

JUST SIX
QUESTIONS

RESEARCH
SUMMARY



Parental involvement initiatives: An analysis

Key Details

KEY WORDS

Parent Grants, Parent Involvement, Educational Policy, Parental Involvement Model

POPULATION GROUP

All Youth

STEPPING UP THEMES

Strong, Supportive Friends & Families
Education, Training & Apprenticeships

RESEARCH ORIGIN

Ontario

SOURCE

Academic

“...carefully devised programs that strive to value parents’ existing knowledge and insights may avoid deficit-based approaches, potentially influencing parents’...beliefs about what they are able to do to support their children” (p. 25).

1. What is the research about?

This research is about the Parents Reaching Out Grants program, a provincial initiative that provides funding for parents to create programs that address barriers to parental involvement in education. The researchers looked at the types of programs that parents created between 2009 and 2014 to determine what kind of supports parents might need.

The research also questions mainstream ways of understanding parental involvement. The most popular model of understanding parental involvement is Epstein’s (1995), which includes *parenting*, *communication*, *volunteering*, *learning at home*, *decision making* and *collaborating with community* as ways parents can be involved. While Epstein’s model has been crucial in moving research about parents’ involvement forward, it has also been argued that the model focuses too much on school-based aspects of involvement, and doesn’t pay enough attention to the broader contexts that influence how parents are involved. Therefore, the researchers present a revised model that they believe can be used to better understand and support parental involvement.

2. Where did the research take place?

This research took place in Ontario.

3. Who is this research about?

This research is about parents who successfully applied for the Parents Reaching Out Grants program, and the programs they created.

4. How was the research done?

The researchers were interested in whether the school setting (e.g. elementary vs. secondary, English vs. French, urban vs. rural, etc.) influenced the types of programs that parents proposed to improve participation. In order to answer this question, they got a list of completed programs from the Ministry of Education, categorized all the programs under five labels, and then compared the programs across different school settings. The categories they used to label the programs were:

- a) support for well-being
- b) skills for home-based learning
- c) accessibility of resources and services
- d) parent-child communication
- e) home-school-community partnerships

The researchers also wanted to know whether the areas of support that parents identified in their programs would fit into Epstein's model for understanding parent involvement. To figure this out, they placed each program into one of the six categories in Epstein's model (*parenting, communication, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with community*).

5. What are the key findings?

Overall, parents across the various school settings described similar challenges and ways to improve parent involvement, focusing mostly on:

- parenting approaches for supporting wellbeing
- skills for home-based learning

However, there were some differences between the contexts, including:

- Parents of elementary school children needed more support with general parenting skills, home-based learning, and nutrition, while parents of youth in high school seemed to need more support with their children's mental health and guiding them through school transitions.
- Large urban areas seemed to need multi-language supports more than other settings. The focus here was on home-school and parent-parent partnerships, while trying to take parents' feedback on their own needs seriously.
- In schools that have lower socio-economic status (income, education, etc.), there appeared to be a stronger need for skills for home-based learning, and helping parents to get access to resources and services.

In regards to Epstein's model and mapping the parenting programs onto the categories in the model:

- The main areas proposed by parents fell under Epstein's categories of *parenting* and *learning at home*, which made up 71% of all programs. The categories *collaborating with community, decision making, and volunteering* made up 4% .
- Perhaps more importantly, the support for well-being category, developed by researchers, was the most common category of parent-initiated programs, but gets absorbed (and hidden) under Epstein's label of *parenting*. The researchers' category of parent-child communication, which also seemed important in the programs assessed, also gets subsumed into Epstein's label of *parenting*. As

such, Epstein's model may need to be improved to better represent and understand parental involvement.

- Finally, in light of the findings above, the researchers suggest using the categories in the model they developed to understand parental involvement: support for well-being; skills for home-based learning; accessibility of resources and services; parent-child communication; and home-school-community partnerships.

6. Why does it matter for youth work?

- Parents can be a vital resource to support youth wellbeing; the more involved parents are, the better youth do in school. This research provides insight about what influences parent involvement in different contexts in Ontario, and can be used to inform how programs think about and support parents' involvement.
- When thoughtfully designed, programs to improve parental involvement can provide support to parents in areas deemed important by parents (for example, in this study, support for well-being and skills for home-based learning). Yet, programs that try to teach skills or share knowledge may be seen as taking a deficits-based approach, and if programs are designed by parents who are already involved in traditional parental involvement activities (e.g. parent council), they may end up focusing on these types of traditional behaviours, while leaving out other less visible, less dominant practices.
- Therefore, programs that want to engage parents should explicitly value parents' knowledge and expertise, taking a strengths-based approach.
- The researchers suggest using their new model, and, in doing so, taking the focus off of parent leadership and volunteering in schools (by including these under the broader category of partnerships), which leaves more room to recognize parents' diverse ways of being involved.



Hamlin, D., & Flessa, J. (2016). Parental involvement initiatives: An analysis. *Educational Policy*, 1-31.

FIND IT ONLINE

<http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0895904816673739>