

Is Parent Involvement In School Really Useful? (##)

February 6, 2013

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By Alfie Kohn

When people who write about agriculture or dentistry tackle the important issues in their respective fields, do they try to shake things up? Are they feisty and willing to peer beneath the surface of whatever topic they're exploring? I have no idea. But I do know that those qualities are awfully hard to find in what's written about education.

Consider the question of parent involvement in schooling. Almost everything published on this subject leaves the ideological foundations of the discussion unexamined. Either we're treated to a predictable announcement that Involvement Is Good ("Parents should do more!") or else we're warned that some folks have a tendency to get, well, you know, a little too involved. ("Jeremy, I'm wondering whether you might have had some help with your science fair project? I ask only because it's unusual for a sixth grader to build a working nuclear reactor"). Put these two themes together and the message seems to be that the interest parents take in their children's education is either inadequate or excessive.

Does that mean there's a sweet spot in the middle that consists of just enough involvement? Or are we looking at an example of what a statistician might call a bimodal distribution when involvement is

plotted against socioeconomic status: Poor parents don't do enough; affluent parents do too much?

Let's begin by noticing that the whole question is framed by the extent to which educators think parents ought to be involved. The parent's point of view is typically absent from such discussions. And, of course, no thought is given to the student's perspective – what role kids might want their parents to play (or to avoid playing). But then that's true of so many conversations about education that we scarcely notice its absence.

There's something both short-sighted and arrogant about exhorting low-income parents to show up at school events or make sure the homework gets done. The presumption seems to be that these parents lack interest or commitment – as opposed to spare time, institutional savvy, comfort level, or fluency in English. Annette Lareau and other sociologists have described how class differences play out in terms of parental advocacy – including why poorer and less-educated parents may be less effective when they do become involved.[1]

But even observers who are sensitive to issues of class don't always take a step back to ask what kind of involvement we're talking about, and to what ends. As is so often the case, our questions tend to be more quantitative than qualitative, with the result that we focus only on how much parents are involved.

Imagine someone who monitors his or her child's schooling very closely, for example, and doesn't hesitate to advocate for – or against – certain policy changes and resource allocation decisions. Is that a good thing? Rather than just asking whether the level or style of advocacy is effective, we'd also want to know whether this parent is asking for changes that will benefit all children or mostly just his or her own child (possibly at the expense of others). Our intensely individualistic, free-market-oriented culture – witness the growing push for charter schools, vouchers, and privatization – encourages us to see education not as a public good but as just another commodity one shops for, and to evaluate

its effectiveness in terms of how much my kid gets out of it. Thus, those of us who value the cause of equity have reason to be disturbed by many sorts of parent involvement – not just because some are more involved, or better at being involved, than others but because of what that involvement is intended to achieve and for whom.[2]

Proponents of progressive education, too, have reason to be disturbed by the focus of much involvement, even in individual classrooms. What are the pushiest parents pushing for? If they're judging schools by test scores and children by grades, if they're demanding more traditional forms of math and reading instruction, tighter regulation of students, and more homework, then the content of their agenda will strike us as more relevant than the degree of their involvement. Some of us may be inclined to ask, "How can we invite these parents to reconsider whether their preferences are really consistent with their long-term objectives for their children?" And: "What would it take to create a powerful parent constituency pushing in the other direction?"

Likewise, while everyone wants parents to be engaged with what their children are doing in school, what matters more is the nature of that engagement. There's a big difference between a parent who's focused on what the child is doing – that is, on the learning itself – and a parent who's focused on how well the child is doing. To ask "So, honey, what's your theory about why the Civil War started?" or "If you had written that story, would you have left the character wondering what happened, the way the author did?" represents a kind of engagement that promotes critical thinking and enthusiasm about learning. To ask "Why only a B+ [or a 3 on the rubric]?" is a kind of engagement that undermines both of these things.[3]

Of course, parents wouldn't be asking the latter questions if the school weren't reducing students to letters and numbers in the first place; they're taking their cue from educators who blur the differences between a focus on learning and a focus on performance, or between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Nevertheless, this issue seems to have escaped the notice of just about everyone who

writes on the topic of parent involvement.

Finally, there's the matter of whether established educational practices are, on the one hand, accepted uncritically, so that the only question is whether kids are compliant and successful by established criteria, or whether, on the other hand, those practices are examined to see if they make sense. Not surprisingly, it's the rare educator who encourages the latter. The result is that parents are urged to become more involved (*ma non troppo!*) in a way that may be more about perpetuating the status quo than about doing what's in children's best interest.

A "partnership" between school and family sounds lovely unless that partnership is perceived by the child as an alliance against him. If the purpose is to coerce him into obeying rules that may not be reasonable, or to "live up to his potential" by working harder at assignments of dubious value, then we'd want parents to ask penetrating questions about the school's practices. Parents should aim higher than helping teachers to make children toe the line.

Homework offers a vivid example. Even on its own terms, parental involvement may not be beneficial. A recent study of middle schoolers found that "the more teachers intended to establish a close link with parents and to involve them in the homework process, the less positive the student outcomes were." [4] And a review of fifty studies found that, while parental involvement in general was "associated with achievement," the one striking exception was parental help with homework, where there was no positive effect. [5]

But the predominant outcome measures in such studies are test scores, which means that even if "positive effects" did turn up, they wouldn't impress those of us who doubt the validity and value of standardized test results. Nor would they tell us about the possible negative effects that certain kinds of involvement might have on students' creativity, psychological health, excitement about learning, their relationship with their parents, and so on.

The practice of forcing children to begin working what amounts to a

second shift after they get home from a full day of school has absolutely no proven benefits before high school, and there are increasing reasons to doubt its value even in high school.[6] What kids need, therefore, are parents willing to question the conventional wisdom and to organize others to challenge school practices when that seems necessary. What kids don't need is the kind of parental involvement that consists of pestering them to make sure they do their homework – whether or not it's worth doing.

Exhortations for more “parental involvement” remind me of calls to be “a good citizen”: In the abstract, everyone is for it. But inspected closely, what's most often meant by the term turns out to be considerably more complicated and even worthy of skepticism.

NOTES

1. For example, see Lareau's book *Home Advantage: Social Class and Parental Intervention in Elementary Education* (Philadelphia: Falmer, 1989).
2. Alfie Kohn, “Only for My Kid: How Privileged Parents Undermine School Reform,” *Phi Delta Kappan*, April 1998. Available at [Only for My Kid: How Privileged Parents Undermine School Reform](#).
3. I review research relevant to this distinction in my book *The Schools Our Children Deserve* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), chapter 2.
4. Ulrich Trautwein et al., “Between-Teacher Differences in Homework Assignments and the Development of Students' Homework Effort, Homework Emotions, and Achievement,” *Journal of Educational Psychology* 101 (2009), p. 185.
5. Nancy E. Hill and Diana F. Tyson, “Parental Involvement in Middle School: A Meta-Analytic Assessment of the Strategies That Promote Achievement,” *Developmental Psychology* 45 (2009): 740-63.
6. Alfie Kohn, *The Homework Myth* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2006); and a look at a new high school study.

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