The Importance and Practice of Parental Engagement in Schools:
A Synthesis of the Literature

by Dr. Malcolm Steinberg, Dr. Paul Wozny, Dr. Owen Livermore,

Dr. Nicole Ofoso, Dr. Paul Veugelers, Mr. Ian Gray, and Dr. Jim Parsons

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Introduction

Notwithstanding that schools function globally as the formal agency that educates children, the importance of parental engagement in the education of children has been known and respected for many generations. In fact, John Locke's treatise *Some Thoughts Concerning Education: The Harvard Classics* notes, "The well educating of their children is so much the duty and concern of parents, and the welfare and prosperity of the nation so much depends on it" (Locke, 1693). Locke has not been alone in that belief. During the past two decades, a number of researchers, including our Aurora Academic Charter Schools Authority research team in partnership with other public school divisions and stakeholders, have engaged their work in the study of how parental involvement can and does impact teaching and learning therein. This paper will review some of that research and work to create a synthesis of some of the findings that research suggests to educators, boards, and senior administrators who wish to nurture a learning culture that engages optimally with parents as active participants in the education of their children.

Defining Parental Involvement

In the context of this paper, *parental involvement is defined to include all the activities parents engage in to help their children succeed both at home and school*. In addition, an assumption of this review is that *parental engagement is a crucial aspect of all children's education* because parents and guardians are the first teachers their children have. Generally speaking, most parents are naturally involved in educational activities with their children before they attend school. Obviously, most parents teach their children

language activities of speaking and listening. As well, many parents read with their children at home. Furthermore, most parents – especially in the early grades – attend school events and confer with teachers about their children's school learning and achievement. Sadly, such school engagement by parents is not universally true and it tends to become less pervasive as students enter older grades. Extant research (Epstein & Sheldon, 2004; Henderson & Berla, 1995; Hill & Tyson, 2009) suggests that:

(a) early parent involvement is critical for the success of children's education;

(b) continued parent involvement in school across the elementary school years is important for children's achievement and motivation to succeed in school; and,

(c) parent involvement, student motivation, and school achievement is a cyclic process that builds upon one another from preschool and throughout grade school.

In general, studies show that students whose parents are engaged have better school attendance, higher self-esteem, and higher graduation rates. Obviously, all these effects contribute to success both in school and later in life. However, this same research shows that there are attendant issues. First, partnerships between parents and schools tend to decline across grades as children increase in grade and age. Second, there are socio-economic differences: for example, affluent families tend to have more positive attitudes toward parental involvement. Third, schools in more economically-challenged communities make more contact with families about the problems and difficulties their children are having than about their children's successes. Fourth, fathers, single-parent families, and parents who are employed full-time are less likely to be involved in schools.

In the next few sections of this literature synthesis, the work of a small number of key researchers in the area of parental involvement will be reviewed. Finally, near the end of this review a number of recommendations will be made that work to pull together the insights from this literature synthesis.

Research from Within a Canadian Indigenous Perspective

Within the Canadian context, the collected works of Dr. Angela Snowshoe span several years of community-based participatory research with First Nations, Métis, and Inuit (FNMI)

community partners and their local school board. Their work highlighted the concepts of connectedness, community-based research partnerships and the use of strengths-based approaches (Crooks, Snowshoe, Chiodo, & Brunette-Debassige, 2013; Snowshoe, 2015; Snowshoe, Crooks, Tremblay, Craig, & Hinson, 2015).

The findings of Dr. Snowshoe's research team showed that cultural connectedness in Indigenous youth was positively associated with outcomes such as self-efficacy, sense of self (present and future), school connectedness, and life satisfaction. Furthermore, in some cases, cultural connectedness predicted mental health above and beyond other established social determinants of mental health (Snowshoe, 2015). They also described community-based partnerships as a model for doing research in a way that was equitable, respectful, honored, and ultimately benefited the Indigenous community (Crooks et al., 2013). Their work demonstrated that partnership building was a process that occurred over a span of years, wherein the success of each joint project further strengthens that partnership relationship.

The team's research also advocated for the use of a strengths-based approach to evaluation, because that approach builds competencies that lead to increased well-being of the participants (Snowshoe, 2015). Dr. Snowshoe's work inspired the use of a participatory approach in this research project. This approach was adopted at Aurora Academic Charter Schools Authority in recent research (2018 to 2022) addressing parental engagement wherein we sought to establish a community advisory board (CAB) in each participating school. The purpose of the CAB was to guide the research project in a manner that worked well within the specific school community and to ensure accountability to that school community. The researchers in this project also endeavored to incorporate a strengths-based approach in the analysis and reporting of findings.

Dr. Snowshoe's research team's work also informed the choice of focusing this research project on enhancing social connectedness in the school community, specifically using the parent/guardian-teacher interview as a pivot for enhancing connectedness between families and the school community. Connectedness is a critical area that impacts on student health and wellbeing (McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002).

Addressing Connectedness and Relatedness in Parental Engagement

Despite the range of conceptualizations of the term connectedness, two basic elements of

connectedness consistently stand out in the literature: (1) relatedness and (2) autonomy (Barber & Schluterman, 2008). Relatedness describes a relational component (i.e. a connection or bond with the socializing agent – ranging from individuals to institutions). Autonomy involves the degree to which a person feels that their individuality is validated or supported by their socialization agents.

Research increasingly recognizes the value that positive social experiences with individuals and with institutions adds to the school environment (Barber & Schluterman, 2008). Such benefits include good mental health and positive self-esteem (Bond et al., 2007; Foster et al., 2017), enhancement of protective factors for positive educational outcomes, and lower rates of health-risk behaviors (Bond et al., 2007). Furthermore, connectedness among parent/guardians, students, and the school community has been shown to contribute to students' senses of connectedness to the school community and ultimately their achievement and wellbeing (Waters, Cross & Runions, 2009). Connectedness has also been associated with an enhanced sense of belonging, a sizable social network (potentially addressing social isolation and building social capital), and active student engagement in their community (Foster et al., 2017). The solid consistency of these associations endorses continued efforts to enhance connectedness within the school community.

This research is also informed by the broader research on parent/guardian engagement in schools, which recognizes the significant role that parental/guardian involvement has in student achievement and well-being. Such research includes *The Evidence Grows* (Henderson, 1981), *The Evidence Continues to Grow* (Henderson, 1987) and, in the 1990s, *A New Generation of Evidence: The Family Is Critical to Student Achievement* (Henderson & Berla, 1994). Research evidence has demonstrated the beneficial impacts of parental/guardian involvement in children's education. For instance, in the fourth edition of the Evidence publication, a systematic review of 51 quantitative and qualitative studies on parents' engagement in education, from early childhood to high school found positive associations with outcomes such as academic achievement, higher graduation rates, improved attendance, better social skills and adaptation to school, and improved behavior (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

Other meta-analyses have determined the impact of parent/guardian involvement on educational outcomes of middle and secondary school children and have found similar positive associations (Jeynes, 2012; Hill & Tyson, 2009). Parent/guardian involvement was linked with

academic achievement regardless of racial/ethnic and educational backgrounds for students at all ages. Overall, the education literature shows consensus on the importance of parent/guardian involvement in their children's education. However, the gaps and areas for further research necessitate identifying improved ways to engage parents/guardians with their child's teacher(s) within their particular school context.

There is a continuum of processes and roles in which parents/guardians engage with schools from passive, involved, to engaged (Wong, 2015). A passive role includes receiving information from the school via various media – letters, newsletters, emails, students' agenda books, etc. An involved role includes attending meetings, events, and supporting school programs. An engagement role includes providing input and participating in decision-making processes at the school level such as school policies and practices that may impact their children's and other students' learning dynamics.

Other authors have described parent/guardian involvement along the lines of: (a) activities that strengthen the entire school population and indirectly help their own child, such as volunteering in the classroom and participating on school council and (b) activities that directly affect the child but have little or indirect effect on the rest of the school, such as parent/guardian-teacher interviews/conferences and helping with homework (Brock & Edmunds, 2010). In reality, parents/guardians move in and out of these roles as best suits their situations because having multiple options for engagement gives them opportunities to make the choices that work for them and their children.

Ultimately, educators aim their parental/guardian engagement efforts at: a) encouraging increased communication between the home and school and b) encouraging parents/guardians to pursue behaviors at home that encourage learning (Brock & Edmunds, 2010). Programs and special efforts to engage families that have been identified as more impactful are teacher-led initiatives that reach out to families in ways that are linked to improving their child's learning. For instance, several studies in Henderson and Mapp's (2002) review demonstrated that teacher outreach to parents/guardians via face-to-face meetings, sending materials home, and keeping in touch about progress was linked to strong and consistent improvements in student performance in both reading and math.

Despite the diverse avenues for parental/guardian involvement in schools, studies show that the level of involvement might differ by factors such as culture, language, and

socio-economic status. Wong (2015), for example, explored the engagement experiences of parents and teachers within the context of the Ontario Ministry of Education's 2010 Parent Engagement Policy for Ontario Schools. The results revealed that the actual and desired levels of engagement were different between new immigrants and the established or non-immigrant families.

Henderson and Mapp (2002) found that, although families of all income and education levels and from all ethnic and cultural groups were engaged in supporting their children's learning at home, middle-class families tended to be more involved at school. This finding led to the recommendation that there is a need to support more involvement at school from all parents across multiple socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds as a strategy to bridge student achievement gaps. Similarly, a study on Indigenous and non-Indigenous parents/guardians' relationships with schools found differences along categories in relation to perceived socioeconomic status. In contrast, middle to higher socioeconomic status parents interacted with schools in ways that educators expected and valued, while parents in lower socioeconomic situations interacted with schools in ways that educators viewed as unhelpful or disengaged from school interactions altogether (Milne, 2016). These socioeconomic perception differences were in addition to challenges many Indigenous parents might have faced with school engagement because of past negative experiences with education in a colonial, parochial and/or residential school context.

The parent/guardian-teacher conference (also interview or meeting) is the most common form of direct communication between parent/guardian and teachers. It serves the purpose of creating opportunities for a teacher and a parent/guardian to address particular issues related to the child, such as academic progress and behavior (Lemmer, 2012). It also provides an opportunity for a teacher to leverage family resources to support the student's education process (Khasnabis, Goldin, & Ronfeldt, 2018). However, the relevance of parent/guardian-teacher interviews/conferences today is being questioned. There are concerns that these are viewed as more ritual than substantial (Lemmer, 2012; McKibben, 2016).

Issues such as poor attendance have led to suggestions to eliminate the traditional parent-teacher conferences altogether in favor of on-demand conferences and other engagement initiatives (McKibben, 2016). Because time constraints have been a consistent challenge for such engagements, there are questions about whether technology could be used to achieve the same

purpose, rather than face-to-face meetings (Nitza & Roman, 2016). Although on-demand conferences might sound ideal, there is still the possibility that some parents/guardians may never take the initiative to request a conference with teachers. Moreover, it could also be argued that, although the use of technology (e.g. emails, video calls, phone calls) could assist in the process, taking away the personal touch of an in-person meeting at least once during the school year might be detrimental to the expected relationship development that needs to happen between parents/guardians and teachers.

Attempts to modify parent/guardian-teacher interviews will require a detailed evaluation of current processes and protocols to identify strengths and weaknesses, as well as to determine efficient and effective ways to enhance the engagement process. McKibben (2016) described a need to think about what parent/guardian-teacher conferences should look like rather than what they are. In this regard, our research was aimed at contributing knowledge to the on-going discussion about the relevance of these interviews. Specifically, we sought to gain understanding about the perspectives of parents/guardians regarding the current interview process and the associated teacher-engagement processes experienced in their child's school context.

James Comer's Work

James Comer's (2010) work was grounded on his classic belief that the purpose of school was not only to raise achievement, but to prepare our children to be successful in life. To make this happen, Comer believed that educating children for success included involving families as early as possible. Working in a cultural context of racial tension and change, as early as 1968, Comer established the Comer School Development Program, an institute that promotes collaboration among parents, teachers, and communities as a way to improve the academic success of children. Comer grounded his work upon a foundation of developmental science, psychiatry, and public health because he believed that social determinants caused by a lack of academic achievement could be mediated by strong families who worked to prepare their children for school success.

Comer's (2010) classic research worked to both understand and identify developmental factors that correlated to academic ability. Key among those was his identification of the importance of strong, nurturing families on the development of children, especially families whose lives were impacted by poverty. For more than 50 years, Comer (who was named The Maurice Falk Professor of Child Psychiatry at the Yale Child Study Center) argued that academic

learning was inextricably linked to development of the whole child – emotionally, psychologically, and ethically. He also argued that success in academics was tied to a child's emotional, psychological, and social development.

Comer came to believe that parent engagement highly impacted student academic success and noted that, although all parents hoped to provide for their families, a number of conditions prevented that provision from fully occurring. These conditions especially impacted families of lower socioeconomic status, where poverty, a lack of transportation, difficulties in communication, and a lack of free time resulted in lower-than-needed involvement. His work offered a number of ideas for improving the school-family alliances, identifying effective components of parent engagement programming, and both validating and building stronger relationships between parents and schools.

Susan Auerbach's Work

Susan Auerbach's (2010 & 2012) research focused on parent and family engagement in education, school-community partnerships, and the social context of urban education. Her work, in its totality, focused on the ways effective schools might help engage families in their children's education. Auerbach's key findings included the insight that (a) effective school leaders believed that parental engagement was highly valuable and that schools should be proactive in working to achieve such engagement; (b) school leaders who were most likely to successfully engage parents worked actively to initiate, plan, and implement activities with families rather than being figureheads who only showed up at events or delegated the organization of such events to others; and (c) leaders who effectively involved parents in the school were motivated by an ethical desire to foster social justice.

Similar to Comer (2010), Auerbach grew to believe that school leaders should encourage and pursue meaningful partnerships with both communities and families; however, also like Comer, she found that cultural and economic barriers often mitigated against such alliances. As well, the skills, tools, and resources to foster these alliances were absent. Her work focused on research that would help school leadership engage in effective practices that could build collaborative practices between schools and families.

In her 2010 article, "Beyond Coffee With the Principal: Toward Leadership for Authentic School-Family Partnerships," Auerbach outlined types of leadership and family

partnerships that worked to increase or decrease family engagement. She believed that when leaders distrusted or saw little value in family partnerships, relationships became closed and families felt pushed away from building relationships with schools and teachers. She also believed that school leaders sometimes viewed parents and families from a deficit perspective, where they were not seen as assets within the school community or even for their children. Such fixed mindsets created both distance and dissonance between families and the school. These mindsets included (a) the inherent belief that the school knew best and that parents should comply with school actions and values, (b) the belief that parents were inferior to teachers in their insights about their children, and (c) the conclusion that parents should be involved but in limited and controlled ways. Models that closed communication included "come if we call" and "we have an open door policy" (Auerbach, 2010, p. 734). Although, on the face of it, an "open door" policy seems quite fair, deep within its meaning is the belief that the onus is upon parents to initiate contact with schools and teachers. Auerbach believed that, if schools ever hoped parents would become involved, school leadership must proactively go to the parents and help them realize their presence was desired and valued.

Auerbach believed the effects of such traditional school-first beliefs on parent engagement was one of compliance, where partnerships were nominal and leaders only encouraged parental involvement within school-based parameters. When this occurred, parents felt they had little say in the workings of the school but were "allowed" to support the school when it solicited their help. Such actions basically kept parents in "their place" and reminded them that the main focus of the school was student achievement and that parental involvement should be focused upon only the academic initiatives of the school. In other words, parent-school relationships were and should remain "traditional," where any two-way communication was centered upon the school's needs and desires. Thus, parents were treated like "clients" of the school and not full partners in their children's education.

On the other hand, Auerbach's research found that particular school leadership teams had more efficacious and positive effects on parent engagement; and, in fact, such leadership actively helped build trust between the school and parents. Specifically, such relationships were built upon foundations of trust. Only where school leadership trusted parents would mutual partnerships flourish between school leaders and families. When schools trusted parents to be true players and advocates in the education of their children, parents tended to respond by more fully trusting the school's ability to involve and collaborate with them.

However, in most contexts, changing traditional culture and historical beliefs can be difficult for schools and parents alike. Not having experienced being trusted with having contributions for their own children's education, having a say can be new for parents. Teachers and schools are the professionals, after all. Furthermore, when school leaders work to build authentic partnerships and parents are invited to "co-construct" the school, feeling confident can be difficult. As a result, it takes work to change the prevailing culture. In addition, although parents are seen to have important contributions to share with schools, that doesn't mean that parents can't benefit from education about schools' goals, values, principles, and policies. In fact, Auerbach believed being transparent about school goals and activities was essential to parental involvement. And, as school leaders worked to build mutually-respectful alliances, these alliances should be based upon "broader goals such as social justice, democratic participation, and cultural responsiveness" (Auerbach, 2010, p. 735).

Auerbach believed leaders who worked to build authentic partnerships created more than trust with their school families; they created alliances. These leaders saw families as assets and created active spaces where parents could share their visions, dreams, desires, and values with and within the entire school community. Such leadership created a community that involved both the school and the neighborhood surrounding it. The key was for leaders to actively create space where the ideas of parents and the collaboration of families could be recognized and normalized. In fact, the grounding ethos within such schools was that children would never be successful if families were not a large part of the school community.

Auerbach came to believe that "Administrators should try to give parents the support they need to help their families and find ways to empower them to participate in the school and the broader community" (Auerbach, 2009, p.16). She outlined three strategies effective school leaders could use to help empower parents and increase family engagement.

These strategies included what she came to call (a) community uplift, (b) parent advocacy; and, (c) culturally responsive parental engagement:

Strategy 1: **Community uplift** included parental regular school or home meetings that helped parents become involved in advisory councils, monthly community service projects, and activities such as a family leadership institute where parents and school leaders collaborated together to discuss important issues. In short, some of these activities engaged parents as

advocates and recognized that they were already leaders within the family and community. Auerbach believed parents could be educated for advocacy and that parental education was "a vehicle for them to learn how to be advocates, to know what to ask for" (Auerbach, 2010, p. 743).

Strategy 2: **Parent advocacy** included nurturing parent-teacher relationships and often emphasized school leadership's active outreach that worked to develop collaborative and interpersonal relationships with families.

Strategy 3: **Culturally responsive parental engagement** included what Auerbach named "co-powerment relationships" between administrators, teachers, and parents. The inclusion of school activities that were appreciative and celebratory of the breadth and depth of cultural diversity and lived experiences of parents and students. For Auerbach, "The essential core of family engagement is furthering the communication and relationship between teachers and parents" (Auerbach, 2009, p.19).

Joyce Epstein's Work

Joyce Epstein, a research professor of education and sociology at Johns Hopkins University, outlined the relationship between children and their schools:

> The way schools care about children is reflected in the way schools care about the children's families. If educators view children simply as students, they are likely to see the family as separate from the school. That is, the family is expected to do its job and leave the education of children to the schools. If educators view students as children, they are likely to see both the family and the community as partners with the school in children's education and development. (Epstein, from: https://www.corwin.com/sites/default/files/upm-binaries/6799_epstein_ch_1.pdf)

Epstein's research (2004) focused on the effects of school leadership and school programming on family and community involvement and corresponding academic achievement. Perhaps Epstein's most noted contribution has been her oft-cited framework that explicated six

types of parent involvement. These six types include:

Type One: Parenting, which includes supporting the home environment and strengthening families as they work to support their children at school. The job of parenting is to help all families establish home environments to support children as students. Some activities that fit under "parenting" include (a) parent education and other training for parents (e.g. college credit, family literacy); (b) family support programs to assist families with health, nutrition, and other services; and, (c) home visits at transition points to make entrance into elementary, middle, and high school easier.

Type Two: Communicating, which works to create effective modes of school-to-home and home-to-school communication about school programs and children's social and academic progress. Some of the activities listed under communicating included: (a) conferencing with every parent at least once a year; (b) providing language translators who could assist families as needed; and (c) the regular scheduling of notices, memos, phone calls, newsletters, and other communications.

T**ype Three: Volunteering**, which works to recruit parents to actively help and support school activities. Some of the activities named volunteering included (a) building school and classroom volunteer programs that help teachers, administrators, students, and parents; (b) creating a parent room or family center for volunteer work, meetings, and resources for families; or (c) creating regular feedback that would help identify the available talents, times, and locations of volunteers.

Type Four: Learning at Home, which focuses on sharing information about ideas for learning at home.   This information included offering ideas about helping families learn to help their children at home with homework and other curriculum-related activities, decisions, and planning. These activities might also include such things as (a) providing information for families about the skills students need if they are to be successful in all subjects at each grade and (b) providing information about homework policies and how parents might monitor and discuss schoolwork at home.

Type Five: Decision-making, which works to empower parents to become leaders who involve themselves in school decision-making. The goal of such parent involvement includes helping families become participants in school decisions and developing parent leaders and representatives. These activities include such things as (a) creating and utilizing parent advisory

councils or committees that would embrace parental leadership and participation and (b) creating district-level advisory councils and committees.

Type Six: Collaborating with the community, which works to identify and integrate resources and services from the community to help strengthen school programs, family practices, and student learning and development. The goal of this type of parental involvement includes coordinating resources and services from the community for families, students, and the school. It also includes providing services to the community. Some activities included in collaborating with the community included (a) providing information for students and families about community health, cultural, recreational, social support, and other programs or services and (b) providing information about community activities that linked to learning skills and talents, including summer programs for students.

Similar to Comer and others, Epstein believed that parents wanted to participate in their children's school lives, but faced barriers to such participation that include (a) attitudes, (b) logistics, (c) system barriers, and (d) a lack of skills. Specifically, one attitude that limited participation was the belief that school and family inhabited separate spheres of influence. Such attitudes could be felt in comments often heard from schools that, "If the family would just do its job, we (teachers) could do our job" or often heard from parents that, "I raised my children; now it's your job (the school's) to educate them." However, such divisive attitudes should be replaced with the more-generative attitude that the family and the school shared overlapping spheres of influence and that neither could educate children without each other's help. That belief can be seen in statements by teachers that "We cannot do our jobs without help of our students' families and the support of this community" or the belief expressed by parents that "We need to know what's happening in school if we are to help our children at home." Such statements indicate that children do not learn or grow in one context; instead, they share and must flourish in both.

For Epstein, supporting parental involvement was broad, practical, and relational work. It might include parents becoming teachers' assistants where they were valued as an extra pair of hands or eyes; or, it might expand to actively inviting parents to engage in more equal partnerships and decision-making about school policies. Epstein believed such relationships were key because, as she found in her research (2001), more than 70% of parents never participated in any activities at their children's schools and only 4% of the parents were highly active at their children's schools.

Epstein offered a number of practical tips that might help overcome the challenges of a lack of parental participation. For example, she suggested working to (a) train parents, (b) incorporate activities into the family schedule, (c) design interactive homework, and (d) allow easy access of materials and resources. In summary, Epstein's model for parental involvement was grounded on the belief that children's learning was enhanced by school and home partnerships where parents and educators came together to share their ideas and views, solve problems, and work towards building a shared vision that contributed to both school goals and student learning. Within such partnerships, parents also became educational leaders who were eager to help schools because they knew their help impacted their children's success. Schools were happy to involve parents by working together to build sustained partnerships. In response, students, as they became more successful, desired that their families become more knowledgeable about school life. In general, in Epstein's model, the relationships between schools and families moved from separate spheres of influence to overlapping spheres of influence where both came to share a single goal – the growing success of children's learning.

In Epstein's beliefs, the goals of home-based learning included enhancing, reinforcing, supporting, and strengthening learning that had been introduced and shared at school. In response, the school's job was to enhance, reinforce, support, and strengthen what children had learned at home. For that partnership to work, it required building two-way communications that engendered give-and-take conversations that helped establish common goals, shared information, followed-up interactions between home-school, and minimized confusion and misunderstandings by building sustainable and trustworthy communication networks.

Nancy Hill's Work

Nancy Hill was a developmental psychologist whose research focused on the ways race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status affected parents' beliefs and behaviors across different racial and ethnic groups. Specifically, her research (2004 & 2009) identified ways in which parent practices based upon demographic differences had different impacts on children's mental health and behavior.

Hill's (2009) meta-analysis examined strategies that best promoted academic achievement among middle schoolers, who historically showed lower engagement and declines in academic performance. Her key findings showed that, across 50 studies, parental involvement was

positively associated with academic achievement (the only exception being parental help with homework) and that parental involvement that focused on academic socialization had the strongest positive association with achievement.

Hill defined academic socialization as parents' actions to communicate their expectations for education and its value and utility, linking school-work to current events, fostering educational and vocational aspirations, discussing learning strategies with their children, and helping their children prepare and plan for their futures.

Hill believed in a more positive focus when talking with children about how education impacted their futures. She believed educational policies in the United States (her work was done within the context of the "No Child Left Behind" political agenda) talked about parental involvement in terms of communication and accountability. However, she also believed that, too often, teacher-parent communication was problem-driven and based upon what children were not doing well both behaviourally and academically.

Instead of such negative talk, she came to believe that, if parents received more information about their children's strengths and about curriculum content, they would be better equipped to offer effective advice and guidance to their children and, by doing so, to reinforce how classroom learning became incarnate in real-world contexts.

William Jeynes' Work

During his academic career, William Jeynes published over 100 academic articles over a broad range of topics; however, he particularly focused on parental engagement. Jeynes meta-analyses (2012 & 2017) synthesized empirical studies about the efficacy of school-based parent-involvement programs and evaluated the effectiveness of such programs, suggesting components of those programs that proved most effective at increasing student achievement.

Jeynes (2012) meta-analysis of 51 studies examined the relationship between various kinds of parental involvement programs and the academic achievement of pre-kindergarten through 12th-grade school children. He found that a significant relationship existed between parental involvement programs and overall academic achievement, both for younger (pre-elementary and elementary school) and older (secondary school) students.

When looking at what specifically enhanced school-based parental involvement programs and parental engagement, Jeynes (2012) found that one variable clearly stood out as encouraging

success: that was an emphasis on partnerships between parents and teachers. His findings suggested that both parental engagement and parental involvement programs were needed. Similar to Epstein, Auerbach, and others, although voluntary parental involvement and school-based family involvement programs had a degree of efficacy independent of one another, proactive cooperation and coordination between the home and the school enhanced the impact of both.

Jeynes (2012) recommended that school leaders and teachers could enhance the efficacy of parental involvement by offering advice to parents about the most vital components of *voluntary* expressions of family engagement, such as setting high expectations and adopting parenting styles associated with positive student outcomes. This guidance was especially important because many parents do not realize how powerful and effective their guidance can be in promoting positive student outcomes. Second, Jeynes came to believe school should take a more active role by encouraging parental engagement in areas such as checking homework and shared reading activities, because school-based guidance was found to increase the efficacy of those behaviors.

Jeynes (2017) meta-analysis of 28 studies examined the relationship between parental involvement and the academic achievement and school behavior of Latino pre-kindergarten-university-aged children. His analysis found that a significant relationship between parental involvement and academic achievement was present on the overall outcomes, except for school behavior. This relationship between involvement and academics held true both for younger (grades K-5) and older (secondary school and college freshman) students. Specifically, parental involvement, in general, was associated with better school outcomes and was specifically associated with higher student achievement.

Of the different components within parent engagement programming studied in the meta-analysis, the components that proved most effective at improving student academic achievement were programs that involved teacher-parent partnerships, teacher-parent communication, checking homework, and shared reading. Similar to other researchers, Jeynes also came to believe that parents should share the high educational aspirations they had for their children with them.

Karen Mapp's Work

Karen L. Mapp (1997 & 2017) became interested in the area of parental involvement when

she was Deputy Superintendent for Family and Community Engagement for schools in Boston, Massachusetts, and researched how schools could partner with families. She came to believe schools should engage family caregivers in students' learning in new ways that were founded on emphasizing active engagement, not just "parent involvement." Her main thesis was that the key ingredient in creating a true partnership between families and school personnel was that all family-related activities be linked to specific overall goals for student learning. Where such links existed, they helped create and strengthen family, community, and school partnerships and, by doing so, increase student achievement.

Mapp's key findings were that increased family engagement in schools was strongly related to (a) faster rates of literacy acquisition among children, (b) increased rates of attending secondary schools, (c) increased attendance rates among students, and (d) decreased rates of school dropouts. Mapp found that, when schools made home visits, children showed a 20% decline in absences and were more likely to read at or above grade level than their peers without home visits.

Mapp's research found that what families do matters because family engagement showed positive correlations with indicators like enjoying school, college access, good attendance, and academic success. Her work identified five key factors (links) between strong family-school partnerships:

Link One: School initiatives should be *linked to learning* and must be aligned with school and district achievement goals that bridged parents to the teaching and learning goals of their students.

Link Two: School initiatives should be *relational* and a major focus of school initiatives should be on building respectful and trusting relationships between families, teachers, and schools.

Link Three: School initiatives should be *developmental*, which means that initiatives should focus on providing a service and on building the intellectual, social, and human capital of everyone engaged in the program.

Link Four: School initiatives should be *collective/collaborative*, which means that learning should be conducted in groups instead of only individual settings. Furthermore, it should be focused on building strong networks and learning communities.

Link Five: School initiatives should be *interactive,* which means that participants should have opportunities to test, practice, and apply new skills.

Mapp's work was grounded on four core beliefs.

- **Core Belief One**: All parents have dreams for their children and want the best for them.

- **Core Belief Two**: All parents have the capacity to support their children's learning.

- **Core Belief Three:** Parents and school staff should be equal partners in children's learning.

- **Core Belief Four**: The responsibility for building partnerships between school and home rests primarily with school leadership.

Similar to other researchers and educators, Mapp found a convincingly positive relationship between family involvement and benefits for students, including improved academic achievement. In general, the research found that this relationship holds true across families of all economic, racial/ethnic, and educational backgrounds, and among students of all ages.

Mapp and colleagues found that home-school partnerships worked best when parents and school staff worked together to support learning. The results of such working partnerships were that students (a) had higher achievement, (b) enrolled in higher-level programs, (c) were promoted more and earned more credits, (d) adapted better to school and attended school regularly, (e) had better social skills and behavior, and (f) graduated and moved to higher education.

In general, Mapp found that the types of programs that best achieved positive student outcomes were programs that helped families support their children's learning at home. She also found that family involvement at home had a great effect on student achievement and that family involvement had a protective effect in that the more families can do to support their children's progress, the better their children do in school and the longer they stay in school.

Summary

This literature synthesis attempted to detail the work of a selected number of researchers and educational leaders who have engaged in the research and analysis of how parent

engagement in schools could best support and guide school leaders who believed in establishing strong alliances – building bridges – with parents and families within their communities. Although it is not specifically focused on parent/guardian-teacher conferences, the general findings obviously support the existence of such conferences and suggest some of the philosophies that should ground such conferences.

In general, the work of these researchers and educational thinkers suggested what school leaders might consider as they work to build effective alliances between parents and schools that improve students' academic and social learning. In general, there is consensus that student achievement is directly and positively impacted by parental involvement in their children's education. Parental involvement has also been repeatedly correlated to both higher social and emotional wellbeing and academic achievement: even small things such as parental involvement with homework and shared reading works to improve students' overall academic achievement. These findings typically hold true for families from all cultural backgrounds, education, and income levels.

As well, there is also consensus that children's learning is improved when parents encourage their children, talk more with them about school, actively help them plan for further education, and work to help them remain focused on learning. In fact, all families can, and regularly do, have positive effects on their children's learning. However, it was suggested that sometimes parents need help learning how to do so.

The research and educational thinking of these committed educators found that the foundational component of effective partnerships was trusting relationships, where partners had equal status but felt obligated to others within that relationship. The keys to building partnerships included (a) a focus on building trusting, sustaining, and respectful relationships between school staff, families, and community members; (b) a working belief that schools should engage families in a philosophy of partnership; (c) a belief that the responsibility for children's education was shared, collaborative work; (d) a belief that parent-involvement programs should proactively invite families and community to involvement in ways that helped them feel welcomed and that addressed specific parental and community needs; and, (e) parent-involvement programs should honor, respect, validate, and affirm the abilities of both the family and schools to impact children's learning.

To sum up recommendations from the literature in a word, that word might be

"*attitude*." The researchers and educational thinkers who engaged in the successful building of parental involvement focused on changing the ways schools thought of parents and that parents thought of schools.

A helpful summary of the work of those who engaged in parental involvement can be found in the work of the *National Association for the Education of Young Children, Engaging Diverse Families Project, (N.D.) who listed six principles for successful parental engagement. These included:*

Principle 1: **Where parental engagement is successful, programs invite families to participate in decision making and goal setting for their children.**

Principle 2: **Where parental engagement is successful, teachers and programs engage families in two-way communication.**

Principle 3: **Where parental engagement is successful, programs and teachers engage families in ways that are truly reciprocal.**

Principle 4: **Where parental engagement is successful, programs provide learning activities for the home and in the community.**

Principle 5: **Where parental engagement is successful, programs invite families to participate in program-level decisions and wider advocacy efforts.**

Principle 6: **Where parental engagement is successful, programs implement a comprehensive program-level system that is accessible and consistent throughout the particular learning context.**

In general, after engaging in a synthesis of the historical work in the area of parental engagement, there is overwhelming evidence that school leadership should work to encourage and build working alliances and partnerships between parents and their schools.

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