

Financial Stress and Parent Involvement in Education

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Abstract

Parent involvement in a child's education is a powerful way of helping a child succeed in school and later on in life (Epstien, 2010). The purpose of this study was to investigate how income affects parent involvement in a child's education. Using a mixed-method approach, a survey was sent to parents of Head Start children containing both multiple choice quantitative questions and free response qualitative questions. There were 25 respondents. The results suggest that overall, parents do not feel that financial stress impedes on their ability to be involved in their child's education. Some common themes that arose throughout the study was that parents partake in activities aimed at learning and development, physical activities, and communicating with their children. Parents often engage in physical and independent activities to reduce stress. Research should be done on the effectiveness of different types of parental involvement.

Keywords: Parent Involvement, Survey research, Head Start, Income

Introduction

In recent years, especially after the COVID-19 Pandemic, test scores in math and reading have dropped significantly for students. These outcomes have been even more pronounced for students in lower income households. These results demonstrate a need for both parents and schools to work to find a way to improve these scores (Mervosh and Wu, 2022). Parent involvement in a child's education has been regarded as a powerful way helping a child succeed both in school and later on in life (Epstien, 2010). Despite this, there are barriers that prevent all parents from being able to be involved. Epstein states that many teachers and schools also do not know where to begin to get parents more involved. It is important to understand why parents are not involved in the first place to move forward with trying to encourage more involvement. Some parents may be involved at home, but economic barriers prevent them from being involved at-school (Bower and Griffin, 2011). Others may perceive negative attitudes from teachers surrounding their socioeconomic status (Velsor and Orozco, 2007). Some schools in lower income areas may have less resources, so parents feel that they are not getting as much out of parent involvement as families in more affluent areas (Gordon and Cui, 2014).

There have been many studies on the effect income has on parent involvement in school. Many studies highlight a connection between low socioeconomic status and less parent involvement. While there are mixed explanations as to why this is, most agree that there is a lack of at-school parent involvement for lower income families. However, research has also found that parents want to be involved in their child's education (Matthews et al., 2017) and that they are involved at home (Bower and Griffin, 2011). There is a gap in the research on the different styles of involvement that are engaged in by families. The purpose of this study is to measure how income could be a potential factor harming parental involvement in school by examining if parents feel that financial stress affects their ability to be involved in their child's education.

Literature Review

Parent involvement in schools has been associated with an improvement in a student's academic performance. Epstein (2010) states that it is vital for teachers to see their students as not only students, but as children that they have a responsibility to help develop. When parents, teachers, and students view one another as partners in education, a community forms around students' wellbeing and academic performance. Epstein provides six examples of parent involvement, including: parenting, communication, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaboration with community. While parent involvement is seen as beneficial, it is not achieved by all families. One potential factor that could negatively affect parent involvement is income. One argument proposed is that poverty creates barriers that prevent parents from getting involved at-school. Another is that low income parents are not involved due to negative attitudes displayed by teachers. A third is that schools in lower income areas have less resources, so parents get less out of parent involvement than families in higher income areas. Using literature on the topic, the potential effects of income will be examined.

Parents tend to be involved in their child's education, but poverty can create barriers to how it presents. In an elementary school studied by Bower and Griffin (2011), the model proposed by Epstein (2010) was unrealistic and did not accurately measure parent involvement. Parents may be unable to participate in the methods commonly used by schools to encourage engagement, however, they still are involved at home. The study by Bower and Griffin was a case study that focused on only one elementary school, therefore, the results cannot be generalized to other schools with similar demographics of being urban, high-minority, and high-poverty. Also, due to the weak parent involvement, formal interviews were not conducted, so parent voices are lacking. Vellymalay (2012) discovered through a survey that most parents, regardless of their socioeconomic background, showed a high degree of involvement in at home

strategies. However, their education level, employment status, and income affected their understanding and knowledge on values that need to be placed on their child's education.

Involvement can be negatively affected by the perceived attitudes of schools and teachers to low income families. Velsor and Orozco (2007), found that teacher attitudes can harm parent involvement. Teachers may make sweeping generalizations about low income families that can alienate these parents from the school environment. Matthews et al. (2017) found that most parents do wish to be involved in their child's education, but their socioeconomic status prevents them. They also found that school-parent communication differs between the poverty level of students and that low-income parents were generally not satisfied with teacher communication. A limitation of this study is that the data was collected through a survey, so a social desirability bias could be present. Epstein and Dauber (1991) found that most teachers have strong attitudes surrounding parent involvement, but that it was not reflected in classroom practices. This shows that both parents and teachers want parents to be involved in a child's education, but the communication and connection is lacking between the two.

Socioeconomic status affects parent involvement because these lower income families get less out of involvement than more privileged families. Gordon and Cui (2014) found that school-related parent involvement was less effective on adolescents' academic outcomes when they lived in areas of high-poverty when compared to their peers from more well-off communities. A limitation of this study is that the data collected come from self-reports done by adolescents, creating a potential bias in the reporting where the adolescents may wish to make their family appear better. McNeal (1999) argued that many of those of a lower socioeconomic status go to schools with less resources, creating negative experiences when it comes to involvement. They also experienced less academic achievement gain from the involvement they

did engage in. This would also explain why those living in areas with greater poverty experienced less gain from parent involvement, as observed by Gordon and Cui. A limitation of McNeals study is that it only focuses on a child's academic achievement in science, other forms of education.

While parent involvement is considered to be vital in a child's academic achievement, barriers exist that prevent all families from being able to be involved in their child's education. One potential factor to this is income. According to literature, some parents may experience challenges that prevent them from being involved at-school, but they still want to be involved and may do so at home. Some parents may also feel alienated from the school environment due to teacher's attitudes about their socioeconomic status. Another explanation is that due to lack of resources at lower income schools, parents and students get less out of parent involvement than families in higher income areas. Further research should be done on how the school environment can be more welcoming and accessible to lower income families. Further research should also be done on the effectiveness of at-home involvement versus at-school involvement.

Data and Methods

Instrument

An online survey questionnaire was created by a research collaborative at Longwood University. The survey created in Qualtrics included an informed consent question and open and close-ended items. There are twenty three close ended items that cover parents needs including resources, comfort, time, finances, mental health needs, and demographics. The questionnaire included three open-ended items. The questionnaire had an estimated completion time of ten minutes.

Sample

The convenience sample for this project is parents and guardians of Head Start children who are between the ages of three and five who reside in seven counties in Central Virginia. There are approximately 119 families in this sample population. Head Start headquarters e-mailed the online survey to county Head Start teachers. Teachers then e-mailed the survey to all families in their classroom. Surveys were e-mailed home at least three times during data collection, this resulted in 26 surveys being submitted. The response rate was approximately 25%. No incentive was offered for completing the survey.

Quantitative Analysis

Quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics. The dependent variable of interest was parent involvement using the survey question “How involved do you feel in your child’s education?”. It was measured on a scale from zero to ten with zero being not at all and ten being extremely involved. The independent variable of interest was income, using the survey question “Does financial stress prevent you from being involved in your child’s education?”. It was measured with the attributes “yes, often”, “yes, sometimes”, or “no”.

Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative analysis was based on the open-ended items. Thematic coding was used to analyze parent responses.

Findings

Quantitative Findings

The dependent variable is parent involvement. This was asked on a scale from 0 (Not at all) to 10 (Extremely involved). The independent variable is income. Respondents answered “yes, often”, “yes, sometimes” or “no”.

The mean for parent involvement was 8.81. This shows that the average parent involvement was high. There was a standard deviation of 2.06. The standard deviation shows that the answers on this variable varied greatly.

Table 1

Percent of parents who feel financial stress impacts ability to be involved in child's education

Financial Stress	Count	Percent
Yes, often	2	9.52
Yes, sometimes	6	28.57
No	13	61.90

Note. N=25

Table 1 shows that most respondents do not feel that their income impacts their ability to be involved in their child's education (61.9%). Only two respondents felt that financial stress impacted their ability to be involved in their child's education.

Table 2

Mean financial stress by level of parent involvement

Financial Stress	Means
Yes, often	7.50
Yes, sometimes	9.50
No	8.75

Note. N=25

Table 2 shows the comparison between respondents' level of parent involvement and how the respondents feel financial stress affects their ability to be involved. Respondents who felt they sometimes were impacted by financial stress had the highest mean of parent involvement (9.5). Respondents who felt that they were often impacted by financial stress had the lowest mean of parent involvement, however it was still fairly high at 7.5. Respondents who felt they were not impacted by financial stress had a mean parent involvement of 8.75.

Qualitative Findings

In the survey, three open ended questions were asked that concerned different aspects of parent involvement. This includes topics such as stress, activities participated in with children and general parent needs. Some common themes throughout the respondents' answers include: Physical activities, learning activities, communication, and independent activities.

Physical activities were a common thread throughout the responses and was used as a method of dealing with stress and something to do with children. Respondent 1 answered “Outdoor activities”, respondent 3 answered “Playing outdoors”, and respondent 17 answered “playing outside”. Specific activities were also mentioned. Respondent 11 answered “Horseback riding”, respondent 23 answered “Playing at the park”, and respondent 2 answered “Take a walk”.

Learning activities was another common theme when respondents were discussing activities they engage in with their children. Respondent two answered “Help them learn and go over what they learn everyday”, respondent 10 answered “building skills”, respondent 12 answered “Their school work and seeing how much they learn from being here”, respondent 15 answered “teaching and learning”, respondent 17 answered “learning numbers and letters”, and respondent 18 answered “learning new things”.

Communication was another theme often brought up by respondents. Respondent 1 answered “Talk with family and friends”, respondent 9 answered “Communication”, respondent 6 answered “Having conversations”, and respondent 25 answered “Our conversations”.

Communication was used as a way to both relieve stress and engage with their children.

The final common theme was independent activities and these activities were used by respondents as a method of relieving stress. Respondent 12 answered "Reading books",

respondent 22 answered “Alone time”, respondent 17 answered “Journaling”, respondent 18 answered “Take deep breaths and pray”, respondent 25 answered “Walk away when can and just breath”. These different activities are varied, but all involve partaking in something independently as a way to reduce stress.

Based on the answers of the respondents, when it comes to activities with their children, parents partake in activities aimed at learning and developing skills, they engage in physical activities, many of which included being outdoors, parents also communicated and had conversation with their children. In regards to methods of reducing stress, parents communicated with others, partook in physical activities such as walking, and engaged in independent activities.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to determine whether income and financial stress negatively affected a parents ability to be involved in their child’s education. A survey was sent home to parents of Head Start children regarding different aspects of parent involvement. The findings suggest that most parents do not feel that financial stress impedes on their ability to be involved in their child’s education. Many parents reported engaging in activities at home to be involved with their child. Some of the activities mentioned included learning and developmental ones such as asking them about what they learned and building skills. They also engaged in physical activities like playing outside. Parents also reported spending time talking and communicating with their child as a way of being involved.

The findings of this study seem to support Bower and Griffin’s (2011) idea that low income parents may show their involvement more through at home activities. While not all activities are educational in nature, parents are still engaging with their child and making an effort to spend time with them. Parents also reported high levels of involvement overall,

indicating that they feel these activities are meaningful. These findings matter because it shows that while there might be barriers that prevent lower income parents from being involved in some forms of parent involvement, parents still find ways to be involved with their child. Further research needs to be done on the different styles of involvement to determine if they are equally effective.

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