

Parental Involvement in the Education of Their Children in Dubai

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ABSTRACT

Many parents have the opinion that the education of their children is the sole responsibility of schools. Research has consistently shown that parents can also play an important role. This policy brief discusses some of the international research and, in addition, examines the impact of increased parental involvement in the education and development of children, with a particular focus on Dubai.

Introduction

There are many factors that have been found to be associated with the improved performance of students. Good quality teachers, effective pedagogical approaches to learning, interesting curricula, an emphasis on critical thinking, student-centered learning styles, regular exercise and a good diet are some of the main factors that have been shown to improve performance. Schools, policymakers, parents and students all have a significant interest in improving the quality of education outcomes.

Most policy interest and the traditional approaches adopted by education authorities have focused on improving factors associated with schooling. Research and observation have revealed, however, that school-centered approaches tell only half the story. Parents also have a major role to play. While it is well known that parents who have better qualifications and a higher socio-economic status have children who perform better, research has demonstrated that good parenting approaches are also associated with improved student performance in academic tests.

This policy brief examines the role of parents in the education of their children with a focus on Dubai's parents. It explores some of the international research that has identified areas where parental involvement has been found to be beneficial. It also analyses some of the Dubai results where increased interactions between schools, students and parents result in a higher quality education environment. Finally, some policy recommendations are identified.

Defining Parental Involvement

One of the most useful tools developed for defining parental involvement practices and linking them with certain types of outcomes is Epstein's Six Types Framework.¹ This widely accepted framework has six types of parental involvement:

1. Parenting (helping families with child-rearing and parenting skills);
2. Communicating (developing effective home-school communication);
3. Volunteering (creating ways that families can become involved in activities at the school);
4. Learning at home (supporting learning activities in the home that reinforce school curricula);
5. Decision-making (including families as decision-makers through school-site councils, committees, etc.);
6. Collaborating with the community (matching community services with family needs and serving the community).²



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¹ Epstein, et al (2002)

² Michigan Department of Education (2001)

This framework covers a wide range of elements for family/school, family/community and school/community interaction. Importantly, none of these types of parental involvement are privileged over others; instead, it is the combination of the types of involvement together that boosts student learning.

International Research on the Effects of Parental Involvement

Most children have two main types of educators in their lives – their parents and their teachers. Generally, parents are the primary caregivers and educators until the child attends nursery or starts school and remain a major influence on their children’s learning through school and into higher education. In many countries, including those in the Gulf, caregivers such as maids and nannies also play a major role in the upbringing of children, especially during the early years.

It is widely recognised that if pupils are to maximise their potential from schooling, they will need the full support of their parents. Attempts to enhance parental involvement in education occupy educators across the world. It is anticipated that parents should play a role not only in the promotion of their own child’s achievements but more broadly in school improvement and school governance. Furthermore, students with parents who are involved in their school tend to have fewer behavioural problems and better academic performance. They are also more likely to complete secondary school than students whose parents are not involved in their school.³

There can be large differences in the degree to which parents see a role for themselves in their child’s education and in the degree to which they feel confident in being able to help. Parents can at times feel put off from involvement by the way teachers treat them or they may feel they lack the skills to make a difference in the success of their child. Children themselves can also have a significant influence on the degree to which their parents are involved by filtering communications from schools or not asking questions to their parents about home work that has been given.

Parental behaviours which manifest parental involvement tend to change as children grow up. With younger children, direct help with school-relevant skills is appropriate and foundational. With older students, activities which promote independence and autonomy become more relevant.

³ Childs Trends Data Bank (2004)

⁴ Bennett (2009)

Early Childhood Education

The effects of parental involvement in the early years can be long lasting. When children are very young, maternal and child health services can assist parents in breastfeeding, providing nutrition advice and creating good habits in setting health and hygiene standards for their child. At this age, it is the parent who is often the focus of the attention of service providers to ensure that the psychological needs of the child are met, adopting practical knowledge of socialisation and upbringing processes including child discipline;⁴ support offered to the play and learning of the child and the avoidance of neglect, abuse or stressful family environments. All aspects of the child’s intellectual, emotional, physical and social needs must be met.

Later, when children enter more formalised educational settings at kindergartens and schools, all of Epstein’s types of parental involvement are available to be used. As children mature and enter high school, there may be subtle changes across each of the types of parental involvement as children as students take on more ownership of their learning.

A longitudinal study conducted on the effects of Chicago’s Child-Parent Centers (CPC) has revealed positive results promoting school readiness and higher academic achievement persisting into adolescence as well as lower drop-out rates. The Child-Parent Centers focus on five areas, one of which is parental involvement. The study’s positive results included the following:

- Parental involvement in pre-kindergarten and kindergarten was associated with greater reading achievement and less grade retention through at least eighth grade;
- Parents who participated in the pre-kindergarten program were more likely to be involved in primary school;
- The more years that the parents were involved in primary school, the more successful their children were.

The effect of parental involvement on achievement and cognitive development has been explored in recent studies of English pre-schoolers. A longitudinal study, the Effective Provision of Pre-school Education Project, assessed the attainment and development of children between the ages

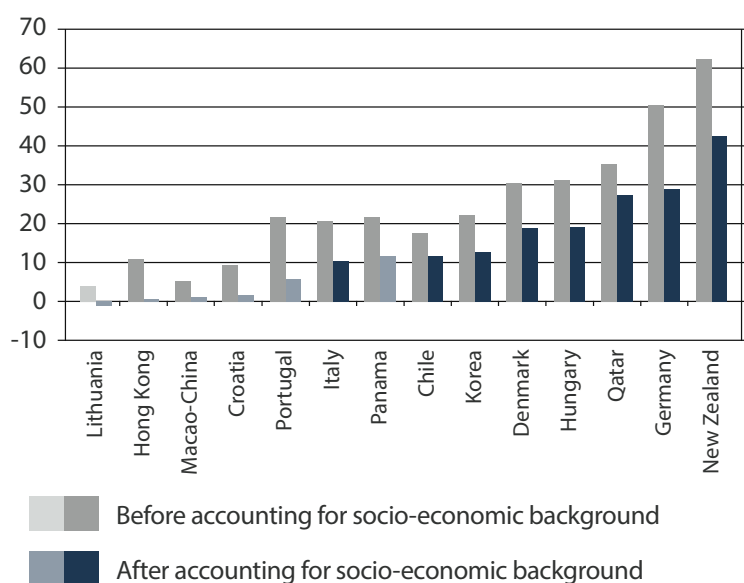
three to seven years.⁵ Of particular interest was the impact of parental involvement in interaction with professional provision. The idea of a 'home learning environment' (HLE) was devised to describe a range of learning related provision in the home as reported by parents. HLE included reading, library visits, playing with letters and numbers, painting and drawing, teaching (through play) the letters of the alphabet, playing with numbers and shapes, teaching nursery rhymes and singing. It was concluded that a "higher home learning environment was associated with increased levels of cooperation and conformity, peer sociability and confidence, ... lower anti-social and worried or upset behaviour and higher cognitive development scores ... after age it was the variable with the strongest effect on cognitive development".⁶ The study also found that the quality of the HLE was more important for child development than parental occupation, education or income. "What parents do is more important than who parents are".⁷

School Years

Results from the OECD's Programme of International Student Assessment (PISA) 2009 show that the involvement of parents has a significant effect on their children. This involvement is not limited to direct involvement in learning activities at home but also includes a range of other activities including reading, discussing how well children are doing at school or even the simple matter of eating main meals together. Each of these makes a positive difference on the children's academic outcome as assessed by PISA.

For PISA 2009, parents in some participating countries were given a questionnaire to complete and their responses were analysed alongside those of students and principals. In these countries, a strong correlation was found between parental involvement with their child during primary school and the child's reading performance at the age of 15.

Parental support at the beginning of primary school*



Darker shade is a statistically significant result

Score point difference between students whose parents often (weekly or daily) "read books" with the student and those who do not

* Dubai did not provide the questionnaire to its parents in the 2009 round of PISA; however, the recently conducted TIMSS and PIRLS 2011 studies will reveal a local perspective about parents in due course.

As can be seen in the graph on the left, students whose parents reported that they had read a book with their child "every day or almost every day" or "once or twice a week" during the first year of primary school scored higher than students who had parents that stated that they "never or almost never" or only "once or twice a month" read a book with their child.

The difference in scores amongst the 14 participating countries is around 25 score points or the equivalent of well over half a school year. After accounting for socio-economic background, the positive effect is still statistically significant. Dubai's regional neighbour, Qatar, had a very high score point difference in comparison with other countries for this question and other questions relating to parental involvement, suggesting that students from the Gulf region, including Dubai, have a culture where they would significantly gain from enhanced parental involvement.⁸

⁵ Child Policy Brief (1996)

⁶ Desforges and Abouchar (2003)

⁷ Sylva, et al (2004)

⁸ OECD (2010)

Other research conducted by the Department for Education and Skills in the UK has demonstrated that parental involvement makes a positive difference to pupils' engagement and their achievement levels. Parental involvement also benefits teachers and schools. Looking at a study using data from the National Child Development Study that examined parental involvement on achievement found that:

- Parental involvement in a child's schooling was a more powerful force than other family background indicators, such as social class, family size and level of parental education, and contributes to more than 10 percent of variation in achievement;
- The involvement of parents in secondary education has an effect on continued development;
- Very high parental interest is associated with better examination results compared with children whose parents show no interest;
- Children with very interested parents progressed between 15% to 17% more in mathematics and reading between ages 11 to 16.⁹

Parental Involvement in Dubai

The situation in Dubai surrounding the level of involvement by parents in the education of their children is quite mixed. Apart from the age of the child, other factors including the cultural background of the parents, the role of family helpers, the extent to which schools communicate with and involve parents, and the range of choice of schools play a role in the extent of parental involvement observed.

Language Acquisition

Due to the multicultural setting of Dubai's population and especially since many Emirati and expatriate families rely on maids and nannies from mostly south-east Asia, parents need to closely observe the impact of caretakers on their children's acquisition of language and on their emotional and behavioural development.

Research findings indicate that input from parents and the family circle are critical for a child's language development. Even as a newborn, a child will respond most to his/her own language and is more likely to respond to the mother. While multilingualism may

cause a slight language delay and lower cognitive development, it has also been shown that bilingual children eventually surpass their monolingual peers in cognitive tests, creativity and problem solving.¹⁰ What is important is that the child grows up in an environment where he or she experiences rich and correct language or languages.

Language capital, or more simply 'the mother tongue', is the set of skills that is acquired during childhood with no particular effort and strength in school. Language deficiency may impinge on communication and may curtail productivity. A good mastery of the first language has the following positive effects:

- Efficient acquisition of a second language;
- Better academic achievement, notably in mathematics;
- Higher earning potential.¹¹

Traditionally, Emirati families have been known to live within extended families with the support of nannies and maids, where the children are exposed to all adults and family members of various ages.¹² The benefits for the child in such a family setting are dependent on the quality of the relationship between these members and the child.

This is more particularly the case with parents working longer hours and women increasingly entering the work force and starting families later in life. With such a development, there is an increasing reliance within the homes on help and support from nannies and maids. Dubai Statistics Centre's data reveals that 94 percent of Emirati families and only 5 percent of expatriate families¹³ employ maids and nannies to do housework as well as look after children. Three main drawbacks on the development of children from this kind of domestic assistance are:

- Infants and young children could spend most of their time in the care of housemaids (between 30 to 70 hours per week), which is not only longer than most institutional childcare hours in the US or Europe, but is also considered harmful to a child's maternal attachment which might cause behavioral problems;¹⁴

⁹ Department for Education and Skills, (2005)

¹⁰ Ismail (2012)

¹¹ Bouhlila (2011)

¹² Avan, et al (2005)

¹³ Bennett (2009)

¹⁴ Roumani (2005)

- Most housemaids are non-Arabic speaking, many also having weak English and many have little training in child-rearing;
- As a nanny ends her contractual arrangement, often after a two-year contract, this can create emotional tension in the child's upbringing.¹⁵

Observations in Dubai Private Schools

Observations in private schools in Dubai reveal that parents are often confused as to what is to be expected of them regarding their role in their children's education. They also question to what extent they can have a positive influence on their child. Parents do not always instill in their children an appreciation of the value of learning and knowledge. Consequently, and particularly for boys, the relationship between teachers and students is not respectful and has been described as ambivalent at best and openly hostile at worst.¹⁶ In addition, the shortage of male Emirati teachers, due to the low status accorded to the teaching profession amongst Emirati men, means that many male students lack effective male role models in schools.¹⁷ This suggests that involvement of the family, and in particular male role models within the family, is even more important.

It is not uncommon for parents to choose a private school for their child based solely on price, rather than through researching into how a school would fulfill the particular needs of their child. This is often done with the best of intentions, believing that they are giving their child the best opportunities. A common trend which was revealed in a recent study conducted jointly by KHDA/CfBT¹⁸ is the high proportion of Emirati pupils in Dubai attending private schools because their parents believe they not only offer a better education, but also provide a higher social status in the community. This perception of higher social status is important in Dubai society, particularly in parent-to-parent dialogues.

One further observation relating to school choice in Dubai is that some parents move their children from one school to another many times during their education, often between schools offering different curricula. While one of the benefits of a Dubai school education is the range of choice on offer, it seems that sometimes this increased choice can result in too much school transfer of children, destabilising

their education and disrupting their peer groups while weakening the strength of interaction between schools and parents.

As the PISA results discussed earlier show, interaction and engagement between parent and child can positively affect academic outcomes. Many Dubai parents see that the role of the school is to not only educate, but also to instill universal social values that more usually fall within the remit of the family. However, in Dubai there can also be a perception that it is the role of the school to educate and that the parent need not be involved at all. One quote from the KHDA/CfBT paper¹⁹ illustrates this point: *"I am searching for a school that helps my children to be independent and do their homework alone. I don't want to face problems with them when they don't understand the curriculum and I am not qualified to teach them."*

That parents distance themselves from the direct education of their children is not limited to interactions with the school. The incidence of private tutoring in Dubai is high, with 51% of students undertaking out-of-school lessons in at least one subject at the age of 15, a rate significantly higher than the international OECD average of 28%. It has been found that many Dubai parents look to private tutoring when they have insufficient time, cannot provide the necessary academic support or want to prove that they are "good" parents by providing their children with the maximum opportunity.²⁰ The use of private tutoring may actually yield a negative effect as it could increase the dependency of the student upon others and reduce the ability for parents to be directly engaged in their child's education.

Dubai Schools Inspection Bureau (DSIB) inspections show that some schools encourage parental involvement more effectively than others. With regard to DSIB's observations of schools' partnerships with parents and the community, schools awarded outstanding and good ratings have undertaken initiatives related to communication and engagement with successful outcomes. While most schools may have tried initiatives to improve communication, many have had limited success in adopting engagement opportunities. This is partly due to parents not fully understanding their role as partners in their children's learning and, instead, focusing on more day-to-day issues like

¹⁵ Bennett (2009)

¹⁶ Ridge (2009)

¹⁷ Ridge (2010)

¹⁸ KHDA/CfBT (2011)

¹⁹ KHDA/CfBT (2011)

²⁰ Farah (2011)

textbooks and transportation.²¹ Inspectors have also observed that the practice of parent volunteers working alongside children in the classroom is not as prevalent in Dubai compared with overseas. This directly reduces parental involvement in simple instances of reading to children and reduces the potential for parents to be recruited as classroom teaching assistants. Parental involvement in schools is often limited to the organisation of social events or other activities that are distanced from teaching and learning in the classroom. Higher quality schools are observed to have more opportunities for parents to be involved in classroom activities.

More effective schools stipulate clearly what is expected of the parents and what the school provides in return. Observations suggest that this practice leads to more willing parental involvement. Many schools fail to engage Emirati parents appropriately and use communication channels that do not take cultural considerations into account, such as when a phone call is more appropriate than written communication.

DSIB conducts an annual parent questionnaire as part of the inspection process. Questions relate to their child's entire academic experience, including a section identifying if parents are satisfied with their communication and engagement with the school. Results revealed that most parents are satisfied with most aspects of their relationship with their child's school. However, as mentioned earlier, it is also evident with research into the role of parents in their child's education in Dubai that parents may express satisfaction but fail to fully grasp what is to be expected of them and schools fail to effectively adopt a variety of communication mechanisms.²²

The largest private school education provider in Dubai, GEMS, launched their Parental Engagement Strategy in late 2009. GEMS conducts an annual Parental Engagement Week featuring talks by guest speakers. Other aspects of the strategy include a special website for parents and a digest of research²³ which includes lists of tips of practical ideas that schools and parents can follow to improve the engagement of parents with their children.

Policy Recommendations

It is clear that expanding the role of parents in the education of their children will have benefits to the children, the parents and the school community. The following approaches are recommended:

1. Raise awareness of the role of parents

Many families are unaware of the important role that parents play in the emotional, behavioural, physical and cognitive development and wellbeing of their children. More needs to be done starting from post-natal classes to encourage both parents to be actively involved in their child's development from an early age and reduce the reliance on nannies and maids on a child's upbringing. This may take the form of government authorities producing practical information booklets or holding sessions for parents on how they can increase their role.

2. Encourage parents to take an active interest in the education of their children

Parents need to be made more aware that reading to their child at a young age and taking a direct interest in what happens at school provides an effective learning environment for their children and leads to improved academic performance later in life. It's also fun!

3. Encourage schools to increase their engagement with parents

In many schools, the only interaction between parents and the school is through infrequent parent-teacher interviews. Expanding engagement activities to include school governance arrangements, volunteering during school classes and regular feedback sessions will encourage parents to take a more active involvement in the education of their children.

4. Improve access to information about schools and their quality

Education authorities have an important role to play in increasing the transparency of information about schools, especially for Dubai where many newly arriving parents have limited understanding of the quality and accessibility of schools. This transparency of information will enable parents to make an informed choice about the school and also drive improvements in quality in schools.

5. Establish an intergovernmental taskforce to take a leadership role in promoting the interests of parents at schools

Improving the involvement of parents in their child's development is not just for education but crosses other aspects of society. Bringing government leaders together to develop a comprehensive programme that covers parental involvement in community, health, education, sports and other sectors will ensure that children receive caring and relevant support to enable them to develop into productive citizens.²⁴

²¹ KHDA (2011a)

²² KHDA (2011b)

²³ Center for Real World Learning (2010)

²⁴ UAE (2011)

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KHDA is an education authority, created to improve schools and other human resource sectors in Dubai. They work to promote lifelong learning to fulfill Dubai's aspirations. KHDA's mission is to assure quality and to improve accessibility to education, learning and human development, with the engagement of the community. They coordinate with many different partners – students, parents, teachers, the private sector and other Government bodies. KHDA's work plans are derived from the Government's strategy and carried out in a transparent manner to make sure everything they do benefits their highest priority – Dubai's students.

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