

# Parental involvement in children's education: A review study about the effect of parental involvement on children's school education with a focus on the position of illiterate parents

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## Abstract

In this article we provide the results of a review study on parental involvement in children's education with a focus on the specific position of illiterate parents. Research results indicate that parental involvement in children's education matters. It matters for their achievement, motivation and well-being at school. Over the last decade, parents and teachers are supposed to collaborate more and more as partners in education. To establish these partnerships, the primacy is placed on teachers and schools as they are the professional partners. The results of our review study reveal different good practices to enhance parental involvement: from parent and teacher training programs to reorganization of the school structure and family interventions. When illiterate parents want to be involved in their children's education, they are faced with many difficulties. Remarkably, the research findings on the involvement of illiterate parents appeared to be limited, in contrast with the results of our literature search on the topic of parental involvement in children's education in general, which was very extensive. However, we have found some good practices to foster the involvement of illiterate parents in their children's education.

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**Keywords:** parental involvement, school achievement, educational partnership, illiterate parents

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## Introduction

Parental involvement in children's education matters. It matters for their achievement, motivation and well-being at school. In past decades parental involvement in children's education has received considerable attention from many researchers and also has become a key component in school policy and government policy concerning family education programs both in the US and in Western Europe.

The aim of this review study is to get more insight in and to identify good practice in the relation between parental involvement and children's school achievement. This review study is

part of a broader project focusing on developing competencies and professional standards for parental involvement promotion in primary education. Two teacher training institutes (Amsterdam and Windesheim University of Applied Sciences) and the Almere public school board governing 51 primary schools are collaborating in this project<sup>6</sup>. The aim of the project is to design methods, competencies and standards which enable primary teachers to better involve parents in the learning of their child(ren). The project is based on school-based teacher – researcher collaboration and enhances teachers’ ownership of the designed products. In this article we will refer to it as ‘the Almere project’. Furthermore, it aims dissemination and further implementation of the best practices developed through the project. The products and good practices could be applied in primary schools as well as in teacher training curricula and postgraduate teacher training sessions.

## Research questions and method

Conducting our review study we aimed to get more insight into the relation between parental involvement and children’s school achievement in general, to detect good practices, and to focus on the special position of illiterate parents. Therefore we have formulated the following research questions:

1. What is known from the existing research literature on the relation between parental involvement and children’s school achievement?
2. Which good practices can be identified from the existing research literature on the relation between parental involvement and children’s school achievement?
3. What is known about the involvement of illiterate parents and their children’s school achievement?
4. Which good practices can be identified from the existing research literature on the involvement of illiterate parents and their children’s school achievement?

We have conducted a search in the following databases and search engines useful in an academic setting for finding and accessing articles: Academic Search Premier, Catalogue UvA, Educational Resources Information Centre (ERIC), Google Scholar, PiCarta, PsycINFO and Web of Science. We have used the keywords: parental involvement, illiterate parents, parents and school, parents and teachers, parents and homework, parent participation and academic achievement, educational partners, families as educational partners, parent-school collaboration, parent involvement and low literacy / illiteracy, parents and low literacy, home literacy, illiterate parents and Dutch equivalents of these keywords. We have limited the selection of literature to

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recent research work (approximately 10 years old) that was characterised by a high degree of citation (> 10). Furthermore we compared the lists of references of the meta-analysis studies we found for equivalent references. Remarkably, the result of our literature search on the topic of parental involvement and school achievement in general was very extensive. In contrast with this the research findings on the involvement of illiterate parents appeared to be limited.

With the four research questions in mind, we have analysed and interpreted the found literature thoroughly. This article is structured on the basis of the four research questions formulated above.

## **The relation between parental involvement and children's school achievement: what do we know?**

Parental involvement in children's education does positively influence school achievement (Epstein, 2001; Fan & Chen, 2001; Desforges & Abouchar, 2003; Jeynes, 2003; McWayne, Hampton, Fantuzzo, Cohen & Sekino, 2004; Fantuzzo, McWayne & Perry, 2004; Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Sandler, Whetsel, Green, Wilkins & Closson, 2005; Smit, Sluiter & Driesen 2006; Smit, Driesen, Sluiter & Brus, 2007).

The concept and definition of parental involvement used in research is often not unambiguous, which leads to the conclusion that in studying the phenomenon of parental involvement many other factors and the relation between these factors should be taken into account (Patall, Cooper & Robinson, 2008). In Dutch research on the topic of parents and schools, a clear distinction is made between parental involvement and parental participation. Smit et al. (2007) define both concepts as follows: parental involvement is the involvement of parents in the upbringing and education of their own child both at home and at school and parental participation can be defined as the active contribution of parents in school activities. Parental participation can be divided into: a. institutionalised forms (e.g. participating in a parent council or in school governance) and b. non-institutionalised forms by which parents assist teachers in day to day activities like accompanying children on school trips, cleaning toys or helping in the school library (Karsten, Ledoux. & Sligte, 2006).

Although parental involvement seems to have a more positive effect on children's development than parental participation (Desforges & Abouchar, 2003), both forms seem to be closely related. Parents which show active forms of parental involvement are usually also more active in the field of parental participation (McWayne et al., 2004) and tend to be more involved in activities in the community (Morrison Gutman & McLoyd, 2000).

In the field of theoretical frameworks for parental involvement Epstein's (2001) typology for different levels of parental involvement is widely recognized. Epstein (2001) identified six types of parental involvement in children's education: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making and advocacy and collaborating with the community. Epstein's typology is in her early work generally based upon separate roles for parents and teachers in children's education, both at home and in the school (Fan & Chen, 2001).

While defining the concept of parental involvement we encounter the rather evident fact that parents are different in many ways. In research projects these differences are sometimes neglected or research focuses on a selected group of parents, like low educated mothers, middle class parents, migrants, low literate parents, et cetera (cf. Leseman & De Jong, 1998; Smith & Elish-Piper, 2002; Zeece, 2005). In defining parental involvement as a research concept we should be able to take differences between parents into account. According to Fan & Chen (2001) the main reason for inconsistent research outcomes on children's achievement is that research takes place on different levels and grades of parental involvement.

Parents and groups of parents differ in: behavior, beliefs, mentality, conviction, aspiration, and also in background and situational characteristics like: socio-economic and ethnic-cultural background, language skills, level of education, home situation, religion, health situation, et cetera (Desforges & Abouchar, 2003).

The most determinative factor in parental involvement appears to be what could be called: good parenthood in the home situation (Desforges & Abouchar, 2003; Fantuzzo et al., 2004; McWayne et al., 2004). This factor is characterised by the establishing of a safe and stable home setting, stimulation of intellectual development e.g. by discussions between parent and child, modeling, disseminating the importance of education and fostering high expectations about children's school success.

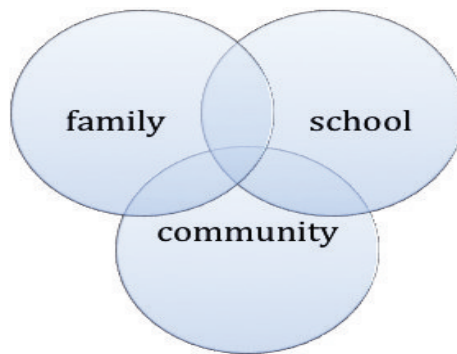
Parental involvement in children's learning does not only affect learning outcomes but also influences learning motivation, attention, task persistence, receptive vocabulary skills, and conduct problems in the classroom. Besides direct parent involvement in the home situation and at school there is another factor that should be considered in this context: parents' strong belief and high expectations of their children's success in school. Parents socialise children in a way that promotes internalization of social and educational goals. By engaging in educational activities with their children at home (homework, reading, modeling) parents communicate their expectations for achievement. This 'efficacy' factor brings the school curriculum goals within the situation at home.

In the relation between parents' involvement and school achievement, research provides evidence of the later factor influencing the first: low school achievement leads to more explicit parental involvement. In other words: higher contact rates between parents and teachers occur when there are problems with children's school results (Todd & Higgins, 1998). On the other hand Morrison Gutman & McLoyd (2000) found that parents of successful achieving children show more interest and seek more contact with teachers and schools than parents of low achievers.

In spite of contradictory research outcomes on some aspects of parental involvement (Patall et al., 2008) results indicate a certain agreement on the fact that by correlating parental involvement and children's achievement outcomes, a negative association is perceived for mathematics achievement and a positive association is observed for verbal and reading achievements (cf. Dearing, McCartney, Weiss, Kreider & Simpkins, 2004; Dearing, Kreider, Simpkins & Weiss, 2006). Research on the effects of the summer vacation on mathematical and language skills confirm these findings (Cooper, Nye, Charlton, Lindsay & Greathouse, 1996).

Recent research shows a change in the traditional roles of parents and teachers concerning children's education (Onderwijsraad, 2003; Smit et al., 2006; Patall et al., 2008). Not so long

ago parents were considered to be responsible for bringing up and raising their children at home and teachers were responsible for the education of children at the school (teaching). Nowadays we see parents in the role of teachers and teachers are becoming educators in a more general sense. Teachers and parents are becoming jointly responsible for the education of children, both at home and in the school situation. From separate responsibilities of parents and teachers on children's social and learning development, research reports a shift towards a form of partnership (Epstein, 2001). This collective responsibility is represented in Epstein's model as shown below.



**Figure. 1.** Territories of educational partnership in Epstein (2001, p. 28).

A crucial factor in establishing and maintaining forms of partnership in the education of students is mutual trust between parents and teachers. Adams & Christenson (2000) found that the relation between parents and school is at a higher level in elementary school than in middle school or other higher school levels. As children grow older the level of trust between family and school declines from both parties involved. One of the facets that were identified as very important to enhance trust between parents and school is a high level of home-school communication. The quality of the home-school communication seems to be a better predictor of trust than the frequency of home-school contacts or demographic variables. Open communication is a frequently found keyword in reports on the relation between school and family (Fantuzzo et al., 2004; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005).

On the other hand criticism has been revealed concerning the concept of equality between parents' and teachers' responsibility. Lareau (1997) concludes that teachers do not strive for equality with parents. Teachers expect parents to respect their professionalism in schools and their decisions in the classrooms. In this context Dom (2006) speaks of 'struggle or partnership between parents and teachers' (Dom, 2006, p. 50). According to Todd & Higgins (1998) the sustaining of equality is hindered by the fact that the element 'power' is always present in the relation between parents and teachers. In view of this circumstance Todd & Higgins (1998) state that parents and teachers occupy their own position on behalf of the child, whereby parents'

involvement is characterised by affection, love and aspirations for their children and teachers' involvement could be characterised by professionalism and knowledge of children based on their experience. Smit et al. (2006) state that the concept of 'equality' between parents and teachers as educational partners can be criticised. Teachers and parents differ in terms of their position, perspective and background. Low literate status of parents can play a role in the inequality, but also differences in norms and values due to social-economic or ethnic-cultural background and differences in pedagogical approach. These differences can make educational partnership hard to reach.

### **The relation between parental involvement and children's school achievement: good practice**

Although the idea of 'equality' between parents and teachers can be criticised and teachers sometimes show a resistance to parents interfering with their work (Todd & Higgins, 1998; De Carvalho, 2001; Addi-Racah & Arviv-Elyashiv, 2008), the initiative to establish forms of partnership as good practice often lies with schools and teachers and it is seen as part of their professional responsibility. Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2005) state that evidence has been found for the fact that teachers and schools are not very well prepared for educational partnership. School environment, school climate, school structure and management practices influence parents' and teachers' ideas about parental involvement and forms of partnership. In the initial and post initial teacher training programs teachers could be made more aware of the many aspects of parent-school relationships besides informing parents about children's learning and progress. They could be taught knowledge and skills in order to make parents feel that they are welcome in the school and that they are respected by the school staff as partners in education.

Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2005) presented a list of strategies that could be used to reinforce parental involvement and educational partnership. This list could be seen as a good practice and is used in the schools, which are connected to our Almere project. The school strategies are concentrated around topics like: invitation and communication, empowerment of teachers and parents, school structure and school policy.

**Table 1.** List of strategies to increase schools' capacities for inviting parental involvement (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005, p. 118)

| Table 1. Strategies to Increase Schools' Capacities for Inviting Parental Involvement   |
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| <p><b>Create an inviting, welcoming school climate</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create visual displays in school entry areas and hallways reflective of all families in the school (photos, artifacts, pictures, history); focus on creating a strong sense that "this is our school; we belong here."</li> <li>• Attend to the critical role of central factors in the creation of positive school climate: principal leadership; long term commitment to improving and maintaining positive school climate; creation of trust through mutually respectful, responsive, and communicative teacher parent relationships.</li> <li>• Develop strong, positive office staff skills with a consumer orientation; create habitual attitudes of re-spect toward parents, students, and visitors</li> <li>• Create multiple comfortable spaces for parents in the school, supportive of parent teacher conversations and parent networking</li> <li>• Hire parents or seek parent volunteers who can provide other parents with information on how the school works, translations as needed, advocacy as needed, a friendly presence</li> </ul>   |
| <p><b>Empower teachers for parental involvement; create dynamic, systematic, and consistent school attention to improving family school relationships:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop routine school practices focused on discussion and development of positive, trusting par-ent school relationships; make family school relationships and interactions a part of the school's daily life and culture, e.g.:</li> <li>• Systematically seek parent ideas, perspectives, opinions, questions about school and family roles in stu-dent learning</li> <li>• Allocate regular faculty meeting time to discuss parental involvement, involvement practices that have been successful in the school, information from other sources on new ideas</li> <li>• Develop and maintain an active school file of teacher and parent ideas on what is helpful and effective in inviting parental involvement; raise public awareness of family school relations in the school; allow de-velopment of a school specific resource bank to support teacher skills and capacities for improved par-ent teacher relations</li> <li>• Develop dynamic in service programs that support teacher efficacy for involving parents and school capacities for effective partnership with families; programs should:</li> <li>• Offer teachers opportunities to collaborate with and learn from colleagues and parents, create opportuni-ties for practice and revision of strategies suggested</li> <li>• Enable school development of involvement plans responsive to teacher, family, and community needs</li> <li>• Learn about parents' goals, perspectives on child's learning, family circumstances, culture:</li> <li>• Offer suggestions for support of child's learning consistent with parents' circumstances</li> <li>• Focus on developing two-way family-school communication (asking questions, listening well to responses)</li> <li>• Seek parents' perspectives on the child and child's learning; seek parent suggestions and follow through on them</li> <li>• Adapt current involvement approaches as needed to enhance the fit between invitations and family cir-cumstances; craft new strategies to enhance opportunities for communication</li> </ul> |
| <p><b>Join with existing parent teacher family structures to enhance involvement.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use after school programs to increase family school communication: include after school staff in in house communications, faculty meetings, professional development opportunities</li> <li>• Use current parent groups (e.g., PTA/PTO) to invite all families' participation; work with parent leaders to ensure open access; encourage varied activities of interest to diverse family groups within the school</li> <li>• In middle and high schools, create advisory structures that allow parents to check in with one adviser for general information on child progress, program planning, etc.</li> <li>• Seek district and community support for creation of new structures to support family school interactions and communication (e.g., parent resource room, telephone and e mail access in classrooms, staff position dedicated to parent school relationships, school based family center)</li> </ul>  |

**Offer full range of involvement opportunities, including standard approaches (e.g., parent teacher conferences, student performances) and new opportunities unique to school and community (e.g., first day of school celebrations, parent workshops, social/networking events):**

- Offer specific invitations to specific events and volunteer opportunities at school; schedule activities at times that meet the needs of families with inflexible work schedules
- Advertise involvement opportunities clearly, attractively, repeatedly, using methods targeted to interests and needs of school families

**Invite teachers, parents, principal, and staff to student centered events at school**

- Increase opportunities for informal parent teacher staff communications and interactions
- Use these events to seek parent comments and suggestions for involvement
- Use the events as venues for distributing brief, attractively formatted information in appropriate languages on issues in parental involvement (e.g., developmentally appropriate, easy to implement suggestions for supporting student learning; information on effects of parental involvement; information on school policies and upcoming events)

## **The involvement of illiterate parents and their children's school achievement: what do we know?**

In families where parents experience difficulties in reading and writing, there is a danger that low literacy is passed on to the next generation (Cooter, 2006). Dearing et al. (2004); Cooter (2006) and Lynch (2009) put forward that the importance of literacy development stretches far beyond children's school achievements. Well-developed literacy ability is an important condition for children's development in other intellectual and social areas (Dearing et al., 2004; Patall et al., 2008). Literacy difficulties could lead to all sorts of problems in social, economic and community contexts, such as high drop out rates, juvenile delinquency and welfare costs. Our society is more and more demanding when people's literacy skills are concerned, thus the costs of literacy problems for society are likely to increase (Dearing et al., 2004).

The notion of intergenerational illiteracy (Cooter, 2006) draws attention to the involvement of illiterate parents in their children's school development. Remarkably, the result of our literature search on the topic of parental involvement and school achievement in general was very extensive; however research-findings on the involvement of illiterate parents appeared to be limited. According to UNESCO<sup>1</sup> world wide some 800 million people are not or not sufficiently able to read and write. That is about 15% of the world's population. For the Dutch situation figures show an adult illiteracy rate of 13%. This means that in The Netherlands around 1.5 million adults have inadequate reading and writing skills (Houtkoop, 1999). A considerable part of these 1.5 million adults are parents.

Cooter (2006) reveals a number of mechanisms which could be responsible for intergenerational illiteracy: a lack of strong language examples, little child-parent interaction and lack of quality print materials like books and newspapers. Besides that Cooter (2006) makes a connection

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<sup>1</sup> [www.unesco.org](http://www.unesco.org) (May 2010)



between a poor language development and poverty. Also Leseman & De Jong (1998) found that among poor families parents speak less and with less variation to their children than parents with a higher socio-economic status. From research on the relation between home literacy and children's language learning Leseman & De Jong (1998) conclude that there are four facets which ought to be considered: the opportunity for children to be exposed to literacy (e.g. reading parents), the quality of reading instruction by parents, cooperation between parent and child (role agreement) and the social-emotional quality of the parent-child relation.

Since the authorisation of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965) and its reauthorisation in 2002 (no child left behind act) in the US, several family education programs have been implemented. Schools were encouraged to seek partners in education. Duch (2005) presented an evaluation of some of the two-generation programs: Comprehensive Child Development Program, Even Start Family Literacy Program, Head Start Family Service Centers, New Chance and New Hope. In these programs parental involvement in learning is emphasised often through empowerment strategies, preschool programs and welfare programs. Liaisons between Head Start and public schools can be found in the 'Schools for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century-model' (cf. Anderson-Butcher, 2004). In this model schools are not only places for education, but places where childcare, learning and family service comes together.

Taking the specific position of illiterate parents into account, research shows that intervention with adults in adult literacy programs is not always very successful. Cooter (2006) found that annually 50-75% of the adults enrolled in adult literacy programs drop out within the first month. One of the explanations could be that poor people must hold several minimum-wage jobs to support their families so there is not much time left for learning.

### **The involvement of illiterate parents and their children's school achievement: good practice**

Cooter (2006) provides a number of strategies, which teachers could use to help illiterate parents succeed in helping their children to become strong readers. The emphasis is on what parents can do, not on what parents are not able to do. On the classroom level teachers could instruct parents on homework assignments and what is expected of parents in their role of homework assistant. Schools could promote and teach parents in: a. dialogic reading: the child leads the conversation around the pictures of a book; b. the use of strategies to improve the length of children's sentences; c. the use of complete sentences when speaking to the child; d. the use of books the children can handle; e. effective play with their children by spending more time talking to them; f. the use of toys as mediator of spontaneous language use.

In aid of the specific group of illiterate and low literate parents teachers in primary education could play an important role (Smith & Elish-Piper, 2002). One cannot expect parents who lack the basic skills of reading to provide books as means of education or to judge whether or not a learning moment occurs while looking at a picture book with their child (Zeece, 2005).

Teachers could provide reading workshops for (illiterate) parent in which they point out skills which parents could use to support their children's reading development: point to words, speak about illustrations and labeling. Rosow (1991) concludes that after parent's participating in workshops around topics like motivation, perseverance, responsibility, initiative, cooperation, and problem solving their children spend more time doing homework, spend less time watching television and spend more time together with their parents. Schools could help illiterate parents by: showing what a rich language environment looks like, providing reading instruction through modeling and coaching, telling parents in what way they could talk to their children about books, explaining to parents how they could select good books, giving library instruction, stimulating parents to enroll in adult literacy programs, visiting parents and their children at home so parents and teachers get to know each other better. When (illiterate) parents inform teachers about their home situation teachers will be able to initiate and sustain a better connection between home and school (Rosow, 1991).

## Conclusions

In this article we report on a review study we have conducted to get more insight in the relation between parental involvement and children's school achievement in general, to detect good practices, and to focus on the special position of illiterate parents in this matter.

By addressing our first research question, we have found strong evidence of the positive influence of parental involvement in children's education on school achievement, learning motivation, perseverance and social behavior of children. The most determinative factors in parental involvement are 'good parenthood in the home situation' and 'parents' beliefs in and high expectations of their children's success in school'. However, it is hard to draw more precise conclusions. The definition of parental involvement used in research is not unambiguous and many intertwining factors have to be taken into account as the nature and intensity of parental involvement in children's education differs and takes place under different conditions. Remarkable however is the positive correlation between parental involvement and verbal and reading achievements in contrast with the negative correlation between parental involvement and mathematics achievement.

During the last decade, it is more and more accepted to hold teachers and parents jointly responsible for the education of children, both at home and in the school situation. Mutual trust and equality appear to be important elements of this so called educational partnership, but the establishment of mutual trust and equality is not self-evident. Differences in power, expertise and background appear to play a disturbing role. Establishing educational partnership is therefore often seen as a part of the professional responsibility of teachers and schools.

This brings us to our second research question about good practices of fostering parental involvement. From the research literature we have found that good practices are featured by inviting parents, communicating with parents, empowering teachers and parents, adapting the structure of the school organization and reformulating and implementing school-wide policy in

this matter. In our 'Almere project' we noticed the first signs of a positive impact in the schools of the implementation of these good practices. An open inviting school climate and coordinated school activities appear to foster parents' involvement in children's learning. In the practice of Almere the keyword also seems to be 'open communication'.

The results of our review study also indicate that differences between parents should be taken into account, while enhancing parental involvement in children's education. Here we have concentrated on the position of illiterate parents. Our third research question asked about the involvement of illiterate parents and their children's school achievement. We have found mechanisms responsible for intergenerational illiteracy: a lack of strong language examples, little child-parent interaction and lack of quality print materials. Teachers and schools appear to play an important role in stimulating the involvement of illiterate parents in their children's education. However, the results of our literature search for this review in different academic databases on this topic are rather limited. We have to conclude that over the last years this field of research has not received much attention.

Addressing our fourth and last research question about good practices of fostering parental involvement of illiterate parents, we found that teachers best focus on what illiterate parents can do and not on what they are not able to do. Good practices appear to be: activities which establish a connection between home and school by which knowledge of the home and school situation is revealed, parent instructions concerning their role as home work assistant and performer in reading instructions and child-parent conversations. Teachers could show illiterate parents what a rich language environment looks like and show them through modeling and coaching how parents could help their children in their literacy development and by that in their intellectual and social development.

We finish this article by concluding that it is worthwhile for (teachers in) schools to invest in relationships with parents in order to enhance their involvement in their child(ren)s' education as parental involvement matters for children's achievement, motivation and well-being at school. The involvement of illiterate parents is especially important in order to avoid intergenerational illiteracy. Therefore it deserves more and special attention of researchers, policy makers and practitioners in education than is does now.

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