

# Who gets involved and who doesn't?

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In an article with the revealing title 'Why some parents don't come to school' Finders and Lewis (1994) point out that practical, cultural and psychological reasons may keep certain types of parents away from the schools. These include obligations to other children at home, difficulty in getting time off from work, and feelings of discomfort in the school's premises because of their own negative experience with schooling. Generally, the connection of low or no involvement to the family's socio-economic status (ses) is very common in the literature. Several authors (Davies, 1987; Lareau, 1987; Ogbu, 1974) maintain that schools are more welcoming, more accessible and therefore more beneficial for middle and high ses parents rather than for low ses ones. Thus, the existing reality is that demographics are of crucial importance when one tries to answer the question that appears on the title of this paper. More recent research (Grolnick et al., 1997) goes beyond these demographics and includes functional characteristics of family as factors contributing to low involvement. Such characteristics are parental efficacy, existence of stress at home and availability of social support resources.

Parental involvement has become a central topic among educational researchers in recent years. Therefore, more information about parameters of involvement is needed so that interventions for the creation of parent-teacher partnerships can be better designed and implemented. The purpose of the study described here was to examine the effect of one such parameter. More specifically, it aimed at examining the relationship that may exist between parental attributions and the

involvement of parents in their children's educational process.

## **Attributions and behavior**

The attribution theory is often traced back to Heider (1944) who claimed that people are not content simply to observe events around them, but strive to understand their causes. He also proposed that actions are usually attributed to stable and enduring factors, such as the actor's personality characteristics, rather than transitory or variable factors such as moods. Ever since its introduction, the attribution theory has been widely used as an explanatory tool in several areas including psychology, education and political science (Graham & Folkes, 1990). In the 1980s the attribution theory framework was called 'the most prominent and active area of social psychology' (Pepitone, 1981, p. 979). Graham (1991) verifies that its influence continues unabated, pointing out that 'no other motivational conception has achieved this degree of visibility' (p. 5).

In educational settings, this theory is usually used in reference to attributions of child achievement either by parents, teachers or students themselves. There is adequate evidence suggesting that these attributions influence directly or indirectly the attitudes, feelings and future behavior of all actors involved. Particular variables that were shown to be influenced by attributions are the following: expectancy of success, child self-confidence, parent involvement and actual school performance. Weiner (1985) has proposed a three-dimensional taxonomy of attributions, according to which attributions can be classified

on the basis of three criteria: (a) **locus** (internal or external), (b) **stability** (stable or unstable causes) and (c) **controllability** (controllable or uncontrollable causes). The children's achievement tends to be attributed either to internal factors (talents and biologically determined dispositions) or external (i.e. influence of parents, teachers, siblings, luck etc). Effort and ability are two major internal sources of attribution; the first is controllable but unstable, while the second is stable but uncontrollable.

The attributions that parents make about their child's achievement can influence their behaviour towards the child. As Stevenson and Lee (1990) comment, 'when parents believe that success in school depends on ability in contrast to effort, they are less likely to foster participation in activities related to academic achievement that would elicit strong effort toward learning on the part of their children' (p. 66). Furthermore, attributional processes may play a major role in observed SES differences in children's achievement. Relative to children from higher-income families, children from lower-income homes tend to believe that they have little control over their environment and therefore are more likely to attribute their success to external factors such as luck and ease of the task rather than to their own effort or ability (O' Sullivan & Howe, 1996).

#### **Attributions and parental involvement**

The study that is presented here (Georgiou, 1999) was conducted in Cyprus among 473 parents, most of which (73%) were mothers. Its basic aim was to examine the existing relationship between parental attributions, parental involvement and child school achievement. It was hypothesised that parental attributions influence child achievement indirectly by altering the degree of parental involvement. That is, parental involvement activities are behavioural

manifestations of the pre-existing parental attributions of child achievement and that they have effects on child achievement. In other words, certain types of attributions that parents make about their children's achievement can explain why these parents exhibit specific types of involvement in children's educational process. This behaviour, in turn, may influence actual child achievement.

It was found that some types of parental involvement are indeed significantly related to parental attributions. Attributing the child's achievement to 'significant others' was related to the parents' controlling behaviour and the interest developing behavior. The helping with homework type of involvement was not related to any attribution factor, but it was related, although negatively, to the child's actual achievement. Furthermore, attributing the child's achievement to its own effort was related positively to the interest developing parental behaviour and negatively to the anxious pressure for better results.

The more parents attributed their child's achievement to its own effort, the better this achievement was. No such relation was found between achievement and other parental attributions. As for the relation between parental involvement and child achievement, it was found that certain parental behaviors are positively related to achievement, some are negatively related to it and some are not related at all. Developing the child's interests was the only one belonging to the first category. Pressing the child and helping with homework belong to the second category, whilst controlling non-academic life belongs to the third. These findings are in line with earlier research (Georgiou, 1997). It is, perhaps, noteworthy that significant correlations were found between helping with homework and controlling on the one hand and between helping and pressing on the other.

One of the main hypotheses of this study was based on earlier reports suggesting that 'parents who believe they can 'make a difference' are more likely to be involved' (Grolnick, et al., 1997, p. 539). However, the findings show that this seems to be only partially true. That is, parents who believed that 'significant others' such as themselves, teachers and peers play an important role in affecting children's actual achievement, tended to act out this belief by becoming more controlling and keener to develop their child's interests. Interestingly, the first of these parental behaviours was also found to be negatively related to the child's actual achievement, whilst the second was positively related to the same variable. No significant relation was found between the above attribution and the 'teaching at home' type of parental involvement. Therefore, it would be better to say that this attribution is related to certain types of involvement and not to involvement in general. It should be noted that no significant differences were found between SES groups regarding either attributions or involvement styles.

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In summary, this study's main findings about the existing relationship between parental attributions and parental involvement are the following:

- Parents who believe that their own role is important in affecting their child's achievement tend to be more controlling and more facilitative to the development of the child's interests.
- Parents who believe that their child's achievement is caused by the child's own effort tend to be less pressing and – again - more facilitative to the development of the child's interests.

As mentioned earlier, Grolnick et al., (1997) have identified a number of parameters of parental involvement, such as parental efficacy, characteristics of the family context (stress, social support, resources), teacher attitudes and behaviour. The present study contributes to the relevant literature by suggesting the inclusion of parental attributions as possible predictors of parental involvement.

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