Parental Involvement in Education: The COVID-19 Panacea?

The achievement gap of disadvantaged students has always been large, and is still widening. Even more now, during the COVID-19 pandemic. Parental involvement is seen as an important strategy for closing this gap. The question is whether this optimism is warranted. A review of the literature pointed to a considerable diversity in parental involvement typologies, classifications, roles, forms, and activities. A synthesis of the results from twelve meta-analyses showed that the average effect of involvement on attainment is small. The type of involvement with the strongest effect appeared to be parents having high aspirations and expectations for their child. Prudence is called for, however, as there are many limitations to studying parental involvement in a reliable and valid way.

1. COVID-19, Educational Disadvantage, and Parents

During the recent COVID-19 pandemic most children were not allowed to visit their school and had to stay at home. In the spring of 2020 nearly 90 percent of the world student population faced school closure.[1] As an alternative, teachers directed educational activities via remote teaching, such as the internet, radio, TV and smartphones, and homeschooling resources.[2] Efforts to continue providing education to students differed significantly, however, largely depending on differences in access to (didactic) technologies, both at school and at home. Schools and teachers had to switch to distance learning overnight, without having had any prior experience, preparation or training.[3] But perhaps even more challenging were the new tasks for parents. Many faced economic hardship in addition to trying to balance child caring and homeschooling activities and working from home.[4] Especially for disadvantaged families, characterized by parents having had no or only a low level of schooling and an ethnic/immigrant background, this proved to be an almost unsurmountable obstacle.

Educational underachievement resulting from socioeconomic and ethnic/immigrant factors in the home environment is perceived as a serious and persisting problem.[5][6] Concrete indicators of underachievement are, for instance, weak test results, repeating grades, low tracks of secondary education, unqualified school leaving/drop-out, and limited transfer to higher education. The interest in the achievement gap between children from lower socioeconomic milieus and ethnic/immigrant backgrounds on the one hand and those from higher milieus and ethnic majority backgrounds on the other hand started in the 1960s and still continues.[7][8] Extremely disappointing is the conclusion of quite a number of recent studies, which demonstrate that the educational gaps by social class and ethnic/immigrant origin have not closed but are actually widening.[9][10][11] Really worrisome is the finding that now, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, school closures have enlarged this achievement gap even more. Reasons given are that disadvantaged students tend to have less access to technology (internet, laptops), have no physical space for studying at home, receive no or only little support from their parents, and spend less time learning compared with their more well-off peers.[12][13] In educational disadvantage policies and programs all sorts of parental involvement and participation activities have always received much attention. Now, as the educational arrears are increasing, there is a renewed interest in the role of parents.

To counter the negative effects of school closures during the pandemic, the Dutch Ministry of Education has awarded an extra total budget of 8.3 billion euros to the educational sector. In primary and secondary education this is €700 per student per school year; schools with disadvantaged students receive more. The schools have much freedom in spending the extra money. There is one condition: the activities chosen have to be evidence-based, that is, they should be based on rigorous research evidence. Schools must select activities from a list of interventions originally compiled by the English Education Endowment Foundation's Teaching and Learning Toolkit. One of the interventions concerns Parental

Engagement, with effect sizes ranging from -0.14 to 0.65, and an average effect of 0.22. It seems somewhat odd that this intervention has been qualified as "evidence-based" as, according to Cohen's rule of thumb interpretation an effect of this seize is a negligible effect.[14] This article focuses on possible stimulating and compensating roles of parents in education and aims at answering two questions: (1) What types of parental involvement can be discerned? and (2) What are the effects of parental activities on their children's attainment? The underlying question is: How evidence-based is the effectiveness claim really?

2. Types of Parental Involvement

In the literature, various definitions and terms are used when referring to forms of cooperation and collaboration between parents, teachers, schools, and the local community.[15][16][17] Some examples are: parental involvement; parental participation; parental engagement; school-family relations; school-family-community partnerships; and educational partnerships. For the sake of readability, henceforth we will use "parental involvement" wherever possible. Research on parental involvement has shown that there are considerable differences in the level of involvement and that this variation to a high degree depends on the socioeconomic position and ethnic/immigrant background of the parents.[18][19]

Epstein et al.[20] developed a framework of six types of parental involvement. Central is the notion of partnership in combination with a theory of overlapping spheres of influence. The three institutions, or contexts, distinguished are: family, school, and the local community. It is assumed that they to a certain extent share vital goals, which therefore can best be reached by communicating and cooperating. The three institutions are viewed as spheres of influence which overlap to a greater or lesser degree. This congruence is of importance for the optimal development of children, and partnership is considered as an essential agent to realize this. Teachers, parents and community members and institutions are all regarded as partners with their own and their shared roles, tasks and responsibilities. At the core of the six types of involvement are two central notions of caring: trusting and respecting. The six types are: parenting; communicating; volunteering; learning at home; decision-making; collaborating with the community.

Barger et al.[21] were interested in the various forms of parental involvement and their specific effects on various children's outcomes. They departed from the definition of parental involvement as parents' commitment of resources, such as time, energy, and money, to the academic context of their children's lives. Based on a review of the literature, they first distinguished between two broad forms of parental involvement, namely school-based involvement, and home-based involvement, and then discerned several more specific modes of involvement: participation; governance; discussion and encouragement; cognitive-intellectual; homework involvement.

Smit et al.[22] developed yet another typology of parents and school strategies aimed at the creation of effective partnerships. The strategies discerned focus on the following core elements: developing a vision of parental involvement; expanding the visibility and approachability of the school team by creating contact moments; taking into consideration the concerns of parents; connecting to what parents find interesting and have an affinity with; bearing in mind the quality of the communication between school and parents; stimulating creativity and initiative; and giving parents time to learn something from the school team. The characteristics were condensed into six profiles in terms of the extent to which the parents show formal versus informal involvement in their child's school and education. The six types are: the supporter; the absentee; the politician; the career-maker; the tormentor; the super parent.

Fox and Olsen[16] developed a conceptual model of parental engagement combining modes of parental involvement and children's outcomes. They discerned family-led learning and family-school partnership. Regarding the former they distinguished: high expectations; shared reading; parent-child conversation around learning, social issues, and family stories; homework support that provides an appropriate environment for learning; cognitively stimulating environment; support for social and emotional wellbeing, peer relationships, and teacher relationships. Regarding the latter they distinguished: communication about children's wellbeing and progress; communication about what children are learning and what families can do; engagement in the school community and positive attitudes to school.

The examples of types of parental involvement presented here point to a considerable diversity in typologies, classifications, roles, forms, and activities. At the same time, and notwithstanding this apparent diversity, almost all are ordered along the lines of just a few perspectives, namely locus (at home/at school), style (formal/informal), action (active/passive), and actor (parent/student/school). Important, however, is the question whether all of this involvement leads to the desired effect, which is the improvement of educational chances in general, and specifically those of disadvantaged students.

3. Effects of Parental Involvement

On the one hand, many hundreds of studies have concluded that a stronger parental involvement in their children's schooling is positively related to their cognitive and social functioning.[23][24] On the other hand, there are also numerous studies that have shown null effects, or even negative effects.[15][25][26][27] In addition, researchers point to the so-called file-drawer effect, which implies that studies with null or no effects often are not submitted to scientific journals and have a lesser chance of being accepted).[28] As a result positive effects probably are highly inflated. Furthermore, most of the studies on parental involvement use cross-sectional and correlational designs, which do not permit causal interferences.[29]

In this section the focus is on review studies and (statistical) meta-analyses. An advantage of the latter is that effects are expressed in a quantitative effect-size, a coefficient that gives an idea of the strength of a relation or effect. According to Cohen[30], who provided a rule of the thumb, an effect size (*d*) of 0.20 can be considered as small, of 0.50 as medium, and of 0.80 as large. In the pursuit for appropriate studies firstly a web-based search was performed using combinations of (alternatives for) "parental involvement" and "student achievement", and "meta-analysis" or "review study", with a limitation to studies published after the year 2000. In addition, the "snowball method" and the author's bookshelves were used to locate more studies. A total of twelve studies were identified. In the following overview the results of the findings will be presented in a compressed form, thereby concentrating on three aspects, viz. the overall effect of parental involvement; the effects of specific types of involvement; and their relationship with socioeconomic and ethnic and immigrant background.

In a synthesis of nine meta-analyses, Hattie[27] found an effect size of 0.51 for the average effect of parental involvement on achievement, a medium effect. Hattie established that there is much variance in the influence of parental involvement. When it involves a surveillance approach, the effects are negative; there are weaker effects in case the involvement relates to early interventions, and much stronger effects when it comprises parental aspirations and expectations, and when parents are more actively involved.

Shute et al.[29] included 74 studies in their review, focusing on secondary education. According to them identifying the influence of parental involvement is complicated: different definitions are used; hardly any experimental studies exist; mediating factors and interacting variables are often ignored. They concluded that there seldom is more than a small-to-moderate association between any of the various forms of parental involvement and academic achievement. The strongest associations appear to be: discussions about school activities between parent and child (positive); parents' aspirations and expectations for their children (positive); and parental styles, in particular an authoritative style (positive) and authoritarian and permissive styles (both negative).

Jeynes[31] performed a meta-analysis of 51 studies focusing on urban areas. He concentrated on involvement programs, distinguishing between a general involvement program and a range of specific types of involvement programs. He did not differentiate between different types of achievement measures, however. The effect sizes ranged from 1.91 to -0.21; all but two effects were positive. The overall involvement program produced an effect size of 0.30.

In their review study, Bakker et al.[32] examined a total of 111 studies into effects of parental involvement on cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes (motivation, well-being, self-esteem). The results showed that for students of all ages involvement of parents at home is the most effective strategy. Significantly less important is the involvement in school and the contact between parents and teachers. They conclude that effects in general are small or even very small. On a total of 135 effects, 78 percent was positive, was 19 negative, and 4 percent was a null effect.

Wilder[33] synthesized the results of nine meta-analyses. He found that the relationship was positive, regardless of the type of parental involvement or the measure of achievement. This association was strongest if involvement was defined as parental expectations for academic achievement of their children; the influence was weakest if involvement was operationalized as homework assistance. The relationship between parental involvement and academic achievement was consistent across different grade levels and ethnic groups.

Castro et al.[34] performed a meta-analysis of 37 studies and differentiated between seven modes of involvement: general involvement; communication with children; homework; parental expectations; reading with children; parental attendance and participation; parental style. In addition they discerned seven measures of academic achievement: general achievement; mathematics; reading; sciences; social studies; foreign language; other. Effect sizes varied from 0.01 to 0.22, that is, non-existent to small. The average effect size of 0.12 can be interpreted as less than small. Strongest linked to high achievement are parental activities focusing on general supervision of the children's learning activities, such as having high academic expectations for their children, communication with them about school matters, and helping them to develop adequate reading habits. The largest effect was for secondary education (0.14), followed by primary education (0.13) and kindergarten (0.05).

For his meta-analysis Danişman[35] collected a total of 1640 empirical research studies, but only 119 could be included in the multilevel analyses. That so many of the studies did not meet the inclusion criteria (often regarding methodology) is typical of this type of studies. The results of the analyses demonstrated that parental involvement has a positive effect of 0.43 on student achievement. Danişman also examined the role of several moderator variables in the relation involvement-achievement. He found no statistically significant difference between the effect of the age groups examined, viz. preschool, elementary school, middle school, high school, and university. Neither were there statistical differences according to school subject, viz. language, mathematics, science, or other.

In a meta-analysis of 28 studies, Jeynes[36] focused on the academic achievement and school behavior of pre-kindergarten to college-age children of Latinos. Results indicated a significant relationship between parental involvement and academic achievement and overall outcomes, but not for school behavior. For parental involvement as a whole, the effects on achievement ranged from 1.90 to -0.12, with an average effect of 0.52. This relationship existed both for younger and older students. However, when sophisticated controls were used, the effect size decreased dramatically, from 0.52 to 0.22. In addition, the effects were stronger for non-standardized academic outcomes (1.28) than for standardized outcomes (0.31). Jeynes found no differences for reading, math, science, and social studies. The analyses also indicated that parental style and strong parent-child communication were associated with higher levels of academic achievement.

Boonk et al.[15] analyzed the results of 75 studies and made a distinction between the phases of early childhood education, elementary school, and middle school and beyond. They found small to medium associations between parental involvement and academic achievement. The most consistent and positive relations were found for: reading at home; parents holding high expectations for their children; communication between parents and children regarding school; and parental encouragement and support for learning. Boonk et al. caution that only 61 percent of the effects are positive, while 15 percent are negative, and in 24 percent of the cases there is no effect. Rather than assuming that any form of involvement is a good thing, educators, parents, and researchers should therefore be aware that some forms of involvement just do not work or might actually lead to declines in achievement. To make matters even more complicated, Boonk et al. remark that not all forms of parental involvement are the same for all ethnic/racial groups.

Barger et al.[21] performed a statistical meta-analysis of 448 studies and reported positive associations (0.26 to 0.47) between parental involvement and the children's achievement, engagement, and motivation. Different types of involvement, such as parents' participation in school events and discussion of school with children, were positively related, homework assistance, though, was negatively associated with their children's achievement (-0.15). According to Barger et al. there is reason to believe that multiple dimensions of children's outcomes reinforce one another over time. The analyses also revealed that little variation existed due to the moderating variables age, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status in the association between different types of involvement and the children's academic outcome measures.

Erdem and Kaya[37] examined the effects of parental involvement on students' academic achievement at the levels of pre-school, elementary school and secondary school. In their meta-analysis they distinguished between home-based and school-based parental involvement strategies, including control, learning assistance, communication, support, activity, academic socialization and expectation. Their analyses of 55 studies revealed that the effects of parental involvement on academic achievement ranged from -0.20 to 0.61; the mean effect was 0.18. Parental expectations had the biggest effect (0.61) on academic achievement and parental control produced a negative and small effect (-0.20). School-based involvement had a (slightly) stronger effect on academic achievement than home-based involvement. The effects did not differ significantly according to the moderator variables of academic area and education level.

Kim[38] conducted a meta-analysis specifically focusing on East Asian countries. These countries are characterized by high achievement levels, a relatively standardized education system, and no policies encouraging family-school relations. Instead, parents in these countries are more likely to be heavily involved in the home situation. Kim located 15 studies and conducted moderator analyses across various types of involvement. He discerned various types of school and home involvement. The analyses showed an average relation of 0.24 (range -0.02 to 0.75), which can be interpreted as weak. The association was strongest for academic socialization, i.e., expectations and aspirations (0.65). Kim also found that the relation between parental involvement and achievement was stronger in the higher grades of secondary school than in elementary school. He concluded that the effects of parental involvement in East Asian countries are very similar (though weaker) as those in other countries. Just like in the U.S., academic socialization of parents toward education is the most important mode of involvement for student achievement.

To summarize the results of the twelve meta-analyses reported on here, it can be concluded that there are many similarities but also some differences. The average effects ranged from 0.12 to 0.52, that is, from no/neglectable effect to small/moderate. In addition to positive effects, also many negative and null effects were reported. In two studies the

percentage positive effects was 61 and 78, the percentage negative effects 15 and 19, and the percentage null effects 4 and 24. In most studies in addition to the overall effect of parental involvement effects for specific types of involvement were also computed. The type with the strongest effect in several studies is parents having high aspirations and expectations for the child; effects were up to 0.88, which is considered as a large effect. In some studies analyses focused on possible effect differences according to age or educational level. The findings are inconclusive: in some studies no differences were found, in other studies the effects were stronger for secondary education than for primary education and kindergarten. A few studies performed specific analyses looking for differences according to ethnicity and social background. These studies could not establish differences. Studies focusing on differences according to outcome measure reported no differences, while analyses focusing on differences according to subject did find differences.

4. Conclusions

Parental involvement is often seen as an important means of contributing to successful educational careers of children, and especially of children from disadvantaged backgrounds stemming from unfavorable ethnic, immigrant and socioeconomic backgrounds. Therefore, in educational disadvantage policies and programs all sorts of parental involvement activities receive warm attention. Now, as the negative consequences of school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic become clear, parental involvement is seen as an evidence-based intervention with a "moderate impact for very low cost on extensive evidence"; it has on average an impact of four months additional progress.[39] However, whether this optimism is warranted is the question.[14]

At first sight, the literature review showed there to be considerable diversity in typologies and classifications. Notwithstanding this apparent variety, almost all can be ordered along the lines of just a few perspectives, namely locus (at home/at school), style (formal/informal), action (active/passive), and actor (parent/student/school). Thus, the diversity to a large degree boils down to much similarity and overlap. From the synthesis of the meta-analyses it can be concluded that the average effects of involvement on attainment range from no/neglectable to small/moderate at the most. In addition to positive effects there were substantial numbers of null and even negative effects. It is probably fair to conclude that the average effect is only small. The type of involvement producing the strongest effect in several studies appeared to be parents having high aspirations and expectations for their child. Studies specifically looking for effects according to ethnic/immigrant and social background could not establish any differences, though it was emphasized that it is difficult to determine this association unambiguously.

What does the above mean? The most important conclusion undoubtedly is that prudence is called for when it comes to pointing to parental involvement as the panacea for closing the gap between the educational performance of children from ethnic/immigrant and low socioeconomic backgrounds and that of children from more favorable ethnic/immigrant and socioeconomic backgrounds, especially now during the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the presence of empirical evidence signifying the importance of parental involvement for the learning of children, it definitively is not the magic potion hoped for.[40][26] What the implications are for not finding effect differences according to disadvantage status is not clear. Having high aspirations and expectations appears to be the most promising type of parental involvement. This is "just" a matter of attitude and does not presume specific skills, capacities and high levels of schooling. Studies suggest, however, that especially immigrant parents have high aspirations for their children, often higher than that of ethnic majority parents[41]. An important relativization then could be whether their aspirations are not too optimistic and unrealistic.

Notwithstanding the seemingly unequivocal outcomes summarized here, there remain many inconsistencies and ambiguities. The interpretation of any effect is very complicated. There are numerous definitions and operationalizations of "parental involvement", which makes it very hard to compare results. To make things even more complicated, there also are many different indicators of "student achievement". This undoubtedly leads to comparing apples and oranges. Furthermore, nearly all studies are correlational by design, some apply structural equation or multi-level modelling. Several perform analyses with mediating or moderating variables. As a consequence, it is – strictly speaking – not possible to draw conclusions with regard to causation ("effects"). Therefore, the reliability and validity of most studies into effects of parent involvement is questionable.

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