

Elementary Parents' Attitudes and Beliefs

About Their Role in Children's

Academic Learning

by

Nicole R. Steinmetz

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Dr. Barb Flom

The Graduate School

University of Wisconsin-Stout

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**The Graduate School
University of Wisconsin-Stout
Menomonie, WI**

Author: Steinmetz, Nicole R.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to research elementary school parents to gain a better understanding of their beliefs and attitudes about their children's academic learning. The research was conducted in a small community in the Midwest. The project took place in the fall of 2005, at the elementary school, in a district that educates approximately 700 students Pre-K – 12. One hundred and fifty families had children attending the elementary school. All parents who attended parent-teacher conferences, both mothers and fathers, were asked to complete the survey. The attendance rate at parent-teacher conferences was eighty-five percent. Data were collected through a survey created by the researcher, which included five research questions.

With more research on the reasons behind the barriers to parents' involvement, parents and teachers can work together to analyze areas for improvement. Therefore, it

was important to know parents' attitudes and beliefs about their role in their children's academic achievement. The overall goal was to provide a framework for the school to build on their parent involvement program, both at home and at school, which in turn would help increase student achievement.

Results of the study indicated that there were no external barriers that prevented parents from participating in their children's education. The main limiting factors related to parents' work schedules and hectic lifestyles. Overall, it was found that most parents strongly valued involvement in their child's learning. However, when females were compared to males, there were several items that indicated a significant difference between the two when analyzing their involvement at home and at school. Prior school experiences for parents had no bearing on their level of involvement in their child's education, and their level of involvement did not change based on the number of children in the home.

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Chapter I: Introduction

The evidence is consistent, positive, and convincing: families have a major influence on their children's achievement in school and throughout life (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). When parents are involved, no matter what their background or income, students do better on tests, achieve higher grades, attend school regularly, show positive behavior and eventually attend postsecondary education following graduation. According to the San Diego County Office of Education (2004a),

the most accurate predictor of a student's achievement is when a student's family is able to: 1) create a home environment that encourages learning, 2) express high (but not unrealistic) expectations for their children's achievement and future careers, and 3) become involved in their children's education at school and in the community.
(para.1)

The suggestions may seem clear and simple, but we have to ask ourselves if they truly are.

If parent involvement is so valuable, why then do we continue to see so many children struggling academically? This seems to be an era of increasing concern about the quality of education. States are taking a greater role in monitoring and maintaining academic standards (Cotton & Wikelund, 1999). With limited resources and funds, local school districts are being pressured more and more to provide qualified teachers and high-quality services. Many schools in Wisconsin, particularly those receiving Title 1 funding, are now required to have a policy in place that describes how the district will involve parents. The recently reauthorized Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), also known as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, is enforcing these requirements. Due to the rapid advancement of the high standards, accountability, and testing movements in

schools throughout the nation, there will be a need to engage families and communities as partners (Machen, Wilson, & Notar, 2005). Knowing what we now know, the key seems to be the development of effective parent involvement programs.

Building successful parenting programs sounds wonderful, but there is evidence that shows schools may not generally support and reward parent involvement, and that only a limited number of parents are involved in their children's education (San Diego County Office of Education, 2004a). While most teachers are likely to agree about the value of involving parents in their children's education, many may not know how to go about strengthening productive partnerships (Smar, 2002). Joyce Epstein, a well known researcher on this topic, would agree with Smar. According to Epstein (as cited in Lindsay, 2002), most teachers and administrators are unprepared to work positively and productively with their students' families. The reasoning behind her statement is based on the lack of formal coursework in this area.

The concept of parent involvement in education may not be new to education researchers or teachers, but are parents familiar with the latest research? Even if parental instincts tell them they should be involved with their child's school activities, they may easily be unaware that the research supports their beliefs. The research clearly supports a correlation between students' academic achievement and parent involvement, but now researchers must investigate further to help schools identify practices and policies that encourage a positive relationship with parents.

According to Deslandes and Bertrand (2005), parents become involved if they believe that their actions will improve learning and academic performance. Other studies (Drummond & Stipek, 2004; Sheldon, 2002) have shown that parents are more involved if

they perceive that teacher and student both want and expect their involvement. For example, when young children ask for help with their homework, they are inviting their parents to become immediately involved. If the child chooses to work alone, parents might respond by reducing the assistance they provide. Unfortunately, it may be the students who are already having academic difficulties who do not seek their parents' help. As Deslandes and Bertrand (2005) indicated, high-achieving students tend to want more parental assistance than low-achieving students.

The research also shows that the earlier parents become involved in their child's educational process, the more powerful the effects will be. Educators frequently point out the critical role of the home and family environment in determining children's school success, and it appears that the earlier this influence is "harnessed," the greater the likelihood of higher student achievement (Cotton & Wikelund, 1999).

With more research on the reasons behind the lack of involvement, parents and teachers can work together to analyze areas for improvement. Therefore, it is important to know parents' attitudes and beliefs about their role in their children's academic achievement. The overall goal is to provide an environment, both at home and at school, that is conducive to learning. Children need a chance to be successful in school and in life. Thanks to Hillary Clinton, the African proverb, "It takes a village to raise a child," has become a focal point for the debate over the role of the function of the government and communities in supporting families and children (Liberty Organization, n.d.). The success of our children is in our hands. Together we can achieve; together we can make a difference in the lives of children.

Statement of the Problem

The idea that parents can enhance their children's education has become so popular in the United States that it has been referred to as the "institutional standard" (Sheldon, 2002). Schools, such as the one in this particular study, spend time, energy, and resources to encourage parents to be more active in the education of their children. Despite their efforts, educators continue to struggle to understand why some parents become involved and others do not.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine the reasons behind the current lack of parent involvement in a small rural town in west-central Wisconsin. Data were collected from elementary school parents through a survey, and a drop box was available as parents enter the school building during parent-teacher conferences in the fall semester of 2005.

Research Questions

There are several questions this study attempted to answer. They included:

1. What are the three most common reasons parents of elementary school children do not get involved in their child's education?
2. Do parents tend to be more involved in their child's earlier years (Preschool - second grade) of elementary school than later years (third - fifth grade)?
3. Are mothers more involved in their child's education than fathers?
4. Do parents' past school experiences influence their level of involvement in their child's education?
5. Are parents with fewer children (one - two) more involved with their child's education than parents with three or more children?

Definition of Terms

Three terms need to be defined for clarity of understanding in this study. These are:

Elementary school parents. In this particular case, elementary school parents refer to parents of children in grades preschool – fifth.

Family/parent(s). Throughout this report, the words “family” or “families” may be used in place of “parent” or “parents.” It is assumed that all family members (i.e. siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles, friends, and neighbors) often contribute in significant ways to children’s education and development (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

Parent involvement. The term parent involvement is broadly used in this report. Cotton and Wiklund’s (1999) definition will be used.

Parent involvement includes several different forms of participation in education and with schools. Parents can support their child’s schooling by attending school functions and responding to school obligations (i.e. parent-teacher conferences & parent educational trainings). They can become more involved in helping their child improve schoolwork, model desired behavior (reading for pleasure), monitor homework, and actively tutor their children at home. At school, parents can serve as advocates for the school, volunteer to help with school activities, and take an active role in decision-making. (p.1)

Assumptions

The researcher assumed the following: It was assumed that parents who completed the survey understood all questions being asked. The researcher also assumed that the subjects answered the questions openly and honestly. It was further assumed that the

questions were answered the way parents wanted to answer, not how they thought the researcher wanted them to respond.

Limitations

There are a few limitations recognized by the researcher. One limitation was that attitudes and perceptions of parents in only one school are represented. Any conclusions would not be generalizable to other schools with similar geographic, socioeconomic and academic make-ups. Another limitation of this study was the sample representation. Parents who are not normally involved may not have been present at parent-teacher conferences when data were collected. However, attendance at conferences is typically between eighty-five to ninety percent at this school. A general bias should also be considered, since the researcher analyzed the data, and is employed by the district surveyed.

Chapter II: Literature Review

This chapter will discuss three major areas relating to parent involvement in education. First, research relating to the positive relations between academic and parental involvement will be shared. Second, a brief history of the changing family and how parent involvement has evolved over the years will be discussed. The chapter will then conclude with the types of parent involvement, along with factors preventing it, and strategies to improve it.

Academic Achievement and Parent Involvement

In past decades, a wealth of studies showed that parent involvement was essential in children's educational process and outcomes (Deslandes & Bertrand, 2005). The role of the parent in their children's education has been a topic of increasing interest. Epstein (as cited in Kyriakides, 2005) strongly suggested that students at all levels do better academic work and have more positive behaviors if they have parents who are aware, knowledgeable, encouraging, and involved.

Two of the most influential systems for young children mentioned in past research were home and school (McWayne, 2004). Both of these systems provided children with instruction and support in order to meet their developmental needs. Therefore, there was the push for positive parent-teacher collaboration. Beneficial connections between home and school have been shown to enhance children's motivation to learn, as well as the development of key emergent skills that are necessary for academic success (McWayne, 2004).

Henderson and Mapp (2002) reviewed sixty-six studies regarding parent involvement and student achievement and found that, when parents were involved in their

children's education at home, they did better in school. Other researchers have found that when parents are involved at school, their children go farther in school (San Diego County Office of Education, 2004b). When parents came to school on a regular basis, it reinforced the view in the child's mind that school and home were connected – that school becomes an integral part of their life. The research overwhelmingly has demonstrated that parent involvement in children's learning is positively related to achievement (Cotton & Wikelund, 1999). Further, the research has shown that the more parents are involved, the more beneficial the achievement effects are. This seemed to be true for all types of parent involvement in children's learning and all ages of students.

Looking into the research more closely, there is evidence that the most effective parent involvement programs were those which engaged parents in working directly with their children on activities at home (Cotton & Wikelund, 1999). This meant that parents were to read with their children, help them with homework, and reiterate what was taught during the school day. Cotton and Wikelund (1999) stated that the more active forms of parent involvement produced greater achievement benefits than the more passive ones. Therefore, if parents were contacted on a regular basis, read and signed communications from school, and attended parent-teacher conferences, the effects on achievement were greater than if there was no involvement. Cotton and Wikelund (1999) also stated that when parents attended and actively supported school activities, assisted in the classroom or on field trips, there was considerably greater achievement.

The importance of parent involvement in children's schooling has been a persistent theme in research and in school reform efforts in the last decade (Trivette & Anderson, 1995). Professional research journals have been devoted to this topic, and newspaper and

magazine articles have spread the news for parents to become more involved. Trivette & Anderson (1995) stated that while research does support the positive effects of parent involvement on learning, research is limited in its scope. Therefore, there is no clear picture for parents and educators about what parent involvement looks like or what types of parent involvement are the most effective in promoting learning.

Parent Involvement Types

Throughout the research in the area of parental involvement, the name Joyce Epstein, sociologist, was present. Epstein developed and categorized six different types of parent involvement through which schools and families interacted: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with the community (Smar, 2002). She demonstrated the value of these crucial pieces to increase a comprehensive parent involvement program (Smar, 2002). The information behind the six types of involvement assisted the reader in understanding various levels (at school and at home) of parental involvement.

Parenting has been identified as one form of parent involvement (Smar, 2002; Sheldon & Epstein, 2005). In one investigation, parenting was referred to as helping families establish a home environment that supports learning (Smar, 2002). That included showing interest in children's progress at school, helping them with homework, and discussing the value of a good education and possible career options. Simple activities such as reading out loud, listening to a child read, discussing the school day over dinner, telling stories, and sharing problems were ways suggested to enrich the home environment (San Diego Office of Education, 2004a). It is important that all parents, whether they attended school functions (i.e. parent-teacher conferences, open houses, or parent trainings)

or not, understood what was happening at their child's school. The information shared needed to be accessible and comprehensible to all parents. The key role for parents was to reinforce what was being taught at school, which in return would help the child develop life-long skills for success.

Communication was the second type of parent involvement discussed (Smar 2002; Sheldon & Epstein, 2005). Communicating was considered a two-way exchange about school programs and children's progress (Sheldon & Epstein, 2005). The use of correspondences to inform parents clearly about student's progress, school events and teaching practices was just one way of communicating. Communication to some may have seemed like an easy and effective tool, but it appeared to be one of the most difficult tasks for teachers and parents to perfect. Time became an issue for many, as well as decisions behind what information would be shared. All too often blame was placed in either direction for lack of or ineffective communication. According to Smar (2002), communication with parents built a foundation to support student progress, to deal effectively with problems, and to avoid problems before they started. Common forms of communication included: face-to-face contact, phone conversations, newsletters, e-mails, and website updates.

Volunteering was another form of parent involvement identified by Smar (2002) and others (Sheldon & Epstein, 2005). Evidence suggested that parents who spent time at school participating in school-related activities had high achieving eighth graders (Trivette & Anderson, 1995). Parents could help out at school in a variety of ways (i.e. chaperone, fundraise, and tutor), which sometimes meant organizing, recruiting, and training on the part of the school. Additionally, the authors identified other possibilities in which parents

could volunteer from the comfort of their own homes (i.e. cut, sew, and sort). Parents also had access to resources such as supplies, transportation, equipment, or technology (Smar, 2002). Truthfully, the number of different ways parents could volunteer was endless. Sheldon (2002) stated that volunteering at school was important because it provided parent's firsthand information about the school environment, allowed them to interact with and observe teachers as they performed their jobs, and enabled them to observe their children interacting with other students.

The fourth type of parent involvement described by researchers related to learning at home. Sheldon & Epstein (2005) referred to learning at home as providing information and ideas to families about how to help their students with homework and other curriculum-related materials. For instance, a teacher could provide suggestions to parents of first graders about different reading strategies to use when reading together at home. This may have included picture clues or covering up part of the word. Teachers would also have showed parents how they could support a child when practicing. For example, parents could have taught what to listen for when their child was reading out loud. It couldn't be assumed that parents knew how to help their child read. Teachers received training on various learning strategies, so it was assumed that parents should as well.

To learn at home meant that teachers developed lists of family-friendly home activities, such as websites or games to play, that facilitated what was being taught at school (Sheldon & Epstein, 2005). It was a process where schools nurtured parents' ability to guide and monitor their children's progress. As Smar indicated (2002), the key was to generate family involvement without diminishing the student's ownership of learning.

Decision-making was also considered to be another valuable piece for involving parents (Smar 2002; Sheldon & Epstein, 2005). To have parents from all backgrounds come together to make meaningful decisions closed a gap between school and home. It was a way to encourage parental leadership and representation on important issues (Smar, 2002). For the school that meant encouraging and helping parents find ways for their voices to be heard. Allowing parents to be a part of decision-making was an empowerment tool. The result then produced positive outcomes for students.

The final parent involvement type discussed by researchers was known as collaborating with the community (Smar 2002; Sheldon & Epstein, 2005). Collaboration, according to Sheldon and Epstein (2005), involved identifying and integrating resources and services from the community to strengthen school programs. Some area schools in Wisconsin, such as Eau Claire and Augusta, have hired full-time or part-time parent liaisons or partnership coordinators. One responsibility of a person in such a position was to inform parents about community resources, enrichment programs, or supportive services. Collaboration also meant that the school provided services to the community (Smar, 2002). With this type of involvement, there were meaningful opportunities for students to demonstrate what they were learning at school. Together, through collaborative connections, everyone was learning and everyone was achieving.

Epstein (Sheldon & Epstein, 2005), along with other parent involvement advocates, provided a solid framework within these six types of involvement. To know and use these tools, educators and parents were able to analyze and redefine their efforts to build strong partnerships on behalf of their students/children. When designing programs, schools could not assume that one type of involvement or single activity would affect student

achievement positively in all directions (Sheldon & Epstein, 2005). Studies indicated that each type of involvement activity led to varying results. The idea was to generate as much involvement within each area as possible. As research indicated, schools needed to take the initiative to create an environment that invited, rather than discouraged parental involvement.

Factors Preventing Parent Involvement.

As previously mentioned, there were several ways of being a part of a child's education. However, there were factors that prevented parents from doing so. The research was limited in this area, and therefore, the main reason for investigating this issue further. In one particular study, authors Machen, Wilson, and Notar (2005) found that if schools removed barriers such as babysitting and transportation, parents attended more functions. They also mentioned that parents needed to feel a sense of ownership in order for the partnership to thrive. When a strong connection was made between home and school, more participation was seen.

In the same study, mothers were more interested in getting involved than fathers, but also reported feeling uncomfortable around teachers (Machen, Wilson, & Notar, 2005). It was also noted that low-income parents were less likely to be involved in school activities and less likely to meet with teachers or other school personnel due to a sense of intimidation or past negative experiences. Another study by McWayne (2004) indicated that parents reported barriers, such as increased familial stress and work responsibilities, which precluded their involvement. Politis' (2004) research also concurred with that of McWayne. Other work supported these findings as well, reporting that parents with a low-socioeconomic status reported a lack of confidence about school matters.

In some cases, educators found that there were parents who had the mind-set that teaching was the job of the school, and parenting was their job (Politis, 2004). Some families felt these roles should not be shared. There was a sense that parents were content with the way the teacher was teaching and did not see themselves as collaborators in their child's learning. Other parents were not aware of the important skills children acquired prior to kindergarten, and that these skills provided the foundation for learning in elementary school (Politis, 2004).

Deslandes and Bertrand (2005) identified several factors that influenced levels and aspects of parental involvement such as family (e.g., education level, family structure, family size, parent gender, and work outside the home) and child characteristics (e.g., age, gender, grade level, and academic performance). School climate also related to the level of parental involvement. Parents tended to be less supportive if they perceived that their child and their child's teacher were not interested in their involvement.

Throughout the research, it was found that most parents valued involvement in their child's education and learning (Drummond & Stipek, 2004). Expectations of schools and families did not always match when it came to the level of support provided. There tended to be barriers in the way of bridging the gap. Some schools and programs were dedicated to exploring involvement possibilities between parents and educators (Drummond & Stipek, 2004). Research indicated that parents wanted to be involved, but issues remained. Schools were not always successful in their work with parents, and sometimes it was a struggle to get the level of involvement they were seeking, despite efforts made. The goal was to respect parents' decisions, while continually providing opportunities for them to be engaged.

Strategies to Improve Parent Involvement.

To find ways to get parents engaged in their child's education was a step toward student's academic success. Politis (2004) stated that when parents and teachers had a close relationship, children felt comfortable switching from the home to school environment. Children needed consistency at home and at school in order to be successful students. Parents became involved if they believed that their actions would improve their children's learning and academic performance (Deslandes & Bertrand, 2005). Parents wanted to feel connected; however, making the actual connection seemed to be the piece missing in the parent involvement puzzle. Researchers briefly discussed suggestions to improve parent involvement, but there was continued need for further studies.

McWayne (2004) found that together schools and families needed to create a workable system of involvement, even if it meant searching for more effective and efficient ways for parents to spend more time with learning activities at home. According to McWayne's study of kindergarten student achievement (2004), to engage parents in educational activities with their children involved rethinking traditional parent involvement practices to accommodate families that experienced stress due to time constraints, new work responsibilities, or lack of child care. More traditional parent involvement activities, such as volunteering in the classroom, were not always possible due to the many obstacles families faced.

Many possible activities for each type of involvement have been identified, and schools could choose which partnership practices were likely to produce specific goals on how to implement the selected activities effectively (Sheldon & Epstein, 2005). Individual districts and schools faced different challenges – no two schools were the same. For some,

the challenge was making sure parents could understand the information coming home (i.e. language barriers). For others, the success of a school's partnership depended on the degree to which the activities were implemented to meet the serious challenges to involve families who were most difficult to reach (Sheldon & Epstein, 2005).

When designing parent involvement activities, it could not be assumed that one type of involvement or single opportunity would affect student achievement. According to Sheldon & Epstein (2005), if researchers produced better information about the results of specific involvement activities, more educators would be able to select and implement the activities most likely to produce the goals that they set for their students. When schools built partnerships with families that respond to their concerns and honored their contributions, they were successful in sustaining connections that were aimed at improving student achievement (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Recommendations by Benson & Martin (2003) as successful parent involvement strategies included the following:

1. One-to-one communications by teachers, parents, or other community members.
2. Representatives, parents, and volunteers making phone calls to peers, phone access for teachers and other staff to call parents.
3. Parent activities that appeal to the individual needs and interests of all parents.
4. The use of encouragement, accomplishment, and recognition to maintain active involvement.
5. Develop a pervasive culture of interaction; provide a positive, warm environment where parents feel welcome.
6. Provide at least one opportunity per month for parents to get acquainted with the school.

7. Provide parents with information designed to promote learning at home and topics related to a child learning. (p.188)

With these strategies in mind, and the belief that involved parents make a difference in a children's academic success, strong partnerships can be developed and maintained.

Research has also established that lack of planning and lack of mutual understanding are two of the greatest barriers to effective parent involvement (Cotton & Wikelund, 1999). The authors recommended that schools wishing to implement effective programs would need to be organized and open-minded in their approach to engage parent's participation. The emphasis that parents are partners of the school should be stressed, and their involvement should be recognized as needed and valued.

Research has also indicated that the most successful parent participation efforts are those which offer parents a variety of roles in the context of a well-organized and long-lasting program (Cotton & Wikelund, 1999). When parents are able to select from a variety of activities which accommodate schedules, preferences and capabilities, the more likely they will be engaged. When planning programming and services, school personnel needed to evaluate their own willingness for involving parents and determine how they wanted them to participate. Machen, Wilson, and Notar (2005) indicated that in order to develop effective parent involvement programs, researchers needed to investigate how to help school leaders identify practices and policies that encouraged parent trust and involvement in the process of schooling.

According to Cotton and Wikelund (1999), the schools with the most successful parent involvement programs were those which offered a variety of ways parents could participate. Schools needed to recognize that parents greatly differed in their willingness,

ability and available time for involvement in school activities. The schools that continually enhanced and evaluated their parent involvement programs would reach parents, get them involved, and witness the success of their students.

The school identified in this study understood the research and the importance of parent involvement as it related to student achievement. One of the goals of the school was to identify the reasons behind their parents' lack of involvement so efforts could be made to engage parents at home and at school as it related to their child's education. By conducting the study, the school intended to analyze its own data and move toward a more comprehensive and effective parent involvement program.

Chapter III: Methodology

This chapter will include information about the sample selection, a description of the subjects, and the development of the survey being used. Data collection and analysis procedures will also be provided. Finally, the chapter will end with methodological limitations.

Subject Selection and Description

The study was conducted in a small rural town in the Midwest. The project took place at the elementary school, in a district that educates approximately 700 students Pre-K – 12. The school district has two buildings, one of which is occupied by middle school students (grades sixth – eighth) and high school students (grades ninth – twelfth). The other building houses the elementary students. Parents of elementary students were selected as subjects for this particular study. One hundred and fifty-five families have children currently attending the elementary school. All parents, both mothers and fathers, attending parent-teacher conferences were asked to complete the survey.

Instrumentation

The purpose of the instrument was to obtain information about the reasons behind the lack of parent involvement at the elementary school level so future programming or services could be developed. With changes recommended from the results of the survey, the level of parent involvement may increase, as will growth in the area of student academic achievement. The survey included demographic questions, as well as open-ended and choice-selection questions. Questions related to current levels of parent involvement and barriers to involvement. Since the instrument was constructed

specifically for this study, no measures of validity or reliability have been documented.

Appendix A provides a final copy of the survey.

Data Collection

Prior to the data collection, permission was obtained from the school board and the superintendent of the school district. This occurred during the month of September, 2005. Once the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Subjects form was completed and approved, the surveys were printed along with a small explanation highlighting the purpose of the study. As parents entered the front lobby of the elementary school building, they were asked to complete the survey on a voluntary basis. Parents could complete the survey sitting or standing at a table set up in the front lobby of the elementary school. A drop box was available for parents as they finished the survey. Surveys were gathered from the drop box at the end of the evening following parent-teacher conferences. Data analysis took place at a later date.

Data Analysis

Following the December deadline, all completed surveys were examined for data analysis. Descriptive statistics were used to determine demographic characteristics. Frequency counts were tallied for questions one through three and means were calculated for questions four and five. Then, t - tests were used to analyze response differences between mothers and fathers, parents with varying numbers of children and parents with different prior school experience. Analysis of variance was used to determine differences in means of parents of young, mixed or older children.

Limitations

One limitation of the instrument was that there was no validity or reliability information available, since the survey was developed by the researcher and had not been measured or previously tested. Only one school participated in the study, therefore the results should be carefully considered before any comparisons are made with other districts. Another limitation of this study was the sample representation. Parents who are not normally involved may not have been present at parent-teacher conferences when data was collected. However, attendance at this round of parent conferences was eighty-five percent. Since the researcher analyzed the data and is employed by the district surveyed, a general bias should be considered.

Chapter IV: Results

The purpose of this chapter is to review the outcome of the parent involvement survey as it relates to the level of parent involvement research questions presented previously in chapter one. Demographic information will be shared, followed by an item-analysis and group comparison. A description of the survey results will be presented in a format consistent with the research questions designed by the researcher.

Demographics

A total of one hundred and forty ($n = 140$) parents participated in the study. Approximately 70 percent of households were represented. One hundred and three (73.6%) females and thirty-seven (26.4%) males represent the sample. Of the one hundred and forty parents who completed the survey, sixty-six (47.1%) had young children (preschool – second grade), twenty-seven (19.3%) had children of mixed ages, and forty-seven (33.6%) had older children (grades three – five). Ninety-three (66.4%) parents had one child in elementary school, whereas only thirty-five (25%) of the parents had two children in elementary school and twelve (8.6%) parents had three or more children in elementary school. Seventy-six parents had an overall positive school experience themselves, while sixty-four indicated they had a negative or mixed reaction to their past school experience.

Item Analysis

When parents were asked about their level of involvement at home in regards to their children's education, the following results were given. The scale was based on a five point Likert scale, where 5 equals always, 4 – usually, 3 – sometimes, 2 – rarely, and 1 – never. Parents typically answered that they always ask about their children's day at school

($M = 4.72$) and encourage them to try ($M = 4.87$). When parents were asked if they helped their children with homework (when needed), most responded that they always do ($M = 4.66$). They also reported that they almost always/usually ($M = 4.49$) read or listen to their children read. When it comes to reading notes or letters sent from their children's teacher or school, parents responded that they always did so ($M = 4.77$). Parents usually signed their children's communication folder ($M = 4.41$) but, in general, rarely helped their children's teacher with projects ($M = 2.66$).

When parents were asked about their level of involvement at school in regards to their child's education the following results were given. Parents, in general, reported that they rarely volunteer in their son's or daughter's classroom ($M = 1.78$) or volunteer at a school function ($M = 2.11$). The survey indicated that parents reported that they sometimes attend extra-curricular events ($M = 2.54$) and almost always attend parent-teacher conferences ($M = 4.84$). When it comes to serving on a school committee, parents said they rarely to never did so ($M = 1.42$). Parents reported that they usually ($M = 3.96$) communicate with their children's teacher but rarely ($M = 2.29$) have lunch with their children during the school day.

Parents were asked about why it was difficult to get involved in their children's education. Ninety-four (67.1%) of the total group indicated it was difficult to get involved due to their work schedule, and sixty-two (44.3%) said it was because of their hectic lifestyle. Other incidences included lack of resources (8.6%) and the inability to understand their son's or daughter's homework (4.3%). Only one parent indicated that they were intimidated by the school (.7%; $n = 1$) or just not interested in participating (.7%; $n = 1$). Some parents offered other comments indicating that school work should be done at

school. One particular father said it was difficult to be involved because his child lives mainly with his/her mother. Attending college was also a barrier in one mother's ability to be more involved. Parents also mentioned that they were not aware of help needed in their children's classroom or have never been asked to help. Getting their children to bed at night was more of a priority for one mother, as opposed to attending an evening school function. Lastly, twenty-one parents (15%) indicated there was nothing preventing them from being active in their children's education.

Group Comparisons

When females were compared to males, there were several items that indicated a significant difference between the two when analyzing their involvement at home and at school. Mothers were significantly more likely than fathers to: 1) ask about their children's day at school (item 4A; $p = .003$), 2) help their children with their homework (when needed) (item 4C; $p \leq .001$), 3) read to their children or listen to them read, (item 4D; $p \leq .001$), 4) read notes/letters from their children's teacher or school (item 4E; $p \leq .001$), 5) sign the children's communication folder (item 4F; $p \leq .001$), 6) attend parent-teacher conferences (item 5D; $p \leq .001$), and 6) communicate with their children's teacher (item 5F; $p \leq .001$). Other items such as encouraging their child to try (item 4B), helping with projects at home (item 4G), volunteering in the classroom (item 5H), at a school function (item 5B) or attending extra-curricular events (item 5C) found no significant difference between mothers and fathers.

When examining the differences based on the number of children parents had in school and their level of involvement, there were no significant differences. Not one item indicated a significantly different response pattern based on the number of children in

school. However, the results did indicate that parents with mixed or older children were significantly more likely to volunteer and less likely if they had younger children ($p \leq .001$). It was also evident that those with older children were significantly more ($p \leq .001$) likely to serve on a school committee and those with mixed or younger children were less likely to do so.

Research Questions

The study presented the information necessary to answer the questions developed by the researcher indicated in chapter one. Research Question One asked, what are the three most common reasons parents of elementary school children do not get involved in their child's education? According to the survey results of this particular study, parents indicated the three reasons for lack of involvement are: 1) work schedule (67.1%), 2) hectic lifestyle (44.3%), and 3) did not apply (15%) – meaning a minority of parents feel nothing gets in the way of their involvement. Results indicate that the most frequent barriers that exist are all external and do not relate to the school directly.

Research Question Two, asking if parents tend to be more involved in their children's earlier years (preschool – second grade) of elementary school than later years (third – fifth grade), was present in two different involvement activities. If parents had children with mixed or older children, they were more likely to volunteer at a school function and less likely if they had younger children. Parents with older children were more likely to serve on a school committee and less likely if they have mixed or younger children. In all other areas of parent involvement at home and at school, there were no indications that there is more or less involvement in their children's education depending on the grade their child is in.

To answer Research Question Three, whether mothers were more involved in their children's education than fathers, the survey in this study indicated that there were some situations where that is the case. When it comes to asking their children about his/her school day, mothers said they did so more than fathers. Mothers also reported that they helped their children more than their fathers when it comes to helping with homework (when needed), reading to their children or listening to them read, reading notes/letters from the teacher or school, and signing the communication folder. Out of the fifteen questions regarding the level of involvement at home and at school, only five showed a significant difference.

When answering Research Question Four, if parents' past school experiences influence their level of involvement in their children's education, the outcome was that there was no significant difference between responses of those with positive experiences and those with negative or mixed experiences. Therefore, even if a parent had a negative school experience, it did not affect their current level of involvement with their children's education.

The final question in the study was, are parents with fewer children (one – two) more involved with their child's education than parents with three or more children? In this particular study the level of involvement did not change based on the number of children in the home. Even if a family had one child versus five, the level of involvement stayed the same.

Chapter V: Discussion

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the results as they relate to the school's future parent involvement strategies. Conclusions will be drawn from this study and recommendations for future research in this area will be provided.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine current levels of parent involvement for families in one particular mid-western school during the fall semester of the 2005-2006 school year. The specific research questions which provided a framework for this study included:

1. What are the three most common reasons parents of elementary school children do not get involved in their child's education?
2. Do parents tend to be more involved in their child's earlier years (Preschool - second grade) of elementary school than later years (third – fifth grade)?
3. Are mothers more involved in their child's education than fathers?
4. Do parents' past school experiences influence their level of involvement in their child's education?
5. Are parents with fewer children (one - two) more involved with their child's education than parents with three or more children?

The information collected was to be used to identify possible barriers that contribute to the school's lack of parent involvement. The study was completed using a survey developed by the researcher. Demographics were compiled about the parents and about the number and grade level of their children. Six questions made-up the survey, which was used to help answer the five research questions mentioned above. One hundred

and forty surveys were collected at parent-teacher conferences during the fall semester of the 2005-2006 school year. Data analysis consisted of frequencies, percentages, *t* - tests, and analysis of variance. Overall, it was found that most parents strongly value involvement in their child's learning. However, when females were compared to males, there were several items that indicated a significant difference between the two when analyzing their involvement at home and at school. Prior school experiences for parents had no bearing on their level of involvement in their child's education, and their level of involvement did not change based on the number of children in the home.

Conclusions

Politis (2004) reported that one of the main reasons parents do not get involved in their children's education is because they may be highly stressed out about work or other family responsibilities. McWayne (2004) also stated that barriers such as increased familial stress and work responsibilities often precluded their involvement. Research findings from this study also supported the work of Politis (2004) and McWayne (2004). A high percentage of parents who responded to this survey indicated that the reasons behind their lack of involvement in their children's education were due to their work schedules (67.1 %) and hectic lifestyles (44.3%). This suggests similarity between the research and the findings of this study as it relates to involvement at home and at school. Half of the parents attributed external factors preventing them from getting more involved. This is a good indication that the school climate or personnel have little or nothing to do with parents' decisions to be engaged.

According to a report by Deslandes and Bertrand (2005), mothers are more involved in helping their children with homework than are fathers. This study would also

draw the same conclusions, as there is an indication that mothers do help their children with their homework (when needed) more so than fathers. Deslandes and Bertrand (2005) also determined that parents with fewer children provided more help with homework than parents with more children. However, this particular study showed no difference in this area. The only parent involvement activities where differences occurred were serving on a school committee and volunteering. There were no indications that help with homework correlated with the number of children in the home.

Drummond and Stipek (2004) found that parent practices have shown that parents of younger children are more likely to be involved in educational activities than are parents of older children. Most of their studies have illustrated age-related differences in parent practices over a wide range of ages. This study only examined questions related to those of elementary school parents, and it was determined that in some incidences such as volunteering and/or serving on a school committee, there was a difference in regards to the ages of their children. Drummond and Stipek (2004) reported that as parents' children grew older, they increased activities, such as volunteering. This study would also concur with those findings.

Politis (2004) suggested that parents may have had negative school experiences of their own, providing the reason behind their lack of involvement. However, according to this study, there was no correlation between parents' past school experiences, whether positive or negative, as it relates to their involvement in their child's learning/education.

The challenge becomes the schools' job to find ways to improve parent involvement, because it betters schools and increases student achievement. According to Machen, Wilson, and Notar (2005), parental involvement is highly important for pushing

the system for higher standards and engaging parents in an active role in the school curriculum, and it can open alternative opportunities for children. It seems clear that parents want to participate. There are, however, external factors that prevent them from doing so. According to this research study, the vast majority of parents are involved at home and at school at a level that works for them. This was indicated in the involvement levels described earlier in chapter four. Finding realistic and workable ways to involve parents in their children's educational learning can create a positive atmosphere and make changes for higher academic standards.

Recommendations

As a result of an analysis of this study, recommendations relevant to this study will be given. It would make the most sense that schools with the most successful parent involvement programs would be those which offer a variety of ways parents can participate. Recognizing that parents differ in their willingness, ability, and available time for involvement in school activities, schools should provide a continuum of options for parent participation. Opportunities where parents can become involved both at home and at school should help break down those barriers.

According to the respondents of this study, parents are involved at the level they can handle. It appears that external factors, such as busy work schedules and hectic lifestyles, hold parents back from becoming more active participants. Parent involvement has become a greater challenge in recent years as the characteristics of families are changing. Now more than ever, mothers constitute a significant portion of the work force; more children are also living in single-parent households (McWayne, 2004). Therefore,

given the external factors that affect families, this research calls for more creative solutions to engage parents in their children's learning.

Cotton and Wikelund (2005) reported that successful programs are when parents are offered a variety of roles in the context of a well-organized and long-lasting program. Parents need to be given a wide range of activities that accommodate different schedules, preferences, and capabilities. As part of the planning process, schools will need to assess their own readiness for involving parents and determine how they wish to engage or utilize them (Cotton & Wikelund, 2005). Some parents of this study made comments that they were not aware of help that was needed in the classroom or for the teacher. Therefore, it is recommended that schools communicate to their parents (i.e. open houses, parent-teacher conferences, and/or newsletters) that their level of involvement and support make a great difference in their children's school performance. Schools need to share with all parents how and when they can get involved at school if they choose to do so. Therefore, it is recommended that parent-teacher relationships be examined to better understand parents' decisions to become more involved at home and at school.

Benson and Martin (2003) suggested several steps to get parents involved, even if they are disinterested, suffering from burn-out, or who are just plain tired. These organizational steps include:

- 1) Focus on the student's success and achievement in the classrooms, in school projects, and on a variety of student academic and extra-curricular skills to draw parents to the school.
- 2) Send frequent personalized invitations to events using the name of the parent and the children or make personal phone calls.

- 3) Use the extended family to support students. Make it clear that siblings, grandparents, aunts and uncles and other significant adults are welcome to help celebrate the children's achievements.
- 4) Creatively use school staff and parent involvement volunteers to organize these programs (i.e. parent associations, senior citizens, etc.)
- 5) Coordinate planning among the school administrators, teachers, aides, parents, students, and community members in order to develop ownership.
- 6) Other factors include: provide refreshments, have name tags for parents and staff, reimburse parents for transportation or baby sitting, or offer child care on-site, and plan events at different times and days. (p. 189)

Deslandes and Bertrand (2005) found that parents become more involved if they believe that their actions will improve learning and academic performance. Therefore, it is suggested that the classroom teacher reassure parents by inviting them to visit the classroom or school when it is convenient for them. The recommendation is that teachers make a special effort to communicate their expectations and classroom information through some type of correspondence or personal contact. The more teachers reach out, the more comfortable parents become with the teacher and the school itself. Further research should also expand beyond the elementary school years. According to Trivette and Anderson (1995), there is limited research available on the effects of parent involvement for middle school youth, and it is unclear which aspects of parental involvement would be most effective in promoting school learning during the middle school years.

There are practical implications of this study for administrators, classroom teachers, and other school staff members. By involving parents and helping them develop high educational standards, school personnel can facilitate the academic development of the students. Schools should focus on the development of effective programs for students in their home environments and at school. This way parents have a variety of options to choose from and can implement the level of involvement that works for them, despite their work schedules and busy lifestyles. It is also important for school personnel to acknowledge and understand the variations in parent involvement in different families and to keep in mind that children live in many worlds – home, school, and society (Trivette & Anderson, 1995). Open communication and support will help bridge the gap between schools and families. Programs and policies that will nurture and support students and their parents should lead to positive educational outcomes. School-home relationships can be built if all parties involved work toward ensuring positive outcomes for children’s academic achievement. Success could occur if parent and schools shared similar beliefs.

In conclusion, when parents talk to their children about school and expect them to do well, their children do better in school. When schools engage families in ways that are linked to improving learning, students make greater gains (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). When schools build partnerships with families that respond to their suggestions and concerns, they are successful in maintaining connections that are aimed at improving student achievement. Together, we can achieve so much more.

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Appendix A: Parent Involvement Survey

Dear Parent(s):

The attached survey is part of a study designed to explore the level of parental involvement in our school. Please read the following information before you complete the attached survey.

Title: Elementary Parent's Attitudes and Beliefs about the Level of Parental Involvement in Their Child's Academic Learning.

Description:

Research tells us that families have a major influence on their children's academic achievement in school and throughout life. With more research on the reasons behind involvement, parent and teachers can work together to analyze areas for improvement. Therefore, it is important to know parents attitudes and beliefs about their role in their children's academic achievement.

The purpose of this study is to determine what holds parents back from becoming involved.

Risk and Benefits:

If you should have any questions after completing the survey please feel free to let me know. For your support, if you have any concerns direct them to Mr. Jerry Bloss, School Psychologist, room D134. With more research on this issue, parents, teachers and schools can work collaboratively together to analyze areas for improvement in our school. The overall goal is to provide an environment at home and at school that is conducive to learning.

Time Commitment:

The survey should take you no longer than five minutes to complete.

Confidentiality:

Following completion of the survey, please place it in the drop box labeled parent involvement survey in the main office. Surveys will not be retrieved by the researcher until parent-teacher conferences are over and the follow-up mailing has passed. There will be no identifiers, such as names or numbers on any documents.

Right to Withdraw:

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may choose to participate without any adverse consequences to you. However, should you choose to participate and later wish to withdraw from the study, there is no way to identify your survey after it has been turned in.

IRB Approval:

This study has been reviewed and approved by the University of Wisconsin-Stout's Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB has determined that this study meets the ethical obligations required by federal law and University policies. If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study please contact the Investigator or Advisor. If you have any questions, concerns, or reports regarding your rights as a research subject, please contact the IRB Administrator.

Investigator:

Nicole Steinmetz
715-286-3319
steinmetzn@uwstout.edu

Advisor:

Dr. Barb Flom
715-232-1343
flomb@uwstout.edu

IRB Administrator:

Sue Foxwell, Director, Research Services
152 Vocational Rehabilitation Bldg.
UW-Stout
Menomonie, WI 54751
715-232-2477
foxwells@uwstout.edu

Statement of Consent:

By completing the following survey you agree to participate in the project entitled, Elementary Parent's Attitudes and Beliefs about the Level of Parental Involvement in their Child's Academic Learning.

Sincerely,

Nicole Steinmetz

This research has been approved by the UW-Stout IRB as required by the Code of Federal Regulations Title 45 Part 46.

Parent Involvement Survey

Section I

Directions: Please place an "x" next to the response that describes you in questions 1 – 3.

1. Gender of parent:

- Male
 Female

2. Grade level(s) of your children (please check all that apply):

- Preschool 3rd
 Kindergarten 4th
 1st 5th
 2nd

3. My personal educational school experience growing-up was?

- Overall positive
 Overall negative
 Combination of positive & negative

Comments optional: _____

Section II

Directions: For the next two questions (#4 & #5), circle a 1 next to the statement if you always participate in the activity; circle a 2 next to statement if you usually participate in the activity; 3 – sometimes; 4 – rarely; and 5 – never.

4. How often to you get involved in your child's educational activities at home?

	1	2	3	4	5
	Always	Usually	Sometimes	Rarely	Never

Ask my child about his or her day at school?	1	2	3	4	5
Encourage my child to try?	1	2	3	4	5
Help my child with homework, when needed.	1	2	3	4	5
Read to my child or listen to him or her read?	1	2	3	4	5
Read notes or letters from my child's teacher/school?	1	2	3	4	5
Sign my child's communication folder?	1	2	3	4	5
Help my child's teacher with projects	1	2	3	4	5



Section II (continued)

5. How often do you get involved in your child's educational activities at school?

	1	2	3	4	5
	Always	Usually	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Volunteer in my child's classroom?	1	2	3	4	5
Volunteer at a school function?	1	2	3	4	5
Attend extra-curricular events (parent trainings, fun nights, guest speakers, etc.)	1	2	3	4	5
Attend parent/teacher conferences	1	2	3	4	5
Serve on a school committee	1	2	3	4	5
Communicate with my child's teacher (notes, e-mail, phone calls, face-to-face)	1	2	3	4	5
Have lunch with my child	1	2	3	4	5

Section III

*Directions: For the last question, please place an "x" next to the response(s) that apply to you.
You may check more than one.*

6. There are incidences that make it difficult to get involved in my child's educational activities (at home & at school) which consist of:

- Hectic lifestyle
- Work schedule
- Lack of resources (child care or transportation)
- Do not understand homework expectations
- Educating children is a teacher's responsibility
- Intimidated by school atmosphere/staff
- Not interested
- Not necessary
- Other, please explain _____
- Does not apply

**Thank you for completing this survey!
Please place it in the drop-box located in the main office.**