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Review

Parental involvement in developing countries: A meta-synthesis of qualitative research

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ABSTRACT

This study is the first to systematically review and synthesize the qualitative scholarship published since 2000 examining parental involvement in developing countries ($n = 16$). Contrary to the large focus on micro- and mesosystem aspects of parental involvement in the current literature, studies conducted in developing countries tend to additionally expand on exo- and macrosystems. This meta-synthesis emphasizes collective outcomes as an important goal in developing countries, and highlights the potential contributions of family-school-community partnerships. Furthermore, Epstein's U.S.-centric framework might be less relevant in the developing world due to differences in policy contexts despite its widespread usage.

1. Introduction

Since the [Coleman report in 1966](#), which emphasized the strongest positive effects of family factors on educational outcomes above and beyond school-level factors, policy-makers and educators in the United States have recognized the importance of family involvement for children's school success. A large body of literature has since articulated a framework within which to contextualize parent involvement and family-school relationships, and has established how various types of parent involvement are related to children's academic outcomes ([Epstein and Sanders, 2002](#); [Epstein, 2001](#); [Fan and Chen, 2001](#); [Hill and Chao, 2009](#); [Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, 1995](#)). Furthermore, the majority of these parental involvement studies quantitatively explore the association between parental involvement and achievement in Western developed countries (See meta-analyses by [Fan and Chen, 2001](#); [Hill and Tyson, 2009](#); [Jeynes, 2012](#); [Wilder, 2014](#)), notably the United States where family-school relationships are framed as a policy issue and the goal is to increase achievement and reduce achievement gaps. Very few studies on family-school relations are conducted in developing countries that are still struggling to achieve universal education and face very different challenges from more developed countries such as the United States.

However, parents' and communities' roles might be critical in developing countries where governments are not strong and community resources key to achieve the collective goals of education for all. Moreover, qualitative approaches might be more suitable to explore the culturally embedded meanings and perceptions of children, families, and school personnel in order to understand the nature of parental

involvement and the motives governing parents' beliefs and participation in their children's education in contexts culturally different from those where the majority of parental involvement studies have been conducted up to date. There currently are a growing number of large-scale efforts aiming to qualitatively better understand family-school relations in the developing world, such as the Improving Learning Outcomes in Primary Schools Project in Burundi, Malawi, Senegal and Uganda, supported by the Quality Education in Developing Countries Initiatives conducted by ActionAid, the Institute of Education at the University of London ([Marphatia et al., 2010](#)). However, our current understanding of parental involvement in developing countries is very limited, and there has been no effort to synthesize this work to the best of my knowledge.

To address this gap, this study systematically reviewed and synthesized the qualitative scholarship published since 2000 examining parental involvement in developing countries ($n = 16$). Contrary to narrative reviews, the meta-synthesis approach was developed specifically to systematically review and summarize *qualitative* studies in an area of interest and to provide a higher level of conceptual understanding and interpretation ([Noblit and Hare, 1988](#)). Meta-synthesis is thus ideally suited to generating new insights about the unique contributions of parents in developing contexts, because it lends itself to not only providing a big-picture summary of the literature, but also to developing and refining new theories while retaining the rich and unique details of the original studies, contrary to quantitative approaches ([Major and Savin-Baden, 2010](#); [Sandelowski and Barroso, 2006](#)).

In this qualitative meta-synthetic study, I aim to explore how parent involvement (PI)¹ is conceptualized and enacted in developing

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¹ We will use PI as shorthand for parental involvement from this point onward.

countries where children face multiple barriers to successfully completing their schooling and dropout rates are high. The purpose of this synthesis is to compare and contrast the literature on PI in developing countries to that of PI in Western developed contexts, and to inform educators, practitioners, and policy-makers of the challenges faced by parents in the context of development. I focus on school-age children (K-12) and on general achievement rather than on specific program-driven outcomes such as literacy.

1.1. A framework for understanding parental involvement

In the United States, family involvement has been formulated as a policy issue, included as one of the six targeted areas of reform in the No Child Left Behind act of 2001 (Title I). Against a background of decreasing overall achievement and increasing achievement gaps between White and minority children, schools across the United States were instructed to communicate with and engage families in their children's education, and parenting programs have proliferated. In this context, "family-school partnership" was framed as a remedy for American students' poor achievement, and has generated a large body of scholarship documenting the positive associations between parental involvement and achievement leading to multiple meta-analyses including a majority of U.S. studies (e.g., [Fan and Chen, 2001](#); [Hill and Tyson, 2009](#); [Jeynes, 2012](#)). The large number of published meta-analyses even led to a quantitative meta-synthesis synthesizing these meta-analyses (e.g., [Wilder, 2014](#)).

In spite of the large body of research summarizing quantitative research, there has not been a single meta-synthesis summarizing the qualitative scholarship on the topic. In general, qualitative studies have been scarcer and focused on the emotional dimension of parental involvement and the perceived barriers to involvement of disadvantaged minority parents in the United States or United Kingdom (e.g., [Doucet, 2011](#); [Reay, 2000](#); [Suizzo et al., 2014](#)). Such studies make an important contribution by explaining the deeper culturally embedded motivations and context in which parental involvement occurs. In particular, these studies shed light on not only white, middle-class privileged parents, but more marginalized groups so that the findings can be used to bridge the growing cultural gaps between the more disadvantaged families and schools ([Hornby and Lafaele, 2011](#)).

The most commonly used current parental involvement frameworks are based on Joyce Epstein's six types including parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with the community ([Epstein, 1995](#)). This widely cited framework is largely grounded in a U.S. context where increasing achievement scores and reducing achievement gaps are a central agenda of education reforms. Epstein's framework mainly focuses on what schools and educational practitioners can do to actively involve parents in schools from schools' perspective and emphasizes the overlapping link between families, communities, and schools. This illustrates how parental involvement has been articulated within the context of family-school relations in the United States.

Another development in the parental involvement research is the move above and beyond an emphasis on increasing the absolute quantity of parental involvement. There has been an attempt to advance our understanding of how the quality of parent involvement can matter once minimum quantity has been reached. [Pomerantz et al. \(2007\)](#) explain how the current scholarship explores the mechanisms by which parents influence their children's education, grappling with the question: *What is it that parents do that matter for children, how and why?* Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler also developed a theoretical framework further explaining the psychological motivations of parents for being involved in schools ([Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, 1995](#); [Hoover-Dempsey, 1997](#)). The revised version of Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's theoretical model of the parental involvement process includes parents' perceived life context, defined as parents' self-perceived time and energy and self-perceived skills and knowledge, which might not be static

depending on their life stage ([Walker et al., 2005](#)). Such frameworks are helpful to increase our understanding of parental involvement on an individual-basis, but it is unclear how these models play out in non-Western contexts as they were mostly developed in more developed countries such as United States or Canada.

1.2. The context of development: multiple disadvantages and missed opportunities

[Bronfenbrenner's \(1986\)](#) ecological framework outlines multiple embedded levels that shape children's development: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem, ranging from direct interaction between the child and their immediate environment to the indirect spill-over influences of more removed elements such as institutions or culture. [Seginer \(2006\)](#) provides an ecological analysis of parental involvement and outlines how PI might map onto these different levels:

- (1) Microsystem: home-based involvement, family environment, family structure and family size, physical aspects of the home learning environment
- (2) Mesosystem: school-based involvement, parent-teacher interaction
- (3) Exosystem: parents' social networks, workplace, neighborhoods, and educational policy
- (4) Macrosystem: social classes, ethnic or religious groups and belief systems of those groups

[Seginer \(2006\)](#) further argues that the current literature on parental involvement (mostly conducted in Western developed contexts) only focus on the first two, which is an omission.

In the context of developing countries, all levels are highly relevant. The general context of development poses multiple challenges and the literature provides ample evidence that the disadvantage faced by parents in developing countries might be an impediment to their involvement. At the most immediate micro-level, parents' lack of education and a poor learning environment are key barriers. This is also linked to gaps in family-school communication and poor relations at the meso-level. The large body of research on minority parents in the United States or the United Kingdom extensively documents these problems. In many cases, ethnic minority parents in the U.S. tended to be less involved out of respect for teachers' authority and because they felt that they did not have the expertise to interfere with school affairs ([Hill and Torres, 2010](#)). In many studies in the U.K. and the U.S., working-class minority families were described as tending to view the home and school spheres as separate, leading to misunderstandings whereby teachers thought of them as uncaring and lacking value for education (e.g., [Lareau, 2003](#); [Reay, 2000](#)).

Despite the common issues of poverty, lack of education, and home-school gaps faced by both minority parents in Western contexts and parents in developing countries, the problems faced by minority parents in Western contexts and parents in developing countries are quite different. At the exosystem, additional challenges exist for developing countries at a national level. For parents in developing contexts, the main problem is a more basic one of access to schools of minimum quality. Parents in developing contexts *all* collectively face the problem of low school quality (or even lack of access), making individual achievement less relevant. [Buchmann and Hannum \(2001\)](#) argue that states tend to be weak in the developing world and are not strong enough to implement education reforms and secure quality education for all school-age children. Governments face substantial barriers including limited economic and organizational resources, a lack of legitimacy, and peripheral status in the world ([Buchmann and Hannum, 2001, p. 80](#)).

Furthermore, with urbanization under way, rural schools face multiple problems including geographical isolation, poor resources and infrastructure, low quality of teachers, lack of teachers willing to teach

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