**Social Research and Program Evaluation Final Paper**

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**Abstract**

This paper addresses a study designed and conducted by the Social Research and Program Evaluation team at Longwood University with the participation and collaboration of elementary children and their families in and around the area. The study examines the impact of parental involvement with children through various educational and exploratory activities. The goal was to provide fun and educational projects to evaluate how interactive parents are with their kids during after-school hours because of the strong connection between high academic achievement and parent involvement. We created and sent home all-inclusive activities for Head-Start families to complete with their children. We then followed up with surveys containing open and close-ended questions to measure their effectiveness and free books to incentivize the parents to fill out the surveys. The obstacle of this research project was getting the surveys back. We found some indicators that support the theory that parental perception leads to student success, but this study's ramifications and predictive power are vague because of the limited surveys returned.

**Introduction**

 Education is a worthy investment because it is linked to increased political and civic engagement, financial security, good character, and crime reduction. Education is also connected with higher-self confident and happiness (Broward, 2020). In recent years, society has truly put an emphasis on the importance of getting a jump-start on educational programs and development at earlier ages than what has been previously practiced so that children can be more equipped and thrive in the ever-increasingly complex and challenging world. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (*What Do Children Learn in a High-Quality Preschool Program?*, n.d.) explains that in the toddler, preschool, and pre-kindergarten years, children learn best through a play-based developmental approach because their physical, social, cognitive, and emotional skills are all being supported and engaged at once. Preschoolers exposed to early reading learn to understand what reading is for and understand rhyming sounds quicker. Likewise, Children who practice scribbling shapes begin to correlate these shapes of letters and start writing sooner (*What Do Children Learn in a High-Quality Preschool Program?*, n.d.).

The benefits of parent involvement are clear and society wants children to be successful. In order to do this, we must engage the parents as well. Because of this initiative to start educating children at a younger age parents or guardians of have to spend more time doing interactive learning activities with their child/children. However, this can pose as a daunting task to parents or guardians that work one or more jobs, have one or more children, or operate a single or multigeneration household. Parents raised in a different culture or speaking a different language can be hesitant to participate in school-based activities.

Unfortunately, many schools are still trying to figure out what constitutes meaningful parental involvement and how to measure it. Schools have enforced federally mandated school improvement plans to help students, parents, and the community, but parents still struggle due to the reasons listed in the previous paragraph. This leaves schools and teachers feeling unsuccessful. Through our project, we wanted to see how parents in our community respond to specific parental engagement programs. To have successful, interested, and well-educated children, parents must engage in activities that show the value of education, allow for family bonding, and the encouragement of future family activities.

**Literature Review**

For decades, the different styles and depths of parental involvement in childhood education and the various outcomes have been a topic of interest in the social research world. Theories and models have been challenged, implemented, and analyzed among families, teachers, and researchers for quite some time. This literature review will discuss parental involvement, then dive into the knowledge and awareness of the benefits of parental involvement.

**Parental Involvement**

Parental involvement is noted to have a positive correlation with students’ academic success (Epstein, 1991). There are a plethora of parental involvement examples, but the parent determines the type and effort of involvement. Parents base their participation on a variety of factors such as comfort level, knowledge, self-confidence, motivation, and language skills (LaRocque, Kleiman & Darling, 2011). Research has shown, parental involvement, in connection to education and academics, is key to stimulating aspirations, high achievements, and success amongst youth. Children in their elementary years are at a moldable age; it has been discovered that it is integral to demonstrate excellent goal-oriented standards and work ethic during this influential time. Timing-wise, it is also crucial for children to develop essential skills, like communication and reading. As increased parental involvement in schools and their children's education is linked to higher educational attainment, it is critical to determine how to promote parental involvement (LaRocque, Kleiman & Darling, 2011).

**Theory**

In the 1990s, Dr. Joyce Epstein of Johns Hopkins University developed one of the most notable models for appropriate parental involvement with education to date. Epstein's framework defines six different parenting styles, which enables teachers to put effort into becoming a joint entity with parents for their children's education. As seen in the recent article titled "Perspectives of family-school relationships in Qatar-based on Epstein's model of the six types of parent involvement", this piece identities and describes the following styles:parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with the community (Ihmeideh, AlFlasi, Al-Maadadi, Coughlin & Al-Thani, 2020). Epstein’s activity-based model is not the only model relative to parental involvement. In comparison, a model developed by Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler in 1995 and 1997 summarizes parental involvement into three categories, rather than six. This tri-fold model is based on the skills the parents possess and not the activities available to them. Several studies have indicated that parents are reluctant to help their children with homework or reading activities as the parents do not feel informed or qualified enough for this role (Eccles & Harold, 2000). Often, parents feel they lack the knowledge, are too incompetent, or didn't receive high enough education to help their children with their studies, thus dissatisfying the schools and the community (Eccles & Harold, 2000). Teachers set educational goals for their students and expect that the parents will encourage and work with their kids at home on these goals to some degree. The parents' ability to demonstrate efficiency and academic support enables the teachers to continue to hold the student to higher standards and increase goals and challenges. Many researchers have suggested the significance of parents’ education, income, marital status, and related indicators of family status dramatically affect parents’ involvement decisions (Lareau, 1989). Early social competency is a direct result of parental participation, and thus, leads children to a higher chance of academic success in the long run (Hill & Craft, 2003). Additionally, parental participation boosts social capital and resource-leveraging networks (Lee & Bowen, 2006). Eccles and Harold’s 1994 model influenced the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model by their way of examining the more comprehensive range of parent, child, school, and community variables that influence parental participation and its results (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler 2000).

**Critiques:**

The second model noted does not include the full range of studies that may include findings of “no parental influence” (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler 2000). Hoover-Dempsey and Sandley admit to discounting typically variables, such as parents’ socioeconomic status, that are included frequently in discussions of parental involvement. This methodology was done to illustrate that other, more ambiguous variables would best explain why parents choose to become involved in their children’s education, what forms their involvement will take, and why their involvement influences their children’s educational outcomes. This compared model attempts to illustrate why and how parents choose to become involved in their child’s education rather than Epstein’s model on how parental involvement makes a difference.

**Data and Methodology**

**Instrument**

The 40 members of the Social Research and Program Evaluation team created a survey questionnaire at Longwood University. The survey contained both open-ended and close-ended questions. Items on the survey were designed to evaluate SMART objectives of each of five activities that were completed the previous week by Head-Start families. Beyond the objectives of the activities, participants were asked about their experiences with Head-Start, take-home activities, and demographic information about their households.

**Sample**

The non-probability sample for this study was based on the 51 children (ages three to five) who attend Head-Start in two rural counties in Virginia. After activities were sent home with children for five days, the questionnaire was sent home with all 51 students. Attached to the questionnaire was a children’s book, to incentivize families to return the survey. Guardians of the children were asked to complete the survey and return it to the Head-Start teacher the following school day. Within the following days, 11 questionnaires were returned. Teachers then sent a reminder home with children to return any outstanding questionnaires. This resulted in zero more questionnaires being returned. Overall, there was a 22% response rate.

**Quantitative Analysis**

Quantitative analysis of the returned surveys is based on close-ended questions. For this study, the dependent variable is the encouragement of parent-child participation in future educational activities. The item from the questionnaire that was used to operationalize this was “On a scale of 0-10, would you be willing to do this activity again with your child? (Scale 0-10; 0 = not at all, 10 = a great amount)”. The answer choices for this item were on a scale of zero to ten, with ten being most likely to do this activity again. The independent variable for this study is the child’s/children's successfulness with the completion of goals in the project provided. The item from the questionnaire that was used to operationalize this was “Was your child successful in completing at painting the leaf?”. The answer choices for this question were “yes, on their own”, “yes, with help”, or “no”. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze these variables.

**Qualitative Analysis**

 Qualitative analysis of the returned surveys is based on open-ended questions. The open-ended questions on the survey were “What did your family enjoy most about these activities? (Please write in your response. Use the back sheet of paper if you run out of room)”, “What recommendations would you suggest to make these activities better?”, and “What are your favorite ways to spend time with your child?”. To answer the research question, how can the at-home activities encourage parent involvement, inductive open coding was used to determine reoccurring themes in the participant’s responses.

**Quantitative Findings**

For the quantitative findings, the following variables were examined using descriptive statistics. The independent variable is the child’s success with painting a leaf. Of the eleven responses, it reported five children to have been successful independently, and four were successful with parental aid. No respondents said “no,” which was the child being unsuccessful in painting the leaf. Table 1 displays the descriptive statistic for this variable.

Table 1.

*Child’s Success at Painting a Leaf*



 The dependent variable for this study was the encouragement of parent-child participation in future educational activities. Of the eleven responses, the mean was 9.67, the median and mode were 10, and the standard deviation 0.71. The descriptive statistic for this variable is in Table 2.

Table 2.

*Parent Involvement*

|  |  |  |  |  | Mean | Median | Mode | SD |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Chance of Parent Participationin Future Activity |  | 9.67 | 10 | 10 | 0.71 |

A bivariate model was run using the variables of parental involvement and the level of success with the activity. When looking at the dependent variable, the chance of parent-child participation in future educational activities, and the independent variable, the child’s level of success painting a leaf, together it is found that more children required help with painting the leaf, but that all of the children were successful.

Table 3.

*Mean Parent involvement of Future Activity with Success of Activity*

| Child's Successat Painting a Leaf | Mean |
| --- | --- |
| Yes, on their own |  | 9.6 |
| Yes, with help |  | 9.75 |

 Previous studies have found that parental involvement, in connection to education and academics, is key to stimulating aspirations, high achievements, and success amongst youth (LaRocque, Kleiman & Darling, (2011). Children in their elementary years are at a moldable age; there have been discoveries that show that is integral to demonstrate excellent goal-oriented standards and work ethic during this influential time. As increased parental involvement in schools and their children's education is linked to higher educational attainment, it is critical to determine how to promote parental involvement (LaRocque, Kleiman & Darling, (2011). These findings relate to what we have discovered from our project and survey because the level of success with painting a leaf increases with the level of participation from the parent. However, the difference in the responses “yes, on their own” and “yes, with help” in relation to success and parental involvement is very low.

**Qualitative Findings**

Qualitative analysis of the returned surveys is based on open-ended questions. The open-ended questions on the survey were “What did your family enjoy most about these activities? (Please write in your response. Use the back sheet of paper if you run out of room)”, “What recommendations would you suggest to make these activities better?”, and “What are your favorite ways to spend time with your child?”. To answer the research question, how can the at-home activities encourage parent involvement, inductive open coding was used to determine reoccurring themes in the participant’s responses.

Out of the 51 surveys that were sent out, we coded the 11 surveys that were returned to us. We coded the short answer responses that were provided at the end of each survey for common themes. Through coding, we identified three themes: satisfaction, togetherness/inclusivity, and play. These words are used and/or implied several times throughout the surveys. The reoccurrence of these themes tells us that parent involvement with educational activities is based on family satisfaction, family togetherness/inclusivity, and playfulness.

The theme “satisfaction” appears in 4 out of the 11 survey answers. For example, Respondent 1 stated, “We did each activity at least twice. I loved the organization, detailed instructions, and the materials [were] included. I would pay for activities like this.” This statement shows that Respondent 1 experienced satisfaction with the activities. Similarly, Respondent 3 answered, “Loved [my son] being so happy doing the activities.” For the second short answer question, we asked, “What recommendations would you suggest to make these activities better?” Respondent 4 answered, “Everything was great.” Likewise, many other respondents responded to the question with “none” or wrote nothing at all, implying they did not have any critiques and were fully satisfied with their experience. We consider a lack of written response to this question as a response.

The theme of "togetherness" or "inclusivity" also appeared 6 times within the answers to the surveys. For example, Respondent 1 explained, "These activities made it so easy and stress-free to do something together!" Respondent 1 emphasizes the importance of togetherness in their household. Respondent 2 explained that "spending time together" was what the family enjoyed most about doing these activities. Unsurprisingly, Respondent 3 also stated that "The family time we spent together" was the most enjoyable part of these activities. Respondent 9 explained that “the rest of the family was interested in participating as well.” This kind of interest could be unusual in their household and the respondent was impressed with the notable interest from everyone in the household. Respondent 6 answered differently, saying that they wished that the exercises "involved the whole family more."

Finally, the theme of “play” appears in five out of the 11 surveys. Respondents 3 and 6 both mention that one of their favorite ways to spend time with their child is playing. Likewise, Respondent 9 wrote that “reading, playing, exploring, and museums” are their favorite way to spend time and interact with their child and involve their education. The action of ”playing” engages in an activity for enjoyment. I interpret that these Family-Fun Activities that we provided were used to incorporate play and education together to inspire future encouragement.

**Conclusion**

​​This project did experience some limitations and unexpected issues. The sample size was the primary source of limitation because of the increased margin of error and decreased generability. Having such a small sample size means that our data is not as representative as possible, leaving information to be uncovered. Another limitation faced was that Head-Start closed for the entire 2020-2021 school year because of Covid-19. Covid-19 rules and regulations have made social interactions, hands-on activities, and in-person learning difficult. Parents claimed that because of Covid-19 and Head-Start being closed, they are not in the groove yet with meeting teachers, scheduling meetings, or participating in school. The lack of parent involvement left Head-Start feeling unsatisfied and unmotivated to continue to reach out to these parents. There is no guidebook on how to raise children or engage in parental involvement during a pandemic. Everyone felt a bit clueless or helpless.

Moreover, some other minor limitations included was that we could no longer send home five-dollar gift cards with the children at Head-Start as done in previous years. Instead of gift cards, we sent home books to the students to incentivize parents to fill out the surveys. This could have dissatisfied the parents. We do not know if all the surveys we got back are entirely truthful. Some parents may not have done any of the activities sent home with their child but might be too embarrassed to admit it. Another possibility is that parents did not enjoy the activities but did not express that to spare bad feelings through the survey.

In conclusion, parents, guardians, and other parental figures are the most important and influential partners to their child's education and academic success. It is commonly known that early learning achievements lead to brighter futures. Children idolize their parents, and during these elementary ages, kids want to do anything to please their parents, so we should take advantage of this. Having encouraging and involved authority figures is hugely telling to a child's success in school. Parents are more likely to encourage the growth and development of their children if they feel they have the authority, time, and resources to help.

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