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Parent Involvement in Kindergarten

An Action Research Report
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Parent Involvement in Kindergarten

Submitted on November 19, 2015

in fulfillment of final requirements for the MAED degree

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A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Sandra Wyner Andrew".

Abstract

This action research investigated the effects of parent engagement strategies on the level of parent involvement in kindergarten. Parents may have barriers preventing them from becoming more involved in their child's schooling. Many parents have younger children they take care of, work full time jobs, and are unaware of how they can get more involved at home. In this study, various strategies were implemented to help increase levels of engagement. Parents were asked to track the amount of time they spent working with their child at home on school related activities. Activities and ideas were sent home to generate discussions and incorporate additional practice, and daily communication kept the home and school connection strong. 21 kindergarten families were included in this study. Sources of data included parent feedback forms, activity tracking logs, parent/child discussions, and personal observations from the researcher. Overall, parents were happy with the implemented strategies, and involvement levels increased. Parents felt that the strategies implemented, including the increased level of communication, was effective. Data collection over a longer period of time is needed to determine the effects on student success and achievement of the increased parent involvement strategies implemented in this study.

Keywords: parent involvement, kindergarten, strategies, engagement, education, parents

Setting kindergarten students up for success is a common goal for educators. Teachers work hard to ensure that the environment is welcoming and conducive to learning, that materials are presented with the best interest of the child in mind, and that students feel that school is an enjoyable and inspiring place to be. Parents play a large role in the education of students. Their involvement both in and out of school sets a precedent for many future learning encounters. Parent involvement in education has long been thought of as a tool for success. The emergence of parental involvement coalitions brought parent engagement to the “forefront” (McKenna and Millen, 2013, p. 10) of educational dialogue over the last three decades. Tekin (2011) articulates that parents are often thought of as the most important role models in a young child’s life and that they should get involved in their child’s education because they know what they want for their child. Creating a strong connection between home and school is often a goal for schools and teachers.

Parent involvement has many definitions. Pomerantz, Moorman, and Litwack (2007) describe it as “parents’ commitment of resources to the academic arena of children’s lives” (p. 373). Sawyer (2015) describes it as an “umbrella term for activities characterized by varying levels of frequency, response effort, and types of settings in which they occur” (p. 172). Lastly, Hashmi and Akhter (2013) found many definitions, including “direct effort provided by the parent, in order to surge educational outcomes of their children” (Bouffard and Weiss, 2008 p. 28).

Involvement from parents is commonly thought of as either school-based, or home-based (Hashmi and Akhter, 2013; El Nokali, Bachman, & Votruba-Drzal, 2010). School-based involvement can include, but is not limited to: attending parent-teacher conferences (Lee and Bowen, 2006; Pomerantz et al., 2007); attending school events (Lee and Bowen, 2006;

Pomerantz et al., 2007); and volunteering (Lee and Bowen, 2006; Pomerantz et al., 2007). While home-based practices can look like: providing homework help (Lee and Bowen, 2006; Pomerantz et al., 2007); discussing schoolwork and school events (Lee and Bowen, 2006; Pomerantz et al., 2007); and engaging children in intellectual activities, such as visiting a library or museum (Pomerantz et al., 2007).

Olmstead (2013) defined parent involvement as being either “reactive” or “proactive”. Reactive involvement includes activities such as “attending meetings, family activities, or volunteering” (p. 29). Proactive involvement includes activities such as “helping with homework, staying informed about school events, and following a child’s progress” (Olmstead, 2013, p. 29).

Lastly, McKenna and Millen (2013) break involvement into two categories: “parent voice” and “parent presence” (p. 12). Parent voice is described as parents’ right to express their thinking and understanding of their child’s everyday lives and educational experiences both in and out of school. In contrast, parent presence is described as parents’ actions and involvement in their child’s education. Parent voice and parent presence are related, and often overlap.

Many advantages can be seen when parents get involved with their child’s education. According to Sawyer (2015) when parents are involved in their child’s education, they “convey to their child the powerful message that school is a valued institution” (p. 172). Pomerantz, Moorman, and Litwack (2007) note that “when parents are involved in their children’s academic lives, they highlight the value of school to children, which allows children themselves to view school as valuable” (p. 374).

Students whose parents are involved in their education often have higher grades (Olmstead, 2013) and higher test scores (Olmstead, 2013; Hashmi and Akhter, 2013). It has also

been shown to reduce problematic behavior (Duchane, Coulter-Kern, and DePlanty, 2007; Hashmi and Akhter, 2013, El Nokali et al., 2010), improve social skills (El Nokali et al., 2010) and instills a greater work ethic in students (Hashmi and Akhter, 2013). Studies have also shown improved literacy skills (Sawyer, 2015; Hashmi and Akhter, 2013), greater participation (Hashmi and Akhter, 2013), and enhanced academic achievement (Duchane et al., 2007; Hashmi and Akhter, 2013; El Nokali et al., 2010; Jeynes, 2005). Sawyer (2015) writes: “Parent involvement in a child’s education is critical for fostering success in school” (p. 172). In his study of the relation between parental involvement and urban elementary students, Jeynes (2005) found that the benefits held across race and gender. He goes so far as to say that his findings suggest that getting parents involved in education may be one way to reduce the achievement gap between races.

While the benefits of parental involvement have been well documented, getting parents involved has often proven to be challenging. In fact, research has shown a decline in parent participation in recent years (Sawyer, 2015). There are many reasons why parents may hesitate or be unable to get involved with their child’s education, including the lack of time (Duchane et al., 2007; Stone and Chakraborty, 2011; Green, Walker, Hoover-Dempsey, and Sandler, 2007; Lee and Bowen, 2006), lack of transportation (Lee and Bowen, 2006), a lack of encouragement from the teacher (Duchane et al., 2007), not feeling welcome in the classroom or school (Olmstead, 2013; Lee and Bowen, 2006), unpleasant memories from their personal schooling (Stone and Chakraborty, 2011; Sawyer, 2015; Machen, Wilson, and Notar, 2005), and just not knowing how to best help their child (Olmstead, 2013; Stone and Chakraborty, 2011). The education level of the parent has also shown to be an indicator of parent involvement. Parents with a higher education level are more likely to be involved in their child’s educational

upbringing (Duchane et al., 2007). In addition, cultural differences and/or not speaking English as a first language has also shown to be a barrier to parental involvement (Lee and Bowen, 2006; Sawyer, 2015; Olmstead, 2013; Margolis 2005). Knowing what obstacles face parents can better help educators formulate a plan to help get parents more involved. Lee and Bowen (2006) state that “identifying and reducing” (p. 214) barriers should be an emphasis of strategies to help engage parents in their child’s education.

While parents may be interested in helping out and being more involved in the kindergarten classroom, there often seems to be a lack of actual involvement. What are the reasons for low parental involvement in kindergarten students’ schoolwork? What strategies will improve this, with a long term goal of facilitating student achievement? Parent involvement is encouraged at the school, but many parents may be unaware of how to be more involved at home. Increasing parent awareness and knowledge of involvement strategies is the goal of this research. My research looked into the motivations for parent involvement in education, examined the barriers parents face, and implemented strategies to increase involvement for the benefit of the student.

Methodology

The action research was conducted within my Kindergarten classroom in a Classical Education charter school. My data was derived from multiple sources. I used parent feedback forms, a home activity log, a Volunteer tracker, a weekly discussion sheet, personal observations, and reflections.

To begin my action research, I sent home the Active Parent Consent form to parents, who returned the form with their signature stating whether or not they wanted their data included in the study. All parents were able to take part in the various presented strategies, regardless of

their decision to have their data included in the research. In the first week, parents were asked to complete a survey (Appendix A) to help me understand their current view of parental involvement, whether or not they would like to be involved in the classroom, any outside commitments their child has, and any barriers they see to getting more involved in their child's education. This survey helped me gather information on current ideas of involvement, barriers parents face to getting more involved, and their current level of interest in involvement. Using this information, I devised a list of strategies on how parents could best help their children at home.

All parents had a solid grasp on what it means to be involved in a child's education. To help monitor home involvement, and track growth in frequency and duration, I sent home a Home Activity Log (Appendix B). Parents received, in writing, a list of ways they could get more involved in their child's education. The list included activities such as reading together at home, discussing the school day, skills practice, frequent communication with the teacher, and other strategies. Sight word and math flashcards, reading and math practice sheets, and mini-books were sent home to promote extra practice and encourage continued involvement. Using the list and the Activity Log, parents, along with their child, tracked how many minutes they spent per night on education related activities. Children were asked to place one sticker on the log for every ten minutes spent working together. Using the activity logs, I was able to track any increases in frequency and duration of parent involvement at home, as well as communicate with families who may need additional activities or help getting more involved. At the end of each week, parents were given a short, question and answer form to complete with their child titled "My Week in Kindergarten" (Appendix C). This helped elicit discussions between parents and children about their week at school. The questionnaire asked questions ranging from academic

to social and emotional. Using my own Discussion Checklist (Appendix D), I tracked which parents completed the questionnaire with their child, and was able to use students' answers to create additional extra practice opportunities for parents to try at home.

Since not all involvement occurs at home, I used a Weekly Volunteer Tracker (Appendix E), to track how often parents were involved in the Kindergarten classroom, how long each volunteering session was, and described the activities they took part in. For those parents unable to volunteer in the classroom, a virtual "Coffee Hour" was hosted, in which students helped create a tour of the classroom displaying the many things they have been working on in class. The tour was emailed to all families.

Over the course of six weeks, parents tracked their home involvement and completed the weekly questionnaire while I tracked and monitored their completed logs and questionnaires for data analysis.

Conferences, weekly newsletters, and daily communication also took place. Parents were able to request meetings and conferences to discuss the various social, emotional, academic, and behavioral needs their child may have. School-wide conferences were also held in the middle of the research process. I reflected upon these communications and how they mirrored the levels of parent involvement, and the value it has to a young child's education. My reflections took place in the form of a journal, where I recorded my thoughts, observations, and trends I noticed through frequent communications.

In closing, parents were given a second survey at the end of six weeks for them to report on their experience of the methods of involvement and collaboration with the teacher. This allowed them to reflect on whether or not the given strategies for increasing involvement were effective (Appendix F). This final method of data collection gave me the opportunity to

contemplate the research, analyze the parent feedback, and evaluate the efficacy of the interventions, thus helping me determine future methods of collaboration and support.

Analysis of Data

Overall, parents were pleased with the strategies provided by the teacher and implemented them at home. Many showed an increase of involvement and engagement in their child's education. Of the 26 families in the kindergarten classroom, 21 agreed to have their data included in the study resulting in 80% participation. Nevertheless, all families utilized the strategies at some point throughout the study.

Based on the first parent feedback form, parents had a good sense at what it means to be involved in their child's education. Some descriptions of parent involvement provided were

- a. "Working as a team with my child's teacher to improve the educational outcome for my daughter and her classmates. The involvement can be direct in the classroom or indirect outside the classroom. It could also mean involvement in school governance such as the school board or in social interaction such as a parent-teacher association".
- b. "Being an active, continuous participant in our child's educational life".
- c. "Parent involvement is helping your kids with homework, asking questions about school, getting to know their friends. Working with the teachers to make sure my kids are doing what they should while in school".

Knowing that parents had an understanding of what involvement means, the research was able to move forward as planned.

When parents were asked how they wanted to become more involved, the majority wanted to volunteer more in the classroom, followed closely by having weekly talking points

with their child to ask about their day and prepping materials at home (see Figure 1). Using this information, a schedule was set up to allow parents to volunteer in the classroom, and two “room parents” were selected to plan significant events and parties in the classroom, as well as help elicit help from families to run these events. A weekly discussion sheet with talking points was sent home every Friday, and projects that needed advanced preparation were sent home to families who wished to help.

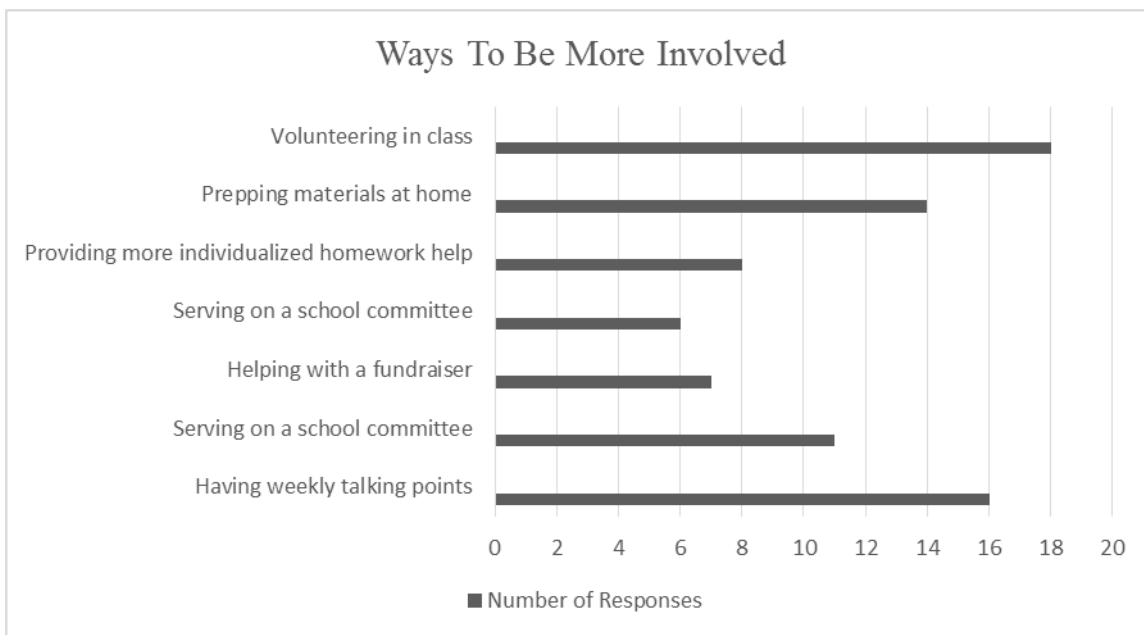


Figure 1. Parent Involvement Opportunities

In the feedback form, parents also noted the things that would prevent them from becoming more involved. Having other children to care for seemed to be the biggest barrier that parents faced. Of the 19 responses to the question, eight identified that not having childcare was the biggest preventer, followed by lack of time with six responses (see Figure 2). Being aware of the barriers parents were facing allowed the researcher to devise a list of strategies parents could easily implement at home. This ranged from working on specific things with their child, to

prepping projects for school at home. In addition, parents were given the opportunity to inform the teacher when and how they would be able to help the most, and not have to solely rely on a set schedule provided by the school.

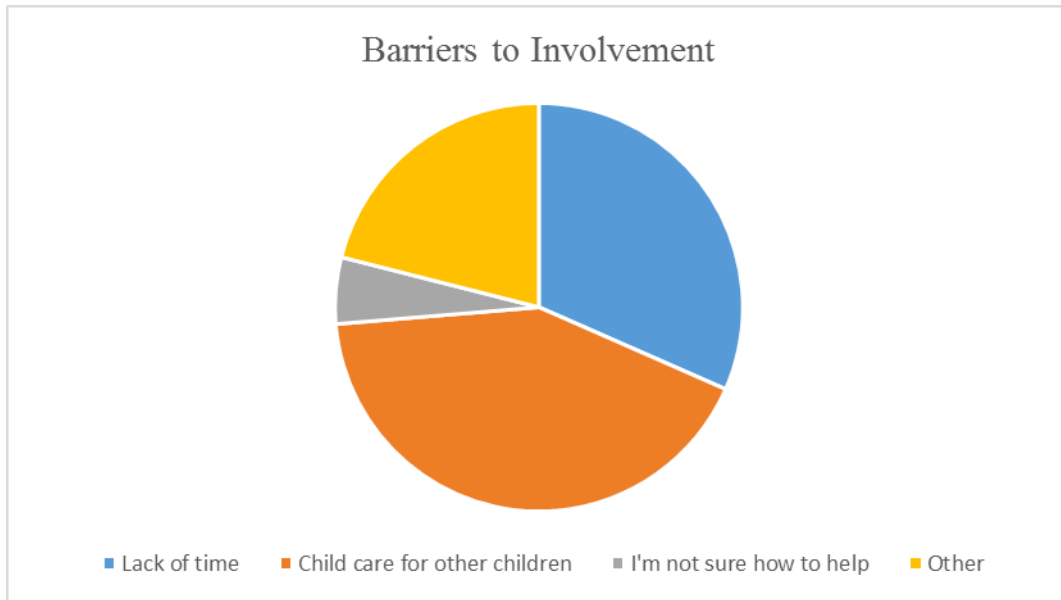


Figure 2. Barriers to Involvement

Moving forward with the study, parents were given a list of ideas of ways they could become more involved in their child's education. Such ideas included sight word practice, number skills practice, fine motor activities, reading together at home, and more. The teacher provided sight word, number, and math flashcards to students per parent request. Parents were then asked to complete weekly activity logs to track how many minutes they spent at home working with their child. Throughout the course of the study, parents spent about 123 minutes per week working on educational related activities with their child. (see Figure 3). This averages about 25 minutes per day of active parent involvement. The amount of time spent showed times of great increase, but was not consistent throughout the study. The shortest amount of time spent being on week 4. The researcher believes that this was the result of week 4 being Minnesota Educator Academy (MEA) break. Week 5 generated an increase in involvement.

During week 4, families met with the teacher for fall conferences. Parents and students were invited in to discuss academics, behavioral goals, social interactions, and emotional needs.

Parents were given specific goals and activities to work on with their child, which could be the reason for the rise in minutes.

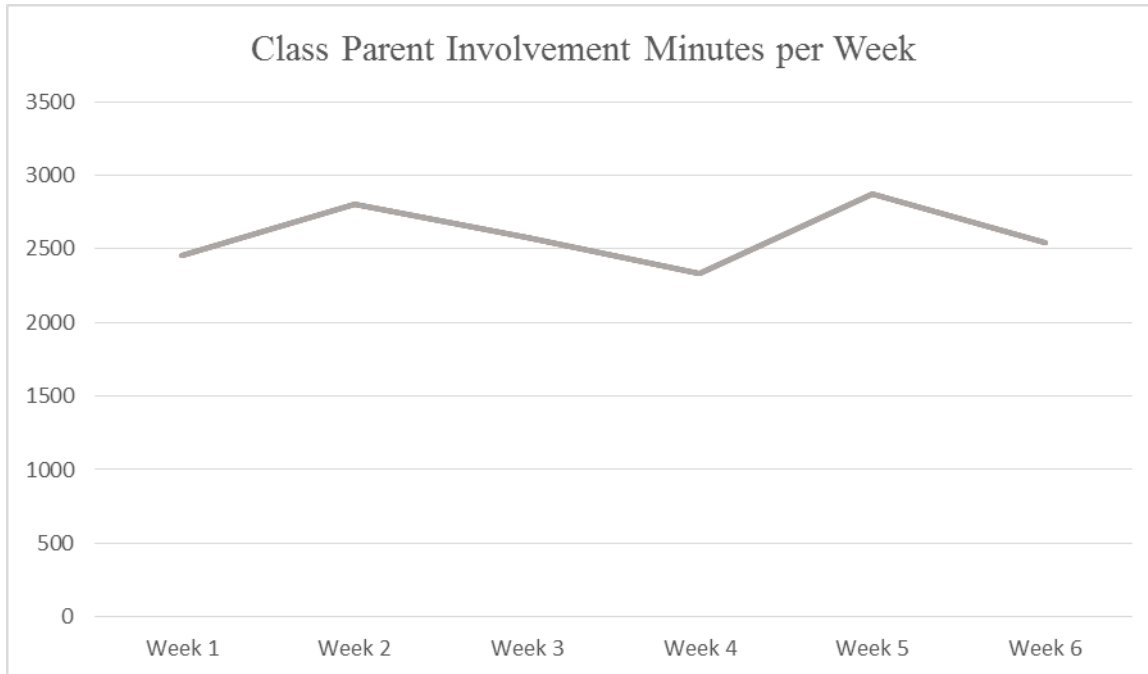


Figure 3. Whole Class Parent Involvement Activity Log Minutes

Based on the data in Figure 4, about 17 families on average each week completed the “My Week in Kindergarten” weekly discussion topics. This shows a percentage of 85% participation. Several parents expressed how much they enjoyed the discussion topics and were able to get their child to discuss their week in detail. Many asked to continue the weekly discussion sheets after the conclusion of this action research. The researcher observed that the students’ attitudes towards school were positive, likely as a result of the continuous discussion and strong connection between home and school. Week 4 resulted in the lowest amount of participation in the discussion topics. The researcher believes that this may have been the result

of MEA break, when many parents expressed plans to be out of town, on vacation, and visiting family. The researcher also noted that the discussion topics prompted parents to connect with the school regarding curriculum questions, social skills questions, and daily routines. Parents sent numerous emails per week, increasing the amount of parent-school communication.

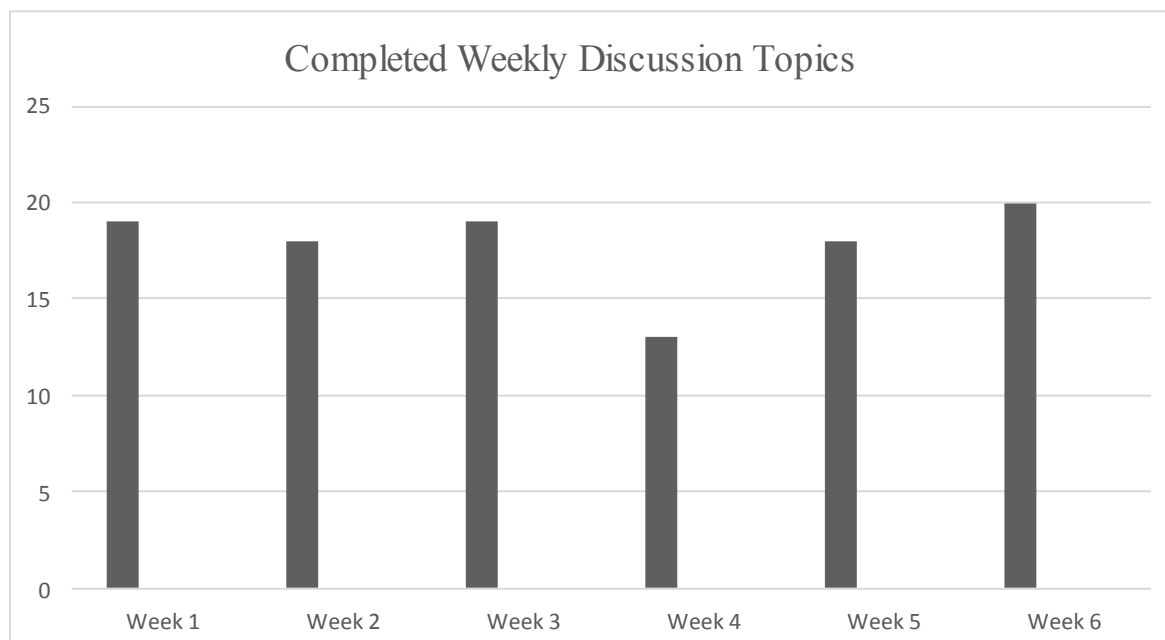


Figure 4. Completed My Week in Kindergarten Forms

The final form of data was collected through a second parent feedback form. Parents were asked to evaluate the value of the strategies provided by the researcher, describe how they have been involved at home, and describe the effectiveness of the communication with the teacher. Eleven families chose to have the information they provided included in the study. Communication provided by the teacher was described as being “very effective” and “excellent”. Parents expressed that they liked being kept well informed as what was going on in the classroom, were kept up-to-date with class and school events, and thought that the communication was “precise and helpful”. When asked if the provided strategies were helpful,

all parents answered positively. The weekly newsletters and daily discussion topics were among the most favored, along with the flashcards and online math practice forums provided by the school. One parent said: “It is really fun to see the strides our daughter is making in her education and to see her get excited about learning.” Another stated: “Unfortunately, we both have new jobs and have been unable to take time away for volunteering at school. However, the daily involvement log, homework assignments and weekly questionnaire were great for providing structure for us, and really encouraged involvement.” Overall, parents were very pleased with the levels of communication and suggested strategies for increasing parent involvement in education.

Action Plan

The results of the research conducted for this action research project will transform my practice as an educator. This action research study had two main foci. The first was to discover the reasons behind low parent involvement. The second was to determine which strategies helped increase parent involvement, and therefore have the potential to eventually help with student achievement. This research has shown me that strategies are often individualistic for each family. Nonetheless, similarities were demonstrated which can be used by educators to promote more at-home engagement by parents, thus improving the interaction between their classroom community’s students and their families.

Previously, the norm for my school was to simply let parents know that they should be involved in their child’s education to help them be more successful in school. How that involvement was to occur was left up to each family. The results of my research suggests that parents do not always know how to be involved, that they often lack the time and ability, and desire some sort of guidelines to increase their at-home participation in education. Through my

research, I have concluded that parents would like to be provided with suggestions and strategies to help them standardize what parent involvement will look like for their family.

Having a strong parent-home connection through effective communication was one of the largest contributors to increasing the levels of parent involvement at home. Making connections on at least a weekly basis helped keep families informed about classroom activities and learning objectives, opened the line of communication for families to connect with the teacher about other questions, areas of development, and concerns, and helped all parties work towards the same goal. Parents were very comfortable asking questions about the school day and inquiring about their child's schoolwork, behavior, and social needs. Throughout the study, I tried to establish strong yet equal parts of "parent voice" and "parent presence" (McKenna and Millen, 2013) since they are so intricately entwined in parent involvement.

Sending home activity tracking logs helped parents keep track of how much time they spent working with their child, helped with accountability, and also informed the teacher who is spending time on the materials at home. This information helped structure the extra support needed for some students at school. In addition, weekly talking points helped parents initiate meaningful yet regular discussions with their child about what they are doing and learning in school. Parents have expressed the desire to continue these talking points for the remainder of the school year. It is my goal that through continued use of these strategies, parents will routinely become more involved in their child's education, and at-home activities and discussion related to their schooling will become a daily routine in the household for years to come.

This research has the potential to help increase levels of student achievement. With increased parent support, a strong home and school connection is created, establishing routines both at school and at home, which can help instill a sense of educational priority in students. By

discussing school related subjects with their child, parents can help develop a love for learning and can help their child see education as an important institution. As previously mentioned, studies have shown that parent involvement in education can help improve literacy skills (Sawyer, 2015; Hashmi and Akhter, 2013), increase participation in class (Hashmi and Akhter, 2013), and enhance academic achievement (Duchane et al., 2007; Hashmi and Akhter, 2013; El Nokali et al., 2010; Jeynes, 2005). By enhancing the levels of parent involvement, we can potentially help set students up for a successful academic career.

For future research involving parent involvement, it would be beneficial to find out which strategies for increasing parent involvement have the greatest impact on student achievement. The parents who participated in this study represented a small population of kindergarten students within the school, and the duration was of short stature. Discovering the long-term effects of increased parent involvement, and specifically, which strategies had the most impact on student success, could potentially be of great value not only to the school, but to families as well. Collecting data over a longer period of time could shed information on whether student success and achievement increases when there is increased parent involvement.

Setting children up for success is a goal for educators and families alike. Learning takes place in more places than just the classroom. Implementing effective strategies to reduce the barriers to involvement and parent participation can help engage parents in the learning process. Bringing parents in to the learning process may help increase student achievement, bridge the gap between home and school, and allows teachers and families to set up a solid team to help guide children through their education. Parents help set the precedent for many future learning encounters.

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Appendix A

Parent Involvement

Completion of these questions is voluntary and confidential. You may quit at any time. Please answer questions to the best of your ability. Responses will be used for data collection purposes and will not reflect on your child in any way.

1. Check the box most appropriate for your situation. Mark only one oval.
 - I would like to continue, but prefer not to have my responses included in the study.
 - I would like to continue, and I am comfortable allowing my responses to be included anonymously in the study.

2. Your child's name: _____

3. What is your preferred contact method? Check all that apply.
 - Email
 - Telephone
 - Letters/Notes home
 - Other:

4. Describe what "parent involvement" means to you.

5. What are some ways you would like to be more involved? Check all that apply.
 - Volunteering in class
 - Prepping materials at home
 - Providing more individualized homework help
 - Serving on a school committee
 - Helping with a fundraiser
 - More communication with the teacher
 - Having weekly talking points with your child to ask about their day
 - Other:

6. How often are you able to volunteer in class? Mark only one oval.
 - Weekly
 - Monthly
 - Few times a year
 - I am unable to volunteer in class

7. I am available to help in class on these days: Check all that apply.
- Monday
 - Tuesday
 - Wednesday
 - Thursday
 - Friday
8. I am available to help in class during these times: Mark only one oval.
- Mornings
 - Afternoons
 - Anytime
 - None of these times
9. What types of activities are you interested in helping with?
Check all that apply
- Reading to students
 - Listening to students read
 - Working in small groups with students
 - Copies, laminating, and other prep work done at school
 - School projects
 - Prep work that can be done at home
10. List any activities your child participates in after school.
11. What would prevent you from being more involved at this time? Check all that apply
- Lack of time
 - Child care for other children
 - I'm not sure how to help
 - Other:
12. What can I do to help you with your involvement?
13. Additional Comments

Appendix B

Student's Name _____

Week of _____

Day of the Week	Time spent working together! (One sticker per ten minutes)
Sunday	
Monday	
Tuesday	
Wednesday	
Thursday	
Friday	
Saturday	

Appendix C

Student Name _____
Week of ____/____

My Week in Kindergarten!

1. What was your favorite part of school this week?
2. Tell me something new you learned.
3. What did you do in Math this week?
4. What did you do in Reading this week?
5. Tell me about something fun you did.
6. Who did you play with this week?

Appendix E

Weekly Volunteers in Ms. Reinhardt's Class
 Week of _____

Day	Volunteer Name	Describe Activity	Time (minutes)
Monday			
Tuesday			
Wednesday			
Thursday			
Friday			

Appendix F

Parent Involvement Part 2

Completion of these questions is voluntary and confidential. You may quit at any time. Please answer questions to the best of your ability. Responses will be used for data collection purposes and will not reflect on your child in any way. Thank you for your participation.

1. Check the box most appropriate for your situation Mark only one oval.
 - I would like to continue, but prefer not to have my responses included in the study.
 - I would like to continue, and I am comfortable allowing my responses to be included anonymously in the study.

2. Your child's name

3. Which method was used most frequently to contact you? Mark only one oval.
 - Email
 - Telephone
 - Letters/Notes home
 - Other:

4. How effective was the communication between you and the teacher?

5. Describe what parent involvement means to you.

6. Describe your involvement experiences thus far both in and out of school.

7. Which ways have you been involved in your child's education? Check all that apply.
 - Volunteering in class
 - Prepping materials at home
 - Providing homework help
 - Served on a school committee
 - Helped with fundraiser
 - Communicated frequently with the school/teacher
 - Discussed school with my child weekly
 - Other:

8. How often did you volunteer in class? Mark only one oval.

- 1-3 times
- 4-6 times
- 7-10 times
- 11+ times

9. Were the strategies provided by the teacher effective to helping you become more involved?

10. Additional Comments