Eötvös Loránd University
Faculty of Pedagogy and Psychology
Doctoral School of Education
Director: Prof. Dr. Gábor Halász, PhD

Theses of doctoral dissertation

Nóra Imre

The role of parental involvement in the development of students’ school career

Supervisor: Dr. Judit Hegedűs, PhD, Associate Professor
Dr. Júlia Szekszárdi, PhD, Associate Professor

Budapest, 2017
Subject and objective of the doctoral dissertation

The origins of the concept “parental involvement” stem from research conducted in the 1960s and 1970s in the field of sociology of education (Fuligni, Stevenson 1997, p. 630). This was the era when various (e.g. language) compensation programs in the United States and, at the same time, in Europe started to use the term “parental involvement”. The direct purpose of these programs that were meant to increase the effectiveness of education through parent engagement was to support and encourage the active engagement of parents with unfavourable socio-economic status (and, in some cases, with ethnic minority background) in making their children’s school education more successful. From the 1980s onward, the educational policy objective of strengthening parental involvement has been, and is still being, integrated into education development policies with various degrees of importance. It can be observed that in the past decades the education policies of developed countries fundamentally assumed that parents’ involvement in the life of the school can contribute to mitigate educational inequality and to increase students’ chances for mobility.

In parallel to education policies focused on parental involvement, there was a corresponding increase in scientific investigations analysing relation between home environment and school achievement based on parents’ activity (Hess, Holloway 1984). In the field of developmental psychology, changes in children over time have been studied in the light of home environment and parents’ activities. Research in sociology and social psychology thematised the relations between family and school based on home climate, educational style, communication between mother and child (language use), the physical environment where learning takes place and cultural attitudes (Salili et al. 2001). After the 1970s, theories of social classification and studies based on social status characteristics gained considerable ground in demonstrating the role of families (Lawton 1996). In the 1980s, Epstein played a decisive role by drawing the theoretical boundaries of parental involvement and establishing its conceptual frameworks to be used in development policy practices of the United States (Epstein, 1987). Her work, interpreted as a great achievement also in the science of educational research, has contributed to the creation of a
conceptual system of parental “involvement” that allowed for resources available in homes and in families to be used to increase the effectiveness of education. At the same time, certain representatives of critical sociology of education presented their own scientific views on the forms and characteristics of involvement of various social groups, based on social and capital theories (Lareau 1987, 1996; McNeal 1999).

In the theoretical part of the dissertation, international sociology of education and education science literature, dealing with the subject of parental involvement, is reviewed and analysed. Most of the domestic studies discuss the topic from the perspective of the relationship between family and school, or home and institutional education (Füle 1989; Hunyady 2002; Hunyadi 2006, 2006; Imre 2002b, 2002a; Földes 2005; Szekszárdi 2008). However, recent years saw new studies on forms of communication between teacher and parent and the frequency and prevalence of underlying forms of behaviour (Lannert, Szekszárdi 2015).

In Hungary, the subject of parental involvement was first considered when specialised studies of different supra-national organisations have come to the forefront (Podráczky 2012). The main advantage of this was that the subject matter delved into the domestic professional discourse with a different approach than before. Given the fact that, besides the above mentioned studies, specialised studies in this narrow topic are lacking in the field of educational research, one of the objectives of the dissertation was to put the theme of parental involvement into a wider context – that of sociology of education. Another purpose of the dissertation was to clarify, operationalise and establish the framework for the conceptual system of parental involvement, and open up a new area for analysis, focusing on the complex system of correlations between parental involvement and educational attainment.

The concept of parental involvement/engagement is used in various contexts and, thus, various interpretations may be attached to it. The concept can be interpreted based on the activity of the parents, some of who make instinctive efforts to ensure the best conditions of education for their children and actively help their school career. The concept of involvement can be interpreted at the level of educational institutions,
where teachers are counting on parental capacities that can be utilized in the learning process of the child or in organising leisure programs for them. Furthermore, parental involvement can be interpreted at the level of education policy, as development strategies in some countries take into account the human resources available at home that can improve children’s educational achievement and help them in the process of socialisation. Yet another interpretation of parental involvement is developed to suit the conceptual system of pedagogy, educational research and sociology of education (Epstein, Sanders 2006).

**Research questions**

The scientific substantiation of the concept of parental involvement was intended to be reinforced by integrating it into the rather traditional conceptual systems of sociology of education, pedagogy and educational research. The dissertation outlines the framework for the different interpretations on parental involvement, including the various dimensions that provided the basis for the empirical research. Operationalisation of the concept of parental involvement allowed for analysing different forms of behaviour that can be classified as parental involvement and their quantitative aspects.

In line with the research objectives, and based on the international literature, the following *subjects* were selected to serve as the basis for the research questions.

1. The first thematic area is focused on *the correlation between various forms of parental behaviour and students’ educational attainment*. This area is fundamentally based on empirical research findings that were meant to shed light upon the relationship between certain forms of behaviour in parental involvement and learning outcomes.
2. The second research segment is centred around issues on *the characteristics of involvement of families with different social status*. The cultural capital theory and its supporting studies in the field of
sociology of education serve as an ideal starting point, stating that families belonging to different social statuses take part in their children’s education in different ways according to their cultural resources.

3. The third subject examines the complex set of relationships between school and parents, through examining the presented partnership models in Anglo-Saxon countries. The fundamental differences between institutional practices in Hungary and in Anglo-Saxon countries are highlighted through the Epstein Model that stems from Brofenbrenner’s human ecology theory.

Related to the selected subject areas of parental involvement, the following research questions were defined after conceptualisation of the topic:

1. Can the correlation between various forms of parental involvement and students’ performance in different areas of competence be demonstrated through domestic competence assessment data (OKM 2014)?

   What is the relationship between the social status of parents of elementary students in class 6 and 8 and the frequency of certain forms of behaviour associated with parental involvement? What is the correlation between certain behaviours of parental involvement and competence assessment results, broken down by social status of the parents?

2. How do parents of various social statuses get involved in their children’s education?

   How do certain forms of behaviour and communication of parental involvement (e.g. involvement at school, home support, parents’ attitudes, views on school, etc.) correlate with the social status of the family?

   What kind of relationship can be detected between the student’s school year and the frequency and activity of parental involvement?

3. What do students in different school years and with various social statuses think about the relationship between the school and the family?
A question related to the activity level of the school was also defined: is it obvious that elementary schools make efforts to involve parents, and are there any good practice or institutional objectives, strategies for that purpose? At the same time, the questions about the relationship of the school and the parents were asked with the intention to explore the differences between widely used models and practices of parental involvement in Anglo-Saxon countries and institutional practices and opportunities in Hungary.

**Research methodology**

In order to elaborate on the first thematic area of the research, a secondary data analysis of the National Competence Survey in Hungary (Országos Kompetenciamérés, OKM 2014) was performed, with a view to searching for detectable correlations between the frequency of certain forms of parental involvement behaviour and the students’ achievement in the competence assessment. However, the above-mentioned database did not allow for a more in-depth analysis, as only a few variables could be used. The analysis was based on (individual level) data from questionnaires devised for class 6 and class 8 elementary school students. Basically, descriptive statistical procedures – two-variable analyses – were followed to describe forms of parental involvement behaviour.

The second component of the research is connected to a survey on experiences with a school where teaching finishes at 4 p.m. – a regime first introduced in the academic year of 2013/14. The questionnaire survey that was conducted in three districts gave an opportunity to explore the subject of the dissertation – the forms of parental involvement and the determining factors of involvement at school and home support – in a broader spectrum. The standardised questionnaire data collection was performed in the academic year 2013/14. The survey sample comprised of data from elementary schools in three selected districts. More specifically, the sample included headmasters, pupils, teachers and parents of the students of all elementary schools and their member institutions in three Hungarian districts with different socio-economic status: lower than average (district
M), average (district J) and higher than average (district in the capital). Regarding the surveyed elementary schools, headmasters (N=34), teachers (N=548), pupils in 3rd, 5th and 8th grade (N=2071) and the parents of pupils in 3rd, 5th and 8th grade (N=2320) fulfilled the questionnaire. The data was collected through a standardised self-completion questionnaire.

The third component of the research is based on a qualitative examination covering six elementary schools with less favourable than average composition of students. The qualitative methodological tools applied included desk-based studies of school documents, interviews with various players (in focus groups) and classroom observations. As part of the field work, semi-structured interviews with school leaders and teachers, focus group interviews with 7th and 8th grade pupils with diverse – weaker and stronger – academic performances, and, as far as was possible, with parents representing different social statuses were conducted. The interviews were analysed according to the specified aspects, namely the various dimensions of parental development and the Epstein Model.

Results

1. Correlations between various forms parental involvement behaviour and competence assessment results of 6th and 8th grade elementary school students.

The relevant international literature shows a professional endeavour to explore the relationship between the socio-economic status of families and students’ school attainment. Parental involvement is only one of several mechanisms mediating between the two factors that can influence school performance through various forms of parental behaviour. (Desforges, Abouchaar 2003; Grolnick, Slowiaczek 1994; Sui-Chu, Willms 1996). Therefore, not only does the social status of the family affect school career, but also all activities in the family both in and outside the home environment, including the school (Epstein et al. 2002). These activities include certain dimensions of parental involvement, defined in the
dissertation, and the connected forms of behaviour, which were examined from the aspect of whether they show a correlation with students’ learning outcomes.

The database for the National Competence Survey allowed for studying forms of behaviour of parental involvement and their frequency in relation to students’ school success. At the secondary analysis it had to be taken into account that the three available variables – (1) “How frequently have your parents attended parents’ meetings in recent years?”; (2) “How frequently does it happen in your family that you have a conversation about what happened in school?”; (3) “Do your parents (grandparents, older siblings) help you with learning and doing homework?” – do not fully cover the definition of parental involvement/engagement. Still, they represent fundamental forms of behaviour that can be analysed in dimensions of both parental involvement at school and at home – similarly to some international surveys (PISA 2009). The examination covered 6th and 8th grade pupils and looked into how they performed at the mathematics and reading comprehension competency tests in relation to certain factors of their family background. Against the background of the relevant literature, we were eager to find out whether the social status of the pupil’s parents correlates with the frequency of certain forms of parental involvement and with the results of the competence assessment. The assumption was that different results in educational achievement can be attributed not only to determinant background variables of the family (e.g. qualification level), but also to different forms of behaviour of parent groups with the same social status, which can be demonstrated by the data of the competence assessment.

According to the secondary analysis of the 2014 National Competence Survey, the intensity of certain forms of parental involvement shows different pictures depending on the class year (6th or 8th grade) and the social status of the family. The frequency of attendance at parents’ meetings, which also belongs to the dimension of parental involvement, is strongly correlated with the social status of the parents. Based on data from the National Competence Survey, it was established that, as for conversations about school, which is a form of parental support at home, the higher the mother’s educational level is, the more frequently she asks
her child about school results. It slightly contradicts, the findings of international surveys (Borgonovi, Montt 2012) on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the conclusions of several other studies emphasising that parental involvement at home have an effect on student achievement, regardless of the socio-economic status of the family (Desforges, Abouchaar 2003). Domestic data show that, contrary to the previous variable, the frequency of providing help with the homework follows roughly the same pattern in families with different social statuses. However, this correlation can be interpreted in many ways. It might mean some kind of a modelling or a demonstration of resource capacity by the family, but also a necessity because of the student’s personal skills. Therefore, various patterns can unfold, depending on the student’s cognitive skills, intrinsic motivation, class year, sex, the social status of the family and the resources available. This way, the same form of behaviour might mean different things for children of parents with higher school qualification and those of parents with a lower status.

The relationship between the above-mentioned forms of parental involvement behaviour and the results of the 2014 competence assessment was also examined. Based on the data, there is a positive correlation between the frequency of attendance at parents’ meetings and the average of the survey results. On one hand, a general trend is that children of mothers with higher educational qualification achieved better results in both the reading comprehension and the mathematics competence test. However, on the other hand, it can be observed that, within a given category of educational qualification, a more frequent attendance at parents’ meetings leads to better test results. In terms of this correlation, greater differences are shown in both the mathematics and reading comprehension results primarily of children of mothers with lower educational qualification.

A similar correlation is detected for one of the forms of parental involvement at home – inquiry about what happened at school. Data confirm that a more frequent parental attention, i.e. more conversations about things at school, entails better test results. As for this correlation, greater differences are found in the case of mathematics competences and for children of mothers with lower educational qualification. It means that
the more frequently parents – even within the same social status group – initiated a conversation with their child about school, the more positive results the child attained in the test.

A more concrete form of supporting learning at home is providing help with the homework that can come from the parent, grandparent or even an older sibling. In some respect, this behaviour is quite similar to the previous one, as both can derive from the same parental commitment. Therefore, we could assume that more frequent help from the parent leads to better test results. However, analysis showed that the more frequently the parent and/or the sibling helped a pupil in 6th or 8th grade with their homework, the lower results the pupil achieved in the competence survey. This finding is in line with the results of international surveys (Borgonovi, Montt 2012), stating that this form of parental support is in negative correlation with achievement. According to the explanation, it is not the parents’ support that results in lower test points, but the help is probably only a delayed response to a weaker school performance. The secondary analysis proved that students’ results in the competence survey are in positive correlation not only with the social status of the parents but also with forms of behaviour (e.g. involvement at school, conversations between parent and child, inquiring about what happened at school) that can influence the students’ school attainment in the long term.

2. Parental involvement as a social and cultural resource, based on the school year of the student and the social status of the parents.

Similarly to capital theories, parental involvement can also be interpreted as a social and cultural resource that can have a significant impact on students’ school career. According to some theories, families with different social status participate in their children’s education with varying patterns and ways, depending on their cultures resources (Bourdieu 1978; Lareau 1987). However, other approaches assert that interactions between different players in the educational system produce social resources that have a role in students’ academic achievement (Coleman 1997). Based on the literature, it was assumed that some types of parental involvement
show varying patterns in this respect, according to the social background, place of residence and the class year of the student. Therefore, a special attention was attached in the analysis to these variables to explore the differences across social origin or the age of the student. All these were examined in the various types of parental involvement and, as part of that, the frequency of each form of behaviour was also scrutinized.

The analysis, which followed the above specified classification, intentionally strived to make a clear distinction between the various forms of parental behaviour. Participation at school programs and official forums is not just an opportunity offered by the school and the teachers, but also an expectation towards parents. The analysis showed that parents take part in the life of the school in several ways, in many cases depending on their social class. Parents with higher social status participate more frequently in the different official parent-school forums organised by the school (parents’ meeting, open day, consultation hours), but they are not the most active ones at events not related to school studies.

Parent groups’ willingness to participate differs according to whether the event serves progress at school or gives a sense of community. Most of the parents with the highest educational qualification develop a strategy – intentionally or non-intentionally – that aims at the success of their children at school. It is a wide-spread phenomenon that this group of parents appear most frequently at parents’ meetings, consultation hours and open days. Parents groups with secondary education also appear at these events but, in most of the cases, they are the ones who actually help to run school events (masquerade banquets, banquet buffet) through voluntary work. At the same time, parents with lower school qualifications attend these forums and programs less frequently, but it does not mean that they are not inquiring about their children’s conduct or academic achievement at school. They simply tend to choose the informal events, not the more rigid, formal ones, to make contacts with the school. Research results also prove that this is the parent group where the biggest disagreements prevail inter alia about the importance of learning or the primary tasks of a school. As a consequence, this group is more likely to display irregular behaviour which, in exceptional cases, can manifest in higher parental aspirations and an increased amount of attention and support at home. However, these
cases are atypical in this otherwise heterogeneous group – both in terms of views and behaviour –, still they can show an important way to break out for the local community. The issue of resilience also comes into the picture, because when the family creates a supportive environment, in spite of its unfavourable social status, the child has better chances to have a more positive school career.

Forms of parental involvement at school, however, can be described not only in terms of family background, but also in terms of students’ class year. The analysis confirms a thesis widely covered by the literature that the higher the school year the child attends, the less frequent parental involvement at school becomes. This is in line with age characteristics of students, their efforts to be independent, which combine with decreased intensity of home support, according to the data. For the purposes of the dissertation, home support does not only mean forms of behaviour directly targeted at a concrete learning process (e.g. assistance in doing the homework), but also all kinds of interactions between parent and child.

According to the relevant Anglo-Saxon literature, these activities are independent of the parents’ social status and, at the same time, exert the greatest influence on students’ school achievements (Desforges, Abouchaar 2003). However, our empirical study in Hungary did not justify this statement but indicated that conversations at home are more frequent in families of higher social status. Our data reflect that the higher the mother’s school qualification, the more frequently she has a talk with her children about their friends and classmates.

Conversations about what happened at school are great examples of behaviours with underlying parental views and attitudes about learning and school career. In this respect, there are different correlations for parents’ views on learning and for primary tasks of the school. According to our data, parents with higher social status attach more value to life-long learning than the school certificate or getting the ideal job. At the same time, families with lower social status give more importance to elementary or secondary school certificates of tangible knowledge. On the other hand, our data also show that primarily parents with lower social status tend to apply for different kinds of support offered by the school, as they
themselves, due to lack of their social and cultural resources, cannot provide such support to their children.

The results of our questionnaire survey pointed out that, among activities at school, parent groups of higher social status give priority to those that are closely linked to the learning process (e.g. development of basic skills, foreign language learning). Moreover, increasing and maintaining motivation to learn is a key issue for this parent group, and they consider it to be the task of the school. However, parents with lower school qualifications tend to focus primarily on their children’s social integration and conduct at school and career guidance, which is supported by the data of our qualitative examination.

The “at home” dimension of parental involvement can be approached from the perspective of the student’s learning process, so it cannot be narrowed to formal, curricula-based activities regulated in time and space, it also covers, in most cases, spontaneous informal activities outside school, in the home environment, between parents and children or between siblings. Results of our questionnaire survey indicate that, regardless of social status, most mothers regularly check their children’s homework, and help them, if necessary. Of course, mothers belonging to the same category of school qualification can display significantly heterogeneous behaviour as for the manner and frequency of helping their children in their homework due the next day.

In addition, the need for giving support at home for learning is determined by several factors at the same time. Besides the two of those factors highlighted in our research – the social status and the related resources –, the individual’s interpretation of their own role and the sense of self-efficacy may also play a role, regardless of position in the social stratification. At the same time, the frequency of home support can be influenced by programs offered in the school, by whether it is a full-day school or not, and if not, by whether it provides day boarding and learning rooms in the afternoons for lower and for upper years, respectively. If education with longer school days, i.e. lasting until 4 p.m., is examined in light of parental involvement, it is obvious that the Hungarian education system is counting on parental involvement as a resource. And although the subject of parental involvement is rather narrowly discussed in the
Hungarian professional discourse, both qualitative and quantitative results prove that schools and teachers – latently – exploit the potential of home support provided by parents.

3. The system of relations between the school and the parents from the perspective of Anglo-Saxon partnership models.

The characteristics of the relationship between the school and the parents and its system of expectations and effect mechanism have been widely covered in recent decades by international studies and education policy papers (Borgonovi, Montt 2012). Developed countries have put this subject matter on the policy agenda, because the relationship between parents and schools can play a role not only in increasing academic attainment but also in mitigating social inequalities. In different education systems, however, this set of relationships can take varying forms, meaning that parents can play very different roles in their children’s education. These differences can be detected not only across countries and education systems, but also across the various parent groups of the same educational institution, as parents with diverse social and cultural backgrounds generally engage themselves in their children’s education with dissimilar expectations and understandings. It also means that they tend to have different attitudes towards programs aimed at their involvement. In this respect, critical remarks say that education policy programs for promoting partnerships between family and school generally fail because they start from the individual and do not take the needs of different social layers into account (Lareau, Shumar 1996).

The Anglo-Saxon models presented in the dissertation are typical examples of what school development programs and strategies are drawn up and supported by the school management in educational institutions of the Atlantic system to involve parents. Based on these models, an effective school management develops an institutional strategy that takes into account the different needs and expectations of families with diverse socio-economic statuses and, thus, allows the school to build harmonious partnerships in cooperation with different parent groups. Studies based on international surveys also prove that schools with an institutional policy
that builds upon the local environment and the parental support will become more successful and more effective (OECD 2013).

While international literature abounds with research in fields related to parental involvement, research in Hungary investigate the subject with varying coverage. Thus, our qualitative research in elementary schools of less-favoured areas sets new direction in certain respects, trying to explore *inter alia* the reasons behind differing academic achievements of elementary school students in similar social situations. It was assumed that the social context of the school, the local parent-school relationship and its nature have an effect on the effectiveness of the school. Due to the narrow sample – restricted to direct correlations –, general statements and explanations cannot be made, but the investigation revealed certain specificities that a subsequent study could elaborate on in more details.

As for the system of relations between parent and school, the data from our questionnaire survey in three districts clearly indicate that most of the parents think that teachers working in their children’s school consider them as partners. And although this partnership loosens as the child goes to upper classes, the majority of the parents regard the teachers to be willing to cooperate. From the perspective of the family’s social status, it can be seen that parents with lower educational qualifications are more uncertain and fewer of them think that this relationship is a partnership, contrary to those with higher social status.

The qualitative method allowed us to shed more light, from various perspectives, upon the system of relations between parent and school. As a result, we can state that, in spite of the fact that the basic elements of the parent-school relationship (e.g. involvement at school, home support) are quite similar to those in the presented Anglo-Saxon models, the elementary schools examined are lacking institutional strategies and good practices for getting parents involved. The founding documents of the said elementary schools handle subjects related to relationships with different players of the school, including the parents, with highly varying degree of importance. The ones that are dealt with in those documents focus mainly on the possible channels of the parent-teacher cooperation. These documents are lacking strategic thinking and the corresponding statements that parents are
potential partners who can influence the students’ achievements and social integration at school.

In theory, the implementation framework of the Epstein Model could serve as a reference point on how to integrate the subject of parent-school partnership at local level in a more elaborated version, and as part of the school policy, into both the documents and practices of the school. However, the question still remains: at what level can the Anglo-Saxon model be adapted to the Hungarian situation, and which elements can be applied in the practices of the Hungarian educational system. Further studies are needed to answer these questions, but the international literature certainly include guidance and good practices that take into account the characteristics of different parent groups and can serve as an example for Hungarian schools to follow.
Publications related to the subject of the research


Conference lectures


Publication bibliography


