Parental Involvement in Children's Education: Why Does It Make a Difference?

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We assert that the most important questions concerning parental involvement in children's education address why *parents choose to become involved and* why *their involvement, once underway, often positively influences educational outcomes. We present a model suggesting that parents become involved primarily because (a) they develop a personal construction of the parental role that includes participation in their children's education, (b) they have developed a positive sense of efficacy for helping their children succeed in school, and (c) they perceive opportunities or demands for involvement from children and the school. Parents then choose specific forms of involvement in response to the specific domains of skill and knowledge they possess, the total demands on their time and energy, and specific requests for involvement from children and the school. The model suggests that parental involvement then influences children's developmental and educational outcomes through such mechanisms as modeling, reinforcement, and instruction, as mediated by the parent's use of developmentally appropriate activities and the fit between parental activities and the school's expectations. The major educational outcomes of the involvement process are children's development of skills and knowledge, as well as a personal sense of efficacy for succeeding in school. Major implications of the model for research and practice are discussed.*

The literature on parental involvement in child and adolescent education conveys the clear assumption that parents' involvement benefits children's learning (e.g., Chavkin, 1993; Eccles & Harold, 1993; Epstein, 1989, 1994; Hess & Holloway, 1984; Hobbs, Dokecki, Hoover-Dempsey, Moroney, Shayne, & Weeks, 1984; U.S. Department of Education, 1994). In some circumstances, the literature simply makes the assertion; in others, the assertion is grounded in systematic examination of specific aspects of parental involvement as related to specific indicators of school success (e.g., Eccles & Harold, 1993, 1994; Epstein, 1991). As a whole, however, the literature tends to be pragmatic in its orientation, usually asking the question "What's happening, with what (apparent) effects?" A model commonly assumed in the literature is illustrated in Figure 1. Student educational outcomes are assumed to be influenced or caused by parental involvement, which itself is often assumed to be influenced by selected factors related to parents (most often, sociodemographic variables, but sometimes more dynamic variables such as parental attitudes) or selected factors related to schools (status variables characterizing schools or more dynamic variables such as teacher behaviors). That model falls short of offering clear answers to two critical questions, however: Why do parents become involved in their children's education? How does parental involvement have a positive effect on children's educational outcomes?

Our interest is in learning about parental involvement and its beneficial influences on child and adolescent school outcomes. Many children succeed in school even when their parents are not directly or actively involved in their education; the reasons may include good teaching, positive relationships with other adults, personal resilience, and so forth. While the mechanisms that promote success in school for children and adolescents in the absence of meaningful parent involvement are of substantial interest to educators, our interest in this article lies *not* in that more general domain (i.e., what creates school success for children and adolescents, regardless of parental or familial input?), but in the specific area defined

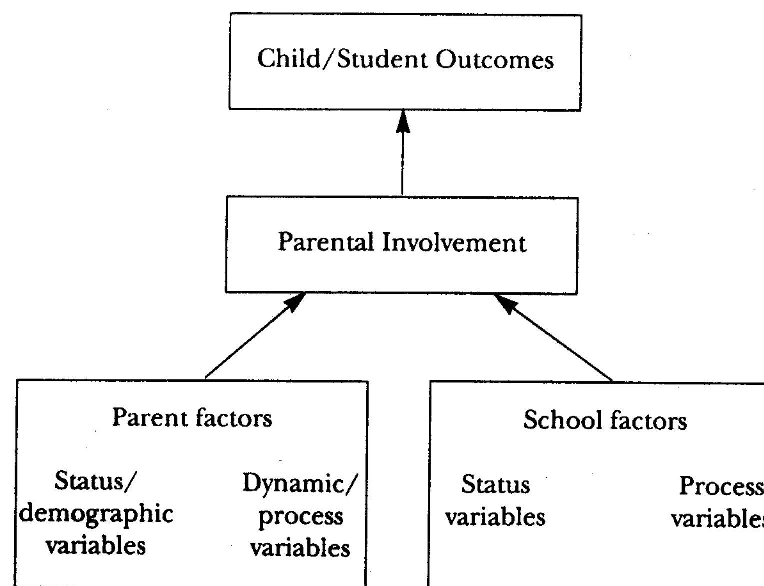

Figure 1. Model of Parent Involvement Commonly Assumed in the Literature

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by this question: Why do parents become involved in various aspects of their children's education, and—when they do become so involved—how does their involvement influence school outcomes?

We are interested in knowing more about parents' *positive* influences on their children's educational outcomes. Thus, we have considered work that points to potential indicators of that influence; we have not included the full range of studies that may include findings of "no parental influence." Our interest is not in examining the proposition: Does parent involvement make a difference? It is rather in these questions: Why do parents become involved? When parents choose to become involved, how do they choose specific forms of involvement? Finally, how does parent involvement make a difference? (That is, what goes on in the process of parental involvement that makes it likely to create a positive difference in children's school outcomes?)

In developing the model presented here, we have built on work that has examined specific aspects of parental involvement as well as work focused on identifying and describing schematically—and to some extent, causally—the wide range of parent, child, school, and community variables that may be related to parental involvement and its outcomes (e.g., Eccles & Harold, 1993, 1994). The variables included in Eccles and Harold's (1993, 1994) model in particular represent a thoughtful distillation of factors that are possible links to both parental involvement and a variety of related educational outcomes for children. Although Eccles and Harold developed their model in order to understand processes that underlie parental involvement, the influence of parents and schools on children's performance, and "the many barriers to parent involvement" (Eccles & Harold, 1993, p. 570), we construe our model as a more specific and delimited approach to these questions: Why do parents become involved? How they choose specific involvement forms? How does their involvement influence outcomes? We have chosen to focus on specific variables that (1) are likely to be most salient to the parent-involvement process from *parents'* perspectives, and (2) are potentially subject to specific intervention and change as school personnel and others work to improve parental involvement and related student outcomes.

WHY PARENTS BECOME INVOLVED IN THEIR CHILDREN'S EDUCATION

Many have suggested the preeminent significance of parents' education, income, marital status, and related indicators of family status in efforts to understand parents' involvement decisions (e.g., Lareau, 1989). However, we assert that these status variables, while not unimportant, do not *explain* parents' decisions to become involved, their choice of involvement forms, or the effects of their involvement on student outcomes. We suggest that parents most often become involved in their children's education for three major reasons: (1) their personal construction of the parental role; (2) their personal sense of efficacy for helping children succeed in school; and (3) their reaction to the opportunities and demand characteristics presented by both their children and their children's schools.[1]

PERSONAL CONSTRUCTION OF THE PARENTAL ROLE

We believe that parents become involved because they *construe the parental role* as including personal involvement in their children's education. Several investigators have referenced or examined parents' role construction as a variable potentially important to parental involvement (e.g., Delgado-Gaitan, 1992; Eccles, 1993; Eccles & Harold, 1993; Lareau, 1989; Lightfoot, 1978). We suggest that parents' role construction is distilled from parents' ideas about the parental role, learned largely through observation and modeling of their own parents' school-related involvement, their friends' involvement in children's schooling, and so forth. This construction of the parental role is important because it enables the parent to imagine, anticipate, and act on a host of educationally related activities with their children.

A construction of the parental role as including personal involvement in children's education would seem to be a necessary (but not sufficient) condition for the emergence of parent-involvement activities. The presence of such a role construction means that relevant responsibilities and activities have been thought of and considered by the parent, thus creating the possibility of an active role; the presence of the role construction alone, however, is not sufficient to ensure involvement. It is not sufficient because the parent must take the role construction and *act* on it in order to be involved; to act on the role, the parent must believe that he or she has the skills and opportunities necessary for involvement (in other words, seeing involvement activities as reasonable or possible does not ensure that the parent believes he or she can *do* those activities).

PERSONAL SENSE OF EFFICACY FOR HELPING CHILDREN SUCCEED IN SCHOOL

We also believe that parents become involved because they have a sense of *personal efficacy for helping their children succeed in school.* The construct is included in Eccles and Harold's model (1993; see also Eccles, 1993), but has been developed more specifically by Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, and Brissie (1992). Parents' sense of efficacy comes from four sources: the direct experience of success in other involvement or involvement-related activities; the

vicarious experience of others' success in involvement or involvement-related activities; verbal persuasion by others that involvement activities are worthwhile and can be accomplished by the parent; and the emotional arousal induced when issues of importance to the parent—for example, his or her child's well-being or success, his or her own success as a parent—are "on the line." This personal sense of efficacy for helping children succeed in school means that a parent believes that he or she has the skills and knowledge necessary to help his or her children, that the children can learn what he or she has to share and teach, and that he or she can find alternative sources of skill or knowledge if and when they become necessary. The sense of efficacy for helping children succeed in school is important because it enables the parent to *act* in relation to his or her child's schooling and to persist in the face of difficulties that may emerge in the course of helping his or her children succeed in school (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 1992).

We suggest that a personal sense of efficacy for helping children succeed in school is a necessary condition for parent involvement, particularly if involvement activities are to be sustained through difficult times. If combined with a construction of the parental role as including parental involvement, and if relatively strong, a parent's sense of efficacy for helping children succeed in school may constitute a sufficient condition for active parental involvement.

A brief overview of the origins of self-efficacy beliefs suggests that they are drawn from four general sources (Bandura, 1986, 1989a, 1989b). The most powerful is *direct experience* of a positive and successful nature in the field or domain of interest. With reference to the sense of efficacy for helping children succeed in school, this source suggests that parents who have been successful in school themselves, or who received varied forms of involvement, perceived as helpful, from their own parents during schooling, or who have had prior personal experiences of successfully helping children succeed in school would be more likely than parents without such experiences—or those with experiences of failure in such domains—to have higher efficacy for helping children succeed in school. Usually secondary in importance to direct experience, *vicarious experience* also serves as a source of personal efficacy beliefs. Parents who have observed (or perhaps been told of) successful involvement activities and experiences by others—especially others who are significant and similar to themselves—will be higher in efficacy for helping children succeed in school than will be parents who have had no or only limited opportunities to observe others successfully helping children in school-related activities. Lower in importance but still offering contributions to personal efficacy are the efforts of others in *verbal persuasion.* Applied to parents' sense of efficacy for helping their children succeed in school, this source of efficacy beliefs suggests that parents who have been told—especially by others who are significant and similar to themselves—that their involvement is important and has had or can have a significant positive impact on children's educational success will be higher in efficacy than those who have not received such exhortations. Thus parents whose children ask them to be involved, parents whose friends or other family members point out the benefits of involvement and the ability of the parent to become involved, or parents whose children's schools and teachers make efforts to communicate the value of the parents' direct involvement will probably be higher in efficacy than parents who do not have these experiences. A fourth general source of personal efficacy is *emotional arousal.* Applied to parent efficacy, the theory suggests that parents who are emotionally and directly concerned about their children's educational success, or whose personal sense of adequacy is emotionally connected to success in helping one's children be successful, will be more likely than those with lower emotional investments or arousal to be high in efficacy.

Parents' sense of efficacy for helping children succeed in school is drawn, thus, from all four sources. Taken together, they create the dynamic quality of efficacy in this general area. Specific skills, knowledge, and abilities derived from one or a combination of these sources of efficacy may also work uniquely to influence the specific types of involvement that individual parents choose. This "unique working" of specific skills or knowledge will be discussed later with reference to parents' choice of specific involvement forms.

Also, as we will see later, these four major sources of the sense of efficacy for helping children do well in school are the same source categories that will come into play for *children* as parents involve themselves in the children's schooling. We suggest that to the extent that parent-involvement activities are effective, developmentally appropriate, and reasonably consistent with the school's goals and expectations, they will become sources of the *child's* personal sense of efficacy for succeeding in school. That is (as developed more fully below), we suggest that parent-involvement activities offer direct experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and emotional arousal that will themselves contribute to the child's development of a sense of efficacy for doing well in school.

OPPORTUNITIES AND DEMANDS FOR INVOLVEMENT PRESENTED BY CHILDREN AND SCHOOLS

Parents also become involved in part because they perceive opportunities, invitations, or demands, from their children or their children's school, to do so (e.g., Epstein, 1986). These opportunities, invitations, and demands may influence parents' involvement decisions because the demand or opportunity characteristics so created tend to elicit and often reward

(selected) involvement behaviors. These demand and opportunity characteristics—if positive and vigorous—may be folded into the verbal persuasion source of parental efficacy for helping children succeed in school, but they may also be relatively free-standing; that is to say, they may exist as invitations or demand characteristics that open the possibility of involvement but do little to directly or vigorously encourage it.

The demand and opportunity characteristics offered by children or their school settings that influence whether parents will become involved are *general* demands and opportunities. Children, for example, might be consistently enthusiastic about any parent visits to school or might be generally eager to talk about the school day's events. The general demand and opportunity characteristics presented by schools might be found in a consistently inviting environment (e.g., signs welcome parents into the school, teachers greet them when they pass in the hall) or a regular parent newsletter describing volunteer opportunities. These qualities offer generic invitations; they may be related to but are often distinct from specific demands and opportunities, which are described below.

General demand and opportunity characteristics may influence the emergence of active parental involvement; these demand and opportunity characteristics, however, are neither necessary nor sufficient conditions for the occurrence of parent involvement. While facilitative of involvement, these characteristics are not necessary; for example, parents who construe their role as including active involvement and who have a relatively strong sense of personal efficacy for helping their children succeed in school are likely to involve themselves whether invited to do so or not. Similarly, these characteristics do not constitute sufficient conditions for involvement because they do not have the power in themselves to create either parental role conceptions that include active involvement or a positive sense of efficacy for helping children succeed in school. (Demands and invitations might be construed as child- or school-initiated efforts at verbal persuasion, but in the absence of more powerful efficacy sources [direct experiences of involvement success, vicarious experiences, or persuasive emotional arousal], neither is likely to influence importantly the sense of efficacy for helping children succeed in school.)

HOW PARENTS CHOOSE SPECIFIC TYPES OF INVOLVEMENT

Parents who become involved—as a function of role construction, sense of efficacy for helping children succeed in school, and opportunity or demand for involvement—select levels and forms of involvement (e.g., help with homework, phone calls to teachers, expressions of interest in school-related activities) that are consistent with four specific domains of

the parent's life. (The discussion above focused on variables that influence *whether* parents will become involved. We shift now to the question of *how* parents choose to become involved.)

Several typologies of parental involvement have been described in the literature. The most widely recognized, developed by Epstein (e.g., 1992, 1994), defines six levels of school-related involvement opportunities for parents. These are efforts to assist parents with child-rearing skills (I), communicating with families (II), providing school volunteer opportunities (III), involving parents in home-based learning (IV), involving parents in school decision making (V), and involving parents in school-community collaborations (VI). We suggest here that parents' responses to such varied invitations from schools as well as parents' initiation of involvement activities will be influenced significantly by the following variables: specific domains of the parent's self-perceived skill and knowlege; the mix of employment and other family demands experienced by the parent; and specific invitations, demands, and opportunities presented by the child and the child's school.

SPECIFIC DOMAINS OF SKILL AND KNOWLEDGE

Specific domains of the parent's skill and knowledge should influence the specific forms of involvement that a parent chooses. While the full mix of a parent's personal skills, knowledge, and abilities contributes to his or her sense of efficacy for helping children succeed in school, his or her *specific* skills and areas of knowledge will influence the choice of specific involvement forms. In general, parents will choose types of involvement consistent with their perceptions of the specific skills and knowledge they bring to the multiple tasks of children's schooling. For example, a parent who feels knowledgeable about math but less competent in social studies is more likely to help with math than with social studies homework; a parent who feels comfortable speaking before groups is more likely than one who does not to volunteer time to talk with students about his or her occupation; a parent who feels unable to communicate effectively in the school setting is likely to choose involvement at home rather than at school. In short, self-perceptions of specific skills and knowledge will influence the type of involvement parents choose; in general, they will tend to choose involvement forms in which they believe they can be successful.

THE MIX OF EMPLOYMENT AND OTHER FAMILY DEMANDS

Several investigators have suggested that family-status variables and related factors (e.g., time, energy, community contacts) are significantly related to parent-involvement decisions and influence (e.g., Entwisle, 1990; Hobbs et al., 1984; Lareau, 1989). We suggest that the full mix of demands on par-

ents' time and energy, particularly related to employment and other family responsibilities, will serve as the primary influence on the types of involvement they choose once they have made the decision—as a primary function of parental role construction, parental sense of efficacy for helping children succeed in school, and opportunities and demands presented by children and schools—to become involved. The demands of employment (e.g., whether the parent can readily take time off from work for school-related activities, how close the work place is to the school, what the work schedule is) will offer both possibilities for and restrictions on parent-involvement activities. Similarly, the demands of other family responsibilities (e.g., infant care, elder care, another child's basketball games) will create constraints on the range of involvement activities that are possible for any given parent.

We argue here that these demands and responsibilities—outside of the child's schooling—are primarily influential on a parent's decision about *how* to become involved, rather than whether to become involved. Many have argued that external demands on parents' time cut down sharply on the possibilities of their involvement in children's education; we agree, and support numerous efforts to increase work-place responsiveness to parents' flexibility in relation to their children's schooling. We suggest, however, that a parent who perceives his or her parental role as including involvement and who has a relatively strong sense of efficacy for helping children do well in school will make the fundamental decision to become involved and will select involvement forms that fit within the mix of other responsibilities and demands. Conversely, a parent who does not perceive his or her role as including school involvement, or who has a low sense of efficacy for helping children succeed in school, will—almost regardless of time free from other employment or family-related demands—choose not to become involved.

SPECIFIC INVITATIONS AND DEMANDS FROM THE CHILD AND THE SCHOOL

Specific "invitations," opportunities, and demands for involvement conveyed by the child or the school should also influence the parent's choice of involvement forms. As noted earlier, the child's general attitude toward the parent's involvement and the general openness to parental involvement conveyed by the school will influence the parent's decision about whether to become involved; in their *specific* manifestations, however, invitations and demands from the child and the school will be influential in the parent's choice of specific involvement forms. For example, the child who asks for homework help will tend to influence the parent to become involved in monitoring and reviewing homework; the child who pleads with the parent to come on a field trip will tend to influence the parent to become involved in providing transportation and chaperoning the trip. Similarly, the teacher who sends home specific homework assignments involving five-minute parent-child interactions will tend to encourage parents' homework involvement; the teacher who calls the parent and specifically invites him or her to call anytime with questions will tend to encourage increased levels of parent-teacher conversation.

WHY PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT HAS A POSITIVE EFFECT ON CHILDREN'S EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES

We now shift from variables that influence whether and how the parent will become involved to variables that influence *how parental involvement will have a positive influence on children's educational outcomes.* We address specific mechanisms that we believe operate to determine whether parent involvement—once it is undertaken, in whatever forms selected by the parent—will have a positive effect on children's educational success.

MECHANISMS OF INFLUENCE

There are three primary mechanisms of parental influence on children's educational outcomes: modeling, reinforcement, and direct instruction. These mechanisms of parental influence are set within the context of understanding that parent-involvement behaviors as a whole constitute *one* of several sources of influence on children's educational outcomes. Parents' involvement plays a role in the context of other variables that have important influences on educational outcomes, such as child variables (e.g., abilities, learning style, developmental level), teacher and school variables (e.g., teaching effectiveness, curriculum appropriateness), and broader sociocultural variables (e.g., cultural attitudes that may limit or enhance the opportunities available to any given child). In most circumstances, parent involvement is most accurately characterized as a powerful enabling and enhancing variable in children's educational success, rather than as either a necessary or a sufficient condition in itself for that success. Its absence eliminates opportunities for the enhancement of children's education; its presence creates those opportunities.

Modeling

Parents influence their children's educational outcomes through modeling of school-related behaviors and attitudes. In involving themselves in aspects of their children's educational lives, parents behave in ways that demonstrate

that activities related to schooling are worthy of adult interest and time. This may be demonstrated in proximal ways, such as asking questions about the school day, talking with a teacher after school, spending time reviewing homework, making a phone call to the teacher. It may also be demonstrated in ways more distally related to child's school work, for example, coming to a school event, attending a school basketball game, volunteering to run the ticket booth at the school play. All such parent-involvement activities are potentially important because they suggest that the parent regards school-related activities as significant to the parent and the child. The activities by parents are specifically important because parents are usually positively regarded by their children, perceived as powerful, and respected. Modeling theory predicts that children will emulate selected behaviors of adults held in such regard. Thus, when parents spend time with or for their children in relation to school activities, children have opportunities and encouragement to model parents' school-focused attitudes and behaviors.

Parental modeling is an enabling variable with respect to children's positive educational outcomes: Its presence enhances the possibilities that children will do well in school. It is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition in itself, however, to produce these outcomes because modeling by itself does not enable the child to acquire the full range of skills and knowledge necessary to success in school.

Reinforcement

Parents influence their children's educational outcomes by reinforcing specific aspects of school-related learning. In involving themselves in aspects of children's schooling, parents often give their children interest, attention, praise, and rewards related to behaviors fundamental to varied aspects of school success. Assuming that the reinforcements are applied in ways that do not interfere with the role and development of intrinsic motivation (e.g., Eccles, 1993), reinforcements are important because they help elicit and maintain child behaviors central to school success. To the extent that parents select reinforcements wisely (i.e., use reinforcements that are valued by the child) and apply these to areas central to school success (e.g., studying well for tests, attending in class, completing homework, asking questions of the teacher when necessary), reinforcement theory predicts that children will engage in more of the rewarded behaviors, and will thus be more likely to do well in school.

Parental reinforcement of behaviors linked to school success enables and enhances positive educational outcomes. Subject to the conditions above, appropriate parental reinforcement will increase the likelihood that children behave in ways important to school success. However, parental reinforcement is not in itself a sufficient condition for school success, because other variables—for example, the child's intrinsic interest in the material being taught, the teacher's ability to teach effectively—are also strongly implicated in the child's success. Similarly, parental reinforcement is not a necessary condition for school success; for example, children may receive sufficient reinforcement for school-appropriate behaviors and activities from teachers and other important adults and thus not need parental reinforcement as fully as might otherwise be the case.

Instruction

Parents also influence their children's educational outcomes by direct instruction. Direct instruction takes two primary forms, which tend to yield or support different learning outcomes for children (e.g., Sigel, 1990). Parents who engage primarily in *direct, closed-ended instruction* (involving orders, commands, requests for correct answers or "the right way" of working or answering a problem) will tend to promote factual learning and knowledge, but will not tend to influence the child toward higher levels of cognitive complexity. Parents who engage in *direct, open-ended instruction* primarily (involving questions and requests to plan, anticipate, and explain) will tend to promote higher levels of cognitive complexity and ability as well as factual knowledge in their children.

Instruction that is closed-ended (e.g., helping children learn correct spellings, derive correct answers to homework problems) will probably enhance positive educational outcomes. To the extent that parents engage in such practice, drill, and review work with their children, they are likely to help the child learn the factual information component of school tasks. Instruction that is open-ended (e.g., asking children how they worked a problem, what other ideas they can think of for addressing a homework issue) will also enhance positive educational outcomes. This open-ended approach to instruction will tend to contribute to higher-level thinking skills in children (e.g., to representation and distancing, in Sigel's [1990] terminology; to problem-solving skills).

As is true of the other primary mechanisms of parental influence on children's positive educational outcomes, parental involvement in instruction of either type is likely to yield both enabling and enhancing effects on children's learning. For several reasons, however, parental instruction is not likely on its own to constitute either a necessary or a sufficient condition for positive educational outcomes.

Mechanisms of Influence: In General

These primary mechanisms of parental involvement's influence on children's educational outcomes are thus all likely to create enabling and

enhancing conditions for children's learning. Added to the educational efforts ongoing in the classroom, these mechanisms of parental involvement's influence are likely to enhance the learning that is begun in classroom instruction and to enable learning that may be overlooked or is less successful in the classroom.

Despite their enabling and enhancing qualities, however, these mechanisms of parental involvement's influence are not likely to create—by themselves—either sufficient or necessary conditions for children's educational success. They are not likely to be sufficient because children's learning outcomes in school are more proximally related to school-based events—for example, the child's school behavior and learning performance, the teacher's teaching effectiveness—than to home-based or parent-controlled events. Similarly, these primary mechanisms of parental involvement's influence on educational outcomes are not likely to become a necessary condition in themselves for children's educational success because school-based learning may occur in the absence of active or effective parental support—for example, a capable child with a supporting and caring adult in his or her life (whether parent or not) and a good teacher will probably learn even in the absence of parental involvement.

Although none of these mechanisms of parental involvement as manifested in different involvement forms appears necessary or sufficient in itself to ensure positive educational outcomes, it is not without importance that so much experience and research have suggested that parental involvement manifested in some form *is* a necessary condition of school success for many children. We suspect that parental involvement—as tempered or mediated by conditions specified below—is most significant in enabling children's accomplishments in skill and knowledge areas where children may be struggling to achieve, and in enabling progress when children come to a roadblock in learning that interferes with continued progress. Under these conditions, when the normal teaching and learning processes of the classroom are insufficient in themselves to create learning, the enabling and enhancing functions of parental involvement may become critical to children's educational success.

TEMPERING VARIABLES

We suggest that the positive influence of parental involvement on children's educational outcomes is tempered or mediated by two major variables as perceived and experienced by the child: the parent's selection and use of developmentally appropriate involvement strategies and activities, and the fit between the parent's activities and the school's expectations for parental involvement.

Developmentally Appropriate Involvement Activities and Strategies

We suggest that the impact of parental involvement on children's educational outcomes will be tempered or mediated by the parent's use of developmentally appropriate activities and strategies. To the extent that parents choose activities and strategies that are developmentally appropriate for a given child, and are perceived as appropriate by the child, their involvement will have the potential for positive impact on educational outcomes. The importance of this "appropriateness" is underscored by several areas of developmental research suggesting the benefits, for example, of accurate parent understandings of children's abilities (e.g., Alexander & Entwisle, 1988; Miller, 1986; Stevenson, Lee, Chen, Stigler, Hsu, & Kitamura, 1990) or beliefs about children (e.g., McGillicuddy-DeLisi, 1992), and the importance of parents' abilities to act in supportive, individually responsive ways when helping children or responding to their school performance (e.g., Clark, 1983; Scott-Jones, 1987). Developmental appropriateness is a critical criterion because the parent's activity and strategy choices must reasonably be perceived by the child as positive or neutral if those activities are to have a reasonable chance of exerting positive influence on learning outcomes. This is not to say that the child must like, feel good about, or agree with all of the parent's involvement activities; it is to say that those activity choices must feel fundamentally appropiate to the child—that is, fundamentally within the range of parental actions that are appropriate for this child. If the activities and strategies that parents choose are perceived by the child as inappropriate, those activities are more likely to be resented or wasted than to facilitate the child's school success. While a parent's choice of activities and strategies should not be driven by the child, it should be informed by both the parent's thinking about helpful involvement strategies and his or her awareness of the child's perceptions, abilities, and developmental preferences. The parent's choice of involvement forms and strategies, in short, must be developmentally appropriate for the child if they are to have maximum potential for positive impact.

Striking this "developmental match" tends to be easier for parents of younger as compared to older and adolescent children. Because younger children are among the most generically enthusiastic about parental attention to themselves, their school work, and school accomplishments, numerous avenues for involvement present themselves as age- and child-appropriate. Further, younger children's school tasks are often well within the range of many parents' personal competencies and abilities, thus enabling a relatively wide range of involvement activities. As children leave the early-middle stages of childhood and their days of clear enthusiasm for overt parental interest and involvement, the parents' task in selecting developmentally appropriate activities and involvement strategies often becomes more difficult. Children moving into adolescence normally become more peer-ori-

ented, more independent, and less interested in accepting obvious help, praise, or even expressions of interest from parents (i.e., the "staples" of many parents' involvement activities on behalf of younger children become unacceptable or inappropriate from the adolescent's perspective). The difficulties associated with changing child interests and preferences may be exacerbated by the reality that the cognitive demands of older children's and adolescents' school tasks may challenge many parents' own abilities, thus making the technical aspects of involvement related to school learning quite formidable at times. Despite the challenges, a growing body of evidence suggests that parental involvement continues to hold significant educational and developmental benefits for children and adolescents (e.g., Dornbusch & Wood, 1989; Entwisle, 1990; Ritter, Mont-Reynaud, & Dornbusch, 1993). If parental involvement is to be useful, however, it must "fit" the changing developmental needs of the growing child and assume new forms that correspond to emerging needs at each level of development.

The Fit between Involvement and the School's Expectations

The influence of parental involvement on child outcomes is also tempered by the fit between the parent's choice of involvement activities and the school's goals and expectations for parental involvement. To the extent that parents' involvement choices and activities are consistent with the school's expectations, their involvement will have significant chances of influencing child outcomes in positive ways. If the involvement activities are inconsistent with or contrary to school expectations, however, their chances of influencing outcomes positively are attenuated at least to some degree.

A fit between school expectations and parent-involvement activities is an important mediating variable in the success of parent-involvement activities because the parent and school conduct most of their mutual business through the child (i.e., the child is the primary link between school and parent). The child occupies a position in this regard that might best be conceptualized as a boundary role: He or she is the party primarily responsible on a day-to-day basis for negotiating and moving between the demands and expectations of two usually separate entities. Parents and teachers may interact directly with each other frequently or intermittently, but it is the *child* who lives fully in each adult's domain and it is the child who is necessarily the person responsible for absorbing and responding to the full measure of each adult's expectations, demands, and requests. If there is a good fit between the two domains, the boundary role is relatively easy to fill, and the child can give maximum attention to the tasks of each in the context of an "easy" relation between the two. If the fit is poor, the child may be placed in the difficult and demanding position of filling a boundary role fraught with demands to translate, negotiate, and at times

ignore the rules and requests of one party when in the domain of the other. Many children are capable of filling this boundary role, even when there are some dimensions of poor fit, and do so with success; but the poorer the fit, the more time, energy, and skill the role demands. The time and energy involved in cases of poor fit are logically drawn from the specific learning tasks of either single domain, usually with some risks to success in those tasks. In cases of very poor fit, when the demands of the boundary role exceed the energy and resources of the person occupying the role, he or she may simply give up, accepting the tension under conditions of reduced effectiveness, or simply "drop out" of one domain or the other.

Optimally, the school and parent would work to fit *each other's* expectations; that is, each family-school "pair" would negotiate a common set of expectations, appropriate for child, parents, and school. In less than optimal and more frequently encountered situations, however, the family is usually assumed (by the school and the culture in general) to be in the best position to accommodate "the other." Thus we speak more of the parent's activities fitting the school than the school shaping its expectations around the varied expectations of many different families—although there are clearly excellent examples of creative and responsive school efforts (e.g., Comer & Haynes, 1991), numerous calls for school responsiveness to family situations in designing parent-involvement programs (e.g., Eccles & Harold, 1993; Epstein, 1991, 1994), and several suggestions of specific school variables that may be very important in creating increased parent involvement (e.g., teacher involvement practices [Epstein, 1986, 1991]; teachers' sense of efficacy [Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Brissie, 1987]). In any event, the better the "fit" between the parent's involvement activity choices and the school's expectations for parental involvement, the more appropriate and effective—from the child's perspective and experience—the parent's involvement activities are likely to be.

An important exception to the fit principle above occurs where there is clear agreement that neither the parent nor the school expects any parental involvement. Given the evidence in favor of parental involvement, efforts in such situations to create some degree of "poor fit"—that is, changing the school's and/or parent's expectations about parental involvement—may better serve most children's best interests than would simple acceptance of no involvement. School efforts to support a parent's involvement, or a parent's efforts to increase school acceptance of his or her activities, are likely to be more conducive to children's success than simple acceptance of a "no-involvement" norm, even if these efforts involve a modest measure of boundary role tensions for the child.

THE MODEL

The full model as described above is summarized in Figure 2. As suggested, we believe that parents become involved in their children's education primarily as a function of the parent's role construction, the parent's sense of efficacy for helping his or her children succeed in school, and the general opportunities and demands for involvement presented by children and their schools. If they choose to become involved, parents select specific involvement forms based primarily on the combination of (1) parents' specific skills and knowledge, (2) the mix of total demands (particularly from employment and family) on their time and energy, and (3) the specific demands and invitations for involvement they receive from their children and their children's schools. Parental involvement works to influence children's educational outcomes primarily through the mechanisms of modeling, reinforcement, and instruction, as tempered or mediated by parents' selection of developmentally appropriate involvement strategies and the fit between parental involvement activities and the school's expectations for their involvement.

EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES

The influence of parental involvement as experienced by children seems likely to function in keeping with the specific involvement activities that parents choose. For example, instruction on the value of asking questions or reading directions carefully seems likely to increase both (1) behaviors that are usually valued by teachers and (2) success in school assignments. Parents' modeling of varied school-relevant behaviors—ranging from helping with homework to volunteering in the school health room to organizing a playfield cleanup day—is likely to convey clearly the parent's valuing of attention and time devoted to school activities. Appropriate reinforcement of school success, and success-related behaviors, is also likely to increase children's sense of the importance of school and the significance of the identified behaviors. The cumulative effects of these sources of influence, we believe, are manifested primarily in two areas of developmental and educational outcome for children.

Skills and Knowledge

The parent's involvement activities are likely to support and enhance the child's skill and knowledge development. This seems particularly true when the parent employs the mechanism of instruction, and works, for example, on home drills to ensure that the child knows the multiplication tables, or talks through with the child the impact of the world economy on

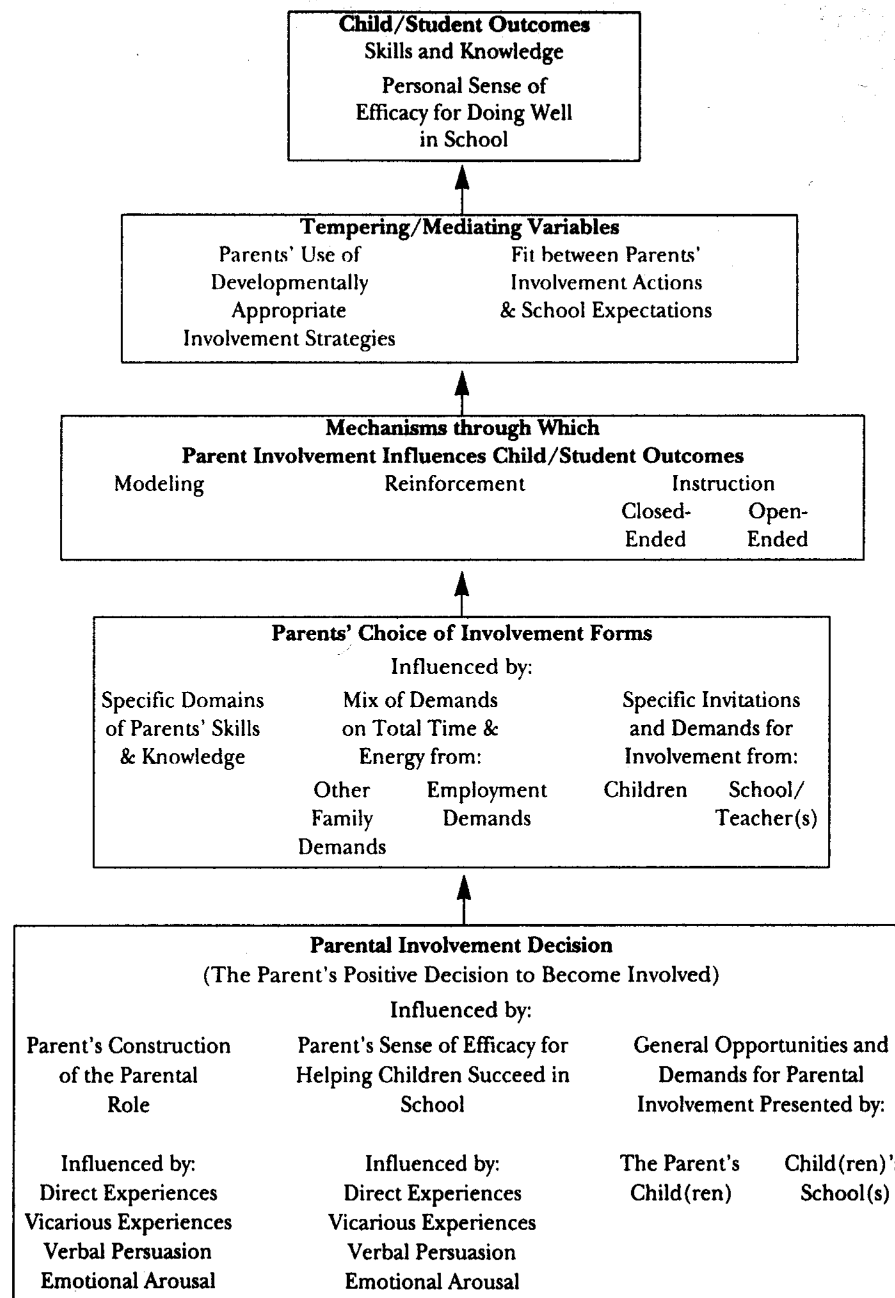

Figure 2. Causal and Specific Model of Parental Involvement, Focused on Variables of Major Significance That Are Also Subject to Intervention and Change

Hitler's rise to power for a World Civilization research project. Modeling and reinforcement are also likely to support skill and knowledge development, however. For example, in modeling the appropriateness of working on pertinent job or school tasks at home, or in contributing to discussion of school assignments, the parent's behavior is likely to support the child's school learning (especially as the activities are developmentally appropriate for the child and consistent with school expectations). Similarly, in reinforcing the value of listening and contributing in class, or sitting in the front row, or earning good grades, or completing homework, the parent's activities are likely to increase the child's learning of behaviors conducive to school success.

Personal Sense of Efficacy for Succeeding in School

The second, and perhaps more significant, outcome of parental involvement in children's education is the parent's contribution to the child's sense of efficacy for doing well in school (see also, e.g., Eccles, 1993). Just as the parent's sense of efficacy for helping the child succeed is developed through the operation of personal experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and emotional arousal, the parent's involvement in the child's educational experiences offers significant and powerful sources of efficacy development for the child. For example, as the parent reviews school work and offers praise, compliments the child's school performance, or provides direct and indirect instruction, he or she offers the child *experiential sources* of efficacy; the parent affirms success in the classroom, reinforces the positive value of academic accomplishment, and participates in developing the skills that enable academic success. In other modes of involvement, parents offer *vicarious experiences* that contribute to children's development of a personal sense of efficacy for succeeding in school. They do so, for example, in taking time to discuss the school day or a specific assignment, or talk with the teacher(s) about the child's work; in so doing, they demonstrate their own school-related skills, interests, and beliefs in the importance of focusing on academic tasks. Effectively involved parents also offer children multiple instances of *verbal persuasion*, as they encourage children to put forth more and effective effort, develop and explain limits and boundaries that encourage effective schoolwork, and explain the importance of succeeding in school. Parents who are involved also contribute to the *emotional arousal* implicated in the development of a personal sense of efficacy; they do so explicitly—as, for example, when they make clear their own expectations for the child's achievement of specific standards of behavioral or task performance—and implicitly as they reinforce the idea that the child's effort and achievement are significant to the parent as well as the child. Taken as a whole, these ideas suggest that children whose parents are involved in their education (in ways that create or reinforce direct experiences of educational success, offer vicarious experiences of educational success, offer verbal persuasion intended to develop attitudes, behaviors, and efforts consistent with school success, and create emotional arousal that underscores the personal importance of doing well in school) will be more likely to develop a strong, positive sense of efficacy for successfully achieving in school-related tasks than will children whose parents are not involved.

CONCLUSION

The model identifies what we believe to be the most significant variables in parents' decisions to become involved in their children's education, their choice of specific involvement forms, and the influence of their involvement on children's educational outcomes. The absence of other variables that are often included in discussions of parental involvement (e.g., parents' socioeconomic status) is not meant to discount their potential importance to full explanation of the role and functions of parental involvement, but rather to suggest that the variables here are the most powerful in explaining (1) why parents choose to become involved in their children's education, (2) what forms their involvement will take, and (3) why their involvement influences their children's educational outcomes.

We believe that the model offers specific advantages over many other discussions of the role and function of parents in their children's educational lives. First, it identifies parent involvement as a *process* that occurs over time and is dynamic. Second, it suggests that parental, school, child, and societal contributions taken *together* constitute the involvement process. Efforts to improve the process and its outcomes are probably well served by cooperative efforts to adjust specific points of intersection and varied contributions to the system; they are probably poorly served by blaming (e.g., "parents just aren't interested," "schools don't care") or unidimensional approaches intended to create "more involvement." Finally, it suggests specific points of entry into (or predictions about) the process of parental involvement and child outcomes for both research and practice—for those who wish to understand more adequately the functioning of specific variables at specific points in the process, and for those who wish to improve levels of parent involvement, the effectiveness of parent involvement, or the contributions of schools to parents' involvement levels and choices.

Note

1 We believe that these causal variables pertain for most parents. The major significant exception would seem to be parents whose life circumstances create very high sociodemo-

graphic risk for poor outcomes (e.g., a combination of low education, low or no income, marginal skills, never-married parental status, and poor health). Such high-risk parents would seem to need consistent satisfaction of these basis survival needs before the variables we discuss here are likely to emerge as salient to understanding their involvement choices and activities.

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