescents (Berkowitz, 2012). The Making Caring Common program

(mcc.gse.harvard.edu), led by Rick Weissbourd, in a national study of over 10,000

adolescent students and their parents and teachers, reports that parents consider caring as

the main value they wish to instill in their children, yet teachers (and students) see the

parents as prioritizing achievement and happiness over caring for others (Making Caring

Common, 2015).

Any or all of these may thwart true partnership. Interestingly, part of deep character

education is a pedagogy of empowerment (Berkowitz, Bier & McCauley, 2016), in which all

stakeholders (including parents) are empowered to serve as co-authors and co-owners of

the child's schooling, including character education. Whereas lighted schoolhouses can effectively incorporate parents as clients, true community schooling includes parents as co-authors and co-owners of the school as an education institution and a community resource (Santiago, Ferrara, & Quinn, 2011). Such partnership, and the authentic discourse that it requires, can serve to build consensus and shared language and understanding.

Motivating Parent Involvement

While it is clearly important to understand why and how parental involvement is helpful to student school success, it is also important to motivate parents to be involved in school, for if they are not motivated to be involved and hence are not actively involved, it does not matter if they or the school are knowledgeable about impactful strategies. Schools routinely lament that parents do not show up for parent focused events. Even though Hattie (2009) reveals that simply attending parent-focused school events is not an effective form of parent involvement, their absence at such events may represent a broader lack of motivation to be involved, including in the more effective ways. Of course, in many cases lack of participation does not reflect lack of motivation, but rather a range of obstacles blocking participation (e.g., work schedules, transportation). Nevertheless, addressing obstacles to motivation (and the intrapersonal and contextual causes of them) can increase involvement.

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) offered a helpful model of four motivational obstacles to parental involvement in schooling. The first obstacle, already addressed above briefly, is that parents may not realize that they ought to be involved; i.e., that is part of an ideal role as a parent. Schools need to share information (such as Hattie's meta-analytic review conclusions) that supports the important and impactful influence of parental

involvement in student learning and development. Of relevance is the set of data on the

analogies between parenting and teaching. Berkowitz and Grych (1998, 2000) have argued

that the five most impactful parenting strategies for character development are the same

strategies that teachers should use. Researchers have subsequently demonstrated this

isomorphism in early childhood education (Howes & Ritchie, 2002), elementary school

(Watson, 2003), middle school (Wentzel, 2002) and even high school (Gregory et al., 2010).

The second motivational obstacle is that parents may not feel welcome by the school

to be involved at all, and certainly not in higher order ways (e.g., as partners). Many parents

are intimidated by schools, often because they do not have positive memories of their own

schooling or because of a lack of education or self-perceived "academic polish." Hence,

they are reticent to participate. Schools, sometimes intentionally but often unintentionally

are not overly inviting to and hospitable towards parents, regardless of their laments about

the lack of parent involvement. Parking may be difficult. Entrance to the school may feel

more like attempting egress like a maximum security installation than to a community

center. Navigation through the school may be confusing. Staff attitudes toward visitors

may be less than welcoming. Schools need to transform into places that authentically

welcome parents by having parking places for visitors, creating a parent resource room,

hiring a parent liaison, routinely relevant and valued programming for parents, making the

entrance way a place to linger and chat, and generally cultivating a school ethos of being

welcoming to parents.

Once parents understand that it is part of the role of a parent to be involved

(effectively) in their child's education, and they feel truly welcome in the school, they may

still avoid participating because their children do not want them involved, and especially do

not want them to be present on the school grounds. For young children, this is typically not a problem, but as children approach and enter adolescence, they often send messages to discourage their parents from being involved in their education. Schools can be proactive in shifting student attitudes about parental involvement, getting them to send more inviting messages to their parents, and creating structures for mutually enjoyable and beneficial structures and events for parent, child, and staff activity. It is advisable to empower a collaborative team of staff, parents and students to find solutions to this issue.

Even if parents understand their role in schooling, and feel welcomed by school and students, there is a final motivational hurdle to overcome; namely, parents may not feel competent to be involved in their children's education. The curriculum can be daunting to many parents, even well-educated ones who learned the subjects long ago and in different ways, including with different terminology. One strategy for overcoming this is to learn more about parents, such as their career histories, their hobbies, their skills, etc. Then the school can be proactive in inviting parents to participate in their areas of competence, which not only reduces this obstacle, but also sends a message of respect to parents by reversing the status hierarchy. They can also employ school-to-home academic assignments that are tailored to parental participation and enjoyment, as is modeled in the Homeside Activities module of the Center for the Collaborative Classroom's Caring School Community program (www.collaborativeclassroom.org).

Leveraging the Isomorphism of Parenting and Teaching

As noted above, there is a marked parallel between the research-based parenting practices that effectively promote learning and development and the effective teacher practices that have the same results (Berkowitz & Grych, 2000; Wentzel, 2002). As also

suggested, this isomorphism can be leveraged to connect parents to school. Berkowitz

(2016) has described the five parenting practices identified in Berkowitz and Grych (1998)

using the acronym DENIM (Demandingness, Empowerment, Nurturance, Induction,

Modeling).

Briefly, Demandingness is the high expectations that parallel Hattie's (2009) most

powerful parent involvement strategy (aspirations and expectations). Parents and teachers

need to set the bar high, both for character and for academic performance, but they must

be supportive and provide the scaffolding necessary for students to have the greatest

chance of meeting those high expectations. Empowerment is parallel to the partnership

element in Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's (1997) motivational model of parent

involvement described above. In this case, parents and teachers are asked to partner with

children/students by empowering their voices in matters of relevance and importance.

Nurturance refers to authentically caring about and for the child. Induction is a well-studied

and highly impactful means of behavior management. It is highly discursive and provides a

justification for the adult's approval or disapproval of the child's behavior by directing the

child's attention toward the affective consequences of their actions for others. Modeling is

being what one is asking the child to be (e.g., empathic, altruistic, hard-working, etc.).

By bringing together both educators and parents and training them together in these

child management strategies, one can build a bridge of equality and competence between

the two groups. While parents are clients in this strategy, they are equal in status to the

teachers who are also being trained. It also responds to the need for felt competence

highlighted in the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) motivational model.

Conclusion: Implications for Policy and Practice

We can conclude much from this initial foray into the research on the impact of parent involvement on student learning and development. In this case, our interest is mostly on the impacts on positive youth development, or character, but here, as is frequently the case, there is a robustness to nurturing development in that the practices that work for one outcome or agent often have substantial overlap with the practices that work for a different outcome or agent. This in fact makes policy and practice much simpler. A few of the more central suggestions from this review are:

- Appropriate and effective parent involvement in their children's schooling is desirable, both for their children's academic success and, most centrally for this paper, for their character development.

- In order for schools and parents to work together to make this happen optimally, there should be careful scrutiny of what are the most effective parent involvement practices. This review begins to identify what some of these might be:

    o Parents need to have high expectations and aspirations for their children, for their academic success and for their character development. Schools need to support parents in holding such beliefs and particularly avoiding their common erosion as children mature.

    o Parents should be informed (audience) and served (clients) by schools, but even more importantly should be included as authentic partners in the design and delivery (and even assessment) of their

children's learning and character development. Community schooling is one means of doing this.

- o Obstacles to parent involvement need to be identified and effectively addressed. Parents need to understand that is a role obligation of parents to be productively involved in their children's schooling. They need to feel authentically welcomed to do so by both the school and by their children. And there need to be ways they can be involved for which they feel competent to do so.

- o In particular, parents should be dissuaded to adopting an authoritarian surveillance approach to involvement in schooling.

- o Training parents and teachers together on the common practices that benefit character development would be advisable.

- However a school addresses these issue, the language and concepts of schooling and in particular character education should be consensually crafted, clearly defined and explained, widely communicated, and consistently applied for all stakeholder groups, including parents.

If, as Heraclitus opined millennia ago, "character is destiny," then effective and appropriate parent involvement in schooling is necessary for it to be a positive destiny. There is no moral future without moral citizens of our societies, and moral citizens need to be nurtured at home and in schools, and parent involvement in schooling is critical to this project of building a more moral world through the character development of each subsequent generation.

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