Does intervening to enhance parental involvement in education lead to better academic results for children? An extended review

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Abstract

This paper summarises the results of a review of the literature linking parental involvement in their child's education to attainment at or before primary school. The search involved nine electronic databases supplemented by other sources, and yielded 4,898 apparently relevant reports. Of these, 127 were reports of attempted evaluations to see whether enhancing parental involvement led to higher attainment outcomes for children. None of these studies was a large, robust evaluation. The overwhelming majority (121/127) reported research with serious limitations, and they were almost equally divided between those claiming success and those saying that the intervention had been ineffective or harmful. Of the remaining six, three offered positive outcomes, and these were generally complex interventions in which parental involvement was only part of a package of measures taken to improve results. Therefore, the paper has three main messages for an area where practice and policy interventions abound. Research has to improve greatly. Parental involvement is not, currently, known to be the solution to the problem of enhancing attainment for the lowest attainers at or before school. Where increased parental involvement is sought, it is better that this is only part of a wider approach involving formal schooling as well.

Introduction

The involvement of parents in their child's education is widely considered to be crucial in the development and well-being of the child. Attainment gaps between children from disadvantaged homes and those from more well-to-do families persist in the UK, despite numerous policies and initiatives by policy-makers and in schools to raise the attainment of the poorest children. One possible explanation, long proposed by some commentators and taken up enthusiastically by governments, lies in the differential involvement of their parents. Does this explanation actually work, in the sense that increasing parental involvement in those families with children at risk of low school achievement will lead to higher achievement? Or is it, like a claimed difference in attitudes and aspirations between social groups, an apparently cheap but actually ineffective way of moving attention away from a problem for education to a purported problem in the home (Gorard et al. 2012)? This paper answers these questions through a large and systematic review of the existing evidence.

Background

In England, government policy to enhance parental involvement in education was set out in the White Paper: Excellence in Schools (1997). The paper identified three ways of achieving this - by keeping parents informed, encouraging parental partnerships with schools, and involving parents in school decisions. In 2003, the role of parents was again highlighted, in the Green Paper: Every Child Matters (2003). One of the aims of this Green Paper was to ensure that every child had the chance to fulfill their potential by reducing school failure. The role of parental involvement was suggested as an important contributory factor in all children's level of attainment in school.

Since 2009, the national school inspection organisation OFSTED has placed an emphasis on getting schools to engage with parents, to improve the quality of communication between home and school, and to develop strategies that help parents support their children's learning at home. According to OFSTED (2009), one of the secrets of successful secondary schools is home-school communication. In 2010, the Schools White Paper for England outlined the government's strategy to raise the attainment of disadvantaged children and narrow the achievement gap (Department for Education 2010). Following this, the Field Review on Poverty and Life Chances made a number of recommendations, specifically identifying the importance of the role of parents in the early development of children (Field 2010).

There is some basis for all of this policy and practice concern. Successive large scale studies have shown a strong association between the level of parental involvement and school outcomes for children (Cooper et al. 2010, Department for Children, Schools and Families 2008, Desforges with Abouchaar 2003). A recent synthesis of nine meta-analyses confirms this positive relationship between parental involvement and academic achievement across different age ranges and ethnic groups (Wilder 2013). Gorard et al. (2012) conducted a wide-ranging review of the evidence linking attainment to attitudes and aspirations, and concluded that only parental involvement in education offered any promise as a causal contributor to attainment. In their review for the DfE, Goodall and Vorhaus (2011) found many promising family learning programmes. There were also notable examples of effective interventions to support home-school links and to provide training to parents on how to support their children's learning. They cited The Manchester Transition Project, and the SPOKES, FAST (Families and Schools Together) and SAAF programmes as examples of these (see below).

However, while these projects were impressive in enhancing parental involvement to support learning (Goodall and Vorhaus 2011), the learning outcomes themselves were either not evaluated, or else the studies did not find a clear positive impact. The cited effects of such programmes involved improving parents' involvement, attitude and understanding of their role. Or in the case of SPOKES and FAST, the evaluations were about children's social-emotional and behavioural outcomes, but not school attainment outcomes directly. Where school outcomes were measured, studies that reported positive effects tended to be those that relied on parents and/or teacher ratings. When standardised assessments were used, as they should be, the impacts were usually non-existent. Gorard and See (2013a) conducted a follow-up to their review of attitudes by focusing solely on parental interventions, and found the overall evidence to be weaker than originally supposed.

So the overall situation currently is that there is an established link between parental involvement and child performance at school. There are interventions that have been shown to enhance parental involvement, and may improve wider outcomes such as child behavior or attitudes. But we do not know whether intervening will improve attainment at school.

Despite this, and as illustrated above, a raft of initiatives have been planned and implemented to encourage greater parental engagement based on incomplete and often flawed evidence. This involves considerable money, time and effort for those involved (parents, teachers, organisers, programme delivers and children). For practical and funding purposes, it is essential to know which, if any, of these initiatives are effective in achieving their objectives and which have not been so successful. In this way any promising ones can be replicated and less promising ones can be discontinued.

It is important to recall throughout this paper that the concern here is solely about the impact of parental involvement on attainment. The paper is not about parenting more generally, whether attainment matters, or whether there is a correlation between parental involvement and attainment.

Methods

This paper can present only a summary of what were in effect three systematic reviews of evidence, and focuses here on families with pre-school and primary age children (for reasons of space). The full methods and findings, including for secondary-age, can be found at See and Gorard (2013), and See (2015a, 2015b). Here they are presented as one over-arching systematic review.

The studies in this review were sought in nine educational, sociological and psychological databases (ERIC, psycInfo, ASSIA, British Educational Index, Australian Education Index, Sociological Abstracts, Social Services Abstracts, Proquest Theses, and IBSS). The search was limited to those reported or published in the English language, and dated from 1990 to 2014. These were supplemented by expertise, reference lists from prior reviews and meta-analyses, and internet searches using Google and Google Scholar. Some studies will inevitably have been missed, but it seems unlikely that including any of these harder to find studies would have altered the overall results reported here.

The review considered any evaluation of parental involvement programmes intended to enhance parents' participation in their child's learning and so raise attainment. The main outcomes of interest included school readiness and performance on standardised tests, but also teacher assessments, school attendance and attitude towards subjects. A very broad search was conducted using the following keywords and their synonyms:

> parents (and synonyms) carer/caregiver/guardian; attainment/achievement/school outcome/learning outcome/school readiness/key stage/exam/qualification/test score/literacy/numeracy; trial/experiment/instrumental variables/regression discontinuity/evaluation/intervention/programme/initiative/research; engagement/involvement/parenting/interest/expectation; children/child/school

A total of 4,898 relevant research reports were picked up. This paper only considers those involving children from birth up to the age of transition to secondary school in the UK (11-12). These were screened in stages, first reading the title, abstracts and then the full-text. Duplicates, those that did not meet the inclusion criteria, and anything reported so badly as to be incomprehensible were removed. Studies were excluded if they made clear that there was no intervention to improve children's school outcomes, or no attempt to evaluate the impact on attainment. Studies were also excluded if they were solely for children with special needs or severe social and behavioural difficulties (not part of the intended study). In total 147 relevant studies were retained for in-depth analysis, but 20 of the interventions reported were later found not to have been evaluated at all (i.e. the report was just a description of practice).

The remaining 127 results were summarized by phase of schooling, reported impacts and types of interventions. To determine how much confidence to place on the findings, the quality of evidence was assessed based on the elements of research design, including appropriateness of the comparators and analysis used, sample size, attrition, and other threats to validity (Gorard 2013). Where these issues were not reported, or they were inappropriate less reliance was placed on the reported findings. For example, several studies reported a positive impact even though there was no evidence presented. Worse, some ignored their own reported data and drew contradictory conclusions. In general reports' conclusions are ignored, and judgements are made on the quality of the evaluations as reported, using the classification detailed in Gorard (2014). Therefore, each study leads to two judgements – one on how effective the intervention has been, and one on how trustworthy the evidence for it is. It is important to realise that these two are completely independent of each other.

Summary of findings

Of the 127 distinct studies, the majority involved training parents and/or giving them support to support their children, and they were relatively evenly divided between those before formal schooling, and those undertaken while the child was in primary or preparing for secondary school (Table 1). Of course, in reality it is hard to classify what are often complex and multi-faceted approaches.

Table 1- Types of interventions found in the review, by age group of interest

	pre-school	school age	across ages	Total
Shared reading	10	2		12
Home instruction	10	1		11
Parent training/support	17	22	3	47
Home-school partnership	4	17	2	23
Parent as teacher	5			5
Use of IT		2	1	3
Family literacy		7	4	11
Homework		3		3

involvement				
Parents in class		2		2
Combination/others	12	3		15
Total	59	67	10	127

Interventions for young children, before or preparing for school

The majority of studies for this age group were about supporting parents to facilitate home learning. Several (22) reported positive effects for parental involvement, but most of these provided very weak, low quality evidence (Table 2). Most had flaws in their design, such as tiny samples, or no pre- post-test comparisons. Few used randomisation to create a comparator group. Five had no comparison group at all. Where the samples were larger, attrition was usually high (e.g. Landry et al. 2011 had 37% attrition). Two studies only used teachers' perceptions of improvements to judge progress.

Table 2 - Parental involvement interventions for children up to age 5

	No benefit	Mixed or unclear	Positive impact
Strong evidence	0	0	0
Medium evidence	2	0	2
Weak evidence	22	12	20

Note: The columns represent the reported results of each study. The rows represent the security of the findings.

Many studies were really pseudo-evaluations. For example, a purported evaluation of the PEEP project (Barlow and Coe 2013) considered the efficacy of the use of PEEP-trained practitioners based on anecdotal reports by participants of the services provided, rather than using the outcomes of children. Even where evaluated, results tended to be inconclusive because of their weak design. For example, a UK study of Book Start used only 43 children, and reported a positive impact using a comparison group matched on gender, age and ethnicity (Wade and Moore 2000). However, the matched children may be crucially different in terms of socio-economic status, which can be an important factor in children's performance at schools and in the involvement of parents.

The two most promising interventions were for children aged 3 to 5. They involved a combination of school strategies where teachers worked with parents to enhance the home and school environment.

The Chicago Child-Parent Centre had what appears to be a positive impact on the learning outcomes of children, and the work was judged to be of medium quality. This programme combines parental involvement, home support and classroom strategies (Denton 2011, Reynolds et al. 2011, Barnard 2001). It includes a nine-month programme of three hours of intervention for five days a week plus a 6-week summer programme. Parents are required to attend and be involved in centres for one half day per week. The school component of the programme includes teacher-directed whole class instruction, small group activities, field trips and play. In every CPC there is also a staffed parent resource room, and so the programme requires active parental participation. The emphasis is on a child-centred and individualised approach to

social and cognitive development. Pre-school participation in the programme had a consistent and lasting effect. The results are reasonably impressive given the scale of the sample (1,400 children), and because comparisons were made with other pre-school interventions such as Head Start. However because of the multiple components of the programme it is not clear which aspects of the programme are related to parental involvement, and it is therefore hard to isolate the specific programme effects.

ParentCorps is a home-school partnership programme, based on after-school group sessions where parents learn effective behaviour management (Brotman 2013). This was a reasonable scale study involving 1,050 children randomised to treatment conditions. Participating children out-scored control children on standardised tests in reading and on teacher assessments of writing and maths. In some ways, ParentCorps is similar to the Chicago-Child Parent Center in its approach in that it is a multiple component programme. It combines promoting parenting skills, improving classroom quality and a family programme to teach parents and children strategies in managing children's behaviour. It involves enhancing teachers' skills in helping to identify and address the needs of children in early childhood settings.

Overall, a summary of the pieces portrayed in Table 2 is that there is as yet no clear evidence that increased parental involvement works in terms of improving attainment for very young children. The evidence base is poor, and the slightly better studies are split in terms of their findings. The two medium-quality studies reporting success were balanced by two others reporting no success, and anyway included more than parental involvement in their programmes.

Unpromising approaches

A large number of interventions that have been evaluated, albeit weakly, show no promise of improving attainment for young children. These include parent-child reading (Baker 2011, Terry 2011). A UK study found dialogic reading had no impact on children's language skills (Morgan 2008). The biggest study involving a randomised controlled trial of 552 children in Australia suggested training parents in shared reading activities actually had a negative impact on vocabulary and home literacy (Goldfeld et al. 2011). A similar result occurred in Canada (Sénéchal et al. 2008), and in the US (Lonigan and Whitehurst 1998). A key determinant appears to be the parent's prior level of literacy. Some of these studies, especially those conducted by the intervention developer, did appear to 'dredge' for news of success – such as success on one measure of vocabulary.

Another area with lack of success was home instruction programmes. Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY) had no benefit for children's learning outcomes (Brown 2008, Moore 2011, Necoechea 2007, Nievar et al. 2008). In fact, there were some negative results. For example, Garcia (2012) found that non-HIPPY children performed better than HIPPY children on a reading test.

Home-school partnership programmes have not been shown to work. The Manchester Transition Project in the UK which trains school staff to work with parents of children in the foundation stage, for example, does not show any evidence of impact on learning outcomes (Waller 2002). As with other types of interventions the reported

success comes from an enrichment element at school rather than parental involvement as such. The Getting Ready Intervention did show an improvement in school readiness using teacher reports, but not on standardised tests. The results are also inconclusive because 46% of initial participants dropped out.

There is also not enough evidence that parents as teachers (PAT) have beneficial effects on learning outcomes for young children (Beach 2004, Mendoza 2008, Roberts 2002). Only one study (Sutherland 2009) reported that PAT children did better than non-PAT children on the kindergarten Stanford Test. This evidence is questionable as comparisons were based on post-test mean scores only. Since PAT is available to all families, those who chose to participate may well have been different at the outset to those who did not.

Studies with inconclusive evidence

Almost all of the studies found and retained (121/127) were weak or very weak in terms of their evaluations. Only a few examples can be outlined here as illustrations. Some studies did not report all test results, or preferred the developers' own tests (Nutbrown and Hannon 2011). Sometimes they reported only changes in parental attitude or behavior, while claiming success for the intervention in enhancing attainment (Evangelou et al. 2008), or the only 'attainment' outcomes were judgements by parents or teachers about a child's progress (Willmott et al. 2009). These were both evaluations of parent training/home support. Another on the same topic was the London Literacy Champions (Cole et al. 2012), which used community volunteers to enhance parents' ability to support their children. It claimed significant improvements in children's literacy skills, but these were based only on reports by parents and volunteers, and it is well-known that participants in interventions generally feel that they are successful even when other measures show that they are not. Further, the children's performance was not compared with any counterfactual group at all, making it impossible to judge if any progress was the result of the intervention or not. These are really pseudo-evaluations.

The evidence for parent support programmes is also inconclusive even though all 13 relevant studies reported a positive effect on children's learning outcomes. Sometimes again there was no comparator group (a fairly basic element of any true evaluation it would seem). Barbre (2003) reported that all children on a 36-week parent support programme improved their English, but with no comparison group it is not possible to say whether this improvement was any more than would have happened over time anyway. Two UK studies looked at the Basic Skills Agency Family Literacy programme, and reported improvements in children's vocabulary or reading and writing, but they again did not make any comparison with non-participating children (Brooks et al. 1996, Jon et al. 2009).

Sometimes the evidence is simply inconclusive even though the same intervention has been looked at repeatedly. For example, one evaluation of the Sure Start programme in the UK reported positive effects on children's cognitive outcomes (Ford and McDougall 2009), while another found no effects on children's school readiness (Melhuish et al. 2010). The situation for Head Start and Early Head Start is similar with relatively weak studies, including those with no comparators or unfair ones,

showing both benefits and no benefits (Chang et al. 2009, Starkey and Klein 2000, Hughes 2003, St Pierre et al. 2005).

Parental interventions for children of primary age

As with younger children, the headline finding of the review for primary age children is that the quality of evidence is very weak (Table 3). The clear majority of studies are of poor quality, and is conflicting evidence as to the effectiveness of parental involvement. Only two studies are of medium quality and these have findings that contradict each other at this general level. In general, there was either no evidence that outcomes were evaluated or, if evaluated, the findings were based on a weak design. There were some pieces where evaluations were attempted but the quality of the studies was so poor that the results were difficult to interpret.

Table 3 - Parental involvement interventions for children up age 5-11

	No benefit	Mixed or unclear	Positive impact
Strong evidence	0	0	0
Medium evidence	1	0	1
Weak evidence	18	5	35

The majority of interventions for this age group were those that support parents to help them with their children's learning, and those that involved a certain amount of home-school collaboration. Most reported positive effects, but in all of the studies apart from one the evidence was weak. Most of these studies had very small samples such as 14 (Sparkes 1995) or 18 cases (Boggess 2008), no random assignment to groups (e.g. Morrison 2009), assessment based on self-reports by teachers or parents (e.g. Beckett et al. 2012), no comparison group (e.g. York 2006) or no pre- post-test comparisons to assess improvements (e.g. Hampton et al. 1998). A number of studies also compared children of parents who volunteered for the programme with those who did not, thus introducing a clear potential for bias in the results which went unremarked in the original reports (e.g. Rhimes 1991, Calnon 2005). The lack of non-random allocation and pre- post-test comparisons with baseline equivalence means that groups may have been different at the outset. One medium evidence study (Bradshaw et al. 2009) suggested a positive impact, but the study was again a complex one and again showed that the classroom aspect of the intervention was more important than the parent-focused component.

Unpromising approaches

For children at primary school, training parents in reading strategies and providing reading resources did not seem to have any beneficial impact. Training parents in phonemic awareness and read-aloud skills had no clear effects on children's reading skills (Warren 2010). In general, there is no evidence that simply providing information to parents or getting parents to volunteer in school activities works in improving school outcomes. As with the earlier age group, where home-school collaborations have been seen as successful, they are often implemented in conjunction with other school-wide improvement programmes, making it difficult to determine if the parenting element works or not.

The evidence for home-school collaboration is mixed. Four studies indicated negative effects, two mixed results and five suggested positive effects. Two studies did not evaluate academic achievement, and two claimed a positive impact on academic achievement even though achievement was not measured (Enriques-Olmos 2002, Coleman-Merritt 2004). Two positive studies correlated home-school involvement with achievements, but did not establish any form of causal model.

Training parents to work with children at home also had no evidence of benefit. Several such approaches were reported to do more harm than good. Six showed negative effects on school outcomes and one had mixed effects. The only medium quality study suggests a negative effect on children's reading comprehension (Villiger et al. 2011).

Involving parents in home literacy activities also appears to be ineffective in raising attainment. Five studies showed no intervention effects on reading. One found that school-implemented reading interventions were more effective (Hughes 2006). In another, the comparator children actually made greater progress (De la Furente Garcia 2004). The only UK study (National Literacy Trust 2010) did not measure children's reading ability. In almost all of the studies, reading activities at home were based on the parents' own report. Similarly, there is also no evidence that involving parents in homework has any beneficial effect. Those that reported positive impact had the usual serious methodological flaws, such as having no comparator or tiny, imbalanced samples.

Studies with inconclusive evidence

There is no good evidence that parent-child reading has beneficial effects for children aged over five. Only two studies were found, both reporting a positive impact on children's reading and vocabulary (Sparkes 1995, Rasinski and Stevenson 2005). Both were very small scale and without a clearly fair comparison group (one had only 14 children, the other 30).

One UK study (Feiler 2003) reported that the Literacy Early Action Project (LEAP) had the effect of moving children up in class rankings. This study involved only four children and had no comparison group. Falbo et al. (2001) suggested that parental monitoring and participation in schoolwork can have positive effects on children's school grades, number of credits earned and school attendance. But this is again extreme over-claiming. The study had 26 children with no account of how these were selected for participation, and no comparator.

There is also no clear evidence that home education is effective. Only one study was found for this phase. This reported that children on the Home Education Literacy Programme (HELP) outperformed control children in reading comprehension (ES=0.67), and so there is some promise here. The sample was not large (n=146), and these children were allocated non-randomly by classes to intervention or comparator group, meaning that there is a good chance of a class or teacher effect.

Six of the 10 studies concerning parental support reported positive effects, two mixed effects and two no benefit. A UK study on the SPOKES and Incredible Years home support programmes (Beckett et al. 2012) reported that treatment children improved

in their behaviour and reading more than a control group. The evidence was considered weak because the sample (n=171) was divided into four groups, no objective measurements of reading were used, and there was 40% dropout by parents. These parents are likely to be different to those who stayed on. Another UK study using the Karmiloff-Smith's model of scaffolding children's understanding of balance concepts (Philips and Tolmie 2007) was also fairly small scale (n=82). Two of the US studies which reported positive intervention effects were small scale. One had only 18 children (Boggess 2008), the other had 60 (Lavelle-Lore 2014).

The evidence for home-school partnership is also inconclusive because of some weaknesses in the studies. An evaluation of FAST, a multi-component intervention to encourage home-school partnership, followed children from kindergarten up to 4th grade and reported positive effects on children's reading, maths and language. But there were no pre- post-test comparisons so it was difficult to say if non-participating children made the same progress (Hampton et al. 1998). McDonald et al. (2006) evaluated a FAST programme for children aged 6-10 and reported effects on children's school engagement, social skills and behaviour and some measures of learning outcomes, but these were largely based on teacher ratings.

Evidence for Project Ease (Early Access to Success in Education) is mixed. One study (Jordan et al. 2000) claimed positive effects on vocabulary, comprehension and reading. Another study (Steiner 2008), a replication, reported no effects on all measures of literacy apart from concepts of print.

A UK study (Sylva et al. 2008) evaluated the combined effects of a parent training programme (Incredible Years) and a literacy programme (Pause, Prompt and Praise) also under the intervention name SPOKES (see above). The study reported positive effects on word reading and writing but not using other measures of literacy. This study has potential but the evidence is weak because of the small scale (only 50 in each treatment arm), and the primary outcome was not specified in advance. The approach could be scaled up and robustly evaluated, but as with other promising approaches it is not possible to attribute any success specifically to the parental involvement element.

MegaSkills is a multi-component intervention that includes parent workshops and classroom skills aimed at developing 11 mega-skills, such as problem-solving, perseverance, initiative, confidence, effort and motivation. Its evaluation was a medium size study involving 1,600 pupils from five schools representing different phases of schooling (primary, middle school and high school). All of the schools reported impressive improvements in reading and maths (Chavkin et al. 2000). However, results were reported for only four schools, and the improvements made in maths and reading were reported for only some year groups. There appears to be selective reporting. Comparisons of results were made with previous years' cohorts, which is not ideal because changes in national curriculum, testing and exam criteria over the years can have an influence on students' test scores. The complex intervention also made it difficult to determine if it was the parent component that made the difference. What is needed is a much clearer evaluation of only the parental involvement components of interventions like this, and with a pre-specified outcome by which success or failure will be judged.

Discussion

Regrettably, the main conclusion of this new review has to be no one seems to have tested whether parental involvement works, in terms of enhanced attainment for children. There are no large, strongly designed studies on this topic despite considerable expenditure by policy-makers and practitioners and thousands of pieces of research by academics. The situation is poor in the UK and not much better elsewhere. While there are a few indications of good practice, and some promising developments on the horizon, some of the best and most understandable studies are still lamentably poor in quality – such as those comparing the results for volunteer parents with those who refused to participate, and attributing success to the process of participation. Elementary research safeguards for protecting readers, the public and even researchers themselves from being misled – such as ensuring unbiased comparators from the outset – are being ignored. This is a serious ethical issue that should be addressed urgently by research funders and reviewers.

At present, the kinds of activities to enhance parental involvement described at the start of this paper are therefore based on an insecure premise. They may do more harm than good, if only by using resources that could have been used to better effect elsewhere. Like enhancing aspiration or improving attitudes to school, parental involvement (or lack of it) is obviously an attractive idea to some commentators for a number of reasons. It sounds like a cheap solution to the poverty gradient in the UK and elsewhere. It places the 'blame' for any perceived lack of success on individuals and families rather than the education system or the government that controls it. And it appears to explain the correlation between parental involvement and attainment. However, as this paper demonstrates, all of these claims are illusory. The answer to overcoming the disadvantage attainment gap currently lies elsewhere (Gorard and See 2013b).

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