

# The need to strengthen the educative role of parents

## Some implications drawn from educational productivity research

Jeff Dorman

*This article considers the empirical results of educational productivity research conducted by a team of researchers from Australia and the United States in the mid 1980s. Based on nine factors identified by this research, three issues that highlight the important educative role of parents, namely, the quality of the home learning environment, homework support and monitoring television viewing are discussed.*

**D**espite the formal recognition of their role as the primary educators of their children and the willingness of many schools to genuinely embrace the tenets of a partnership model, there are many parents who underestimate the importance of their role in the education of their children. Although empirical evidence suggests that family support is critical to student learning, the notion that a child is sent to school 'to get an education' with minimal input from home still prevails in some families. Often such views are based on a lack of confidence: some parents think that they cannot help their child because they have a limited knowledge of subject matter. Although understandable, this view assumes that education equates with subject matter. However, developing values, attitudes, and good study habits in children does not require a mastery of content. Principally, it requires commitment, an appreciation of what to do and the means to do it. Indeed, all parents can make genuine attempts to create supportive environments that foster a love of learning in their children.

To discuss the important role of parents in the education of their children, this article draws on the results of productivity research conducted in Western countries during the 1980s. Three areas where

parents need to act supportively, namely the quality of the home learning environment, homework monitoring and television viewing habits are introduced. Some practical ways through which parents might engender good study habits in their children are discussed.

### Educational Productivity Research

Educational productivity is a macro-term used to describe gains in student affective, cognitive and behavioural learning. Because student outcomes are not simply the results of schooling, factors external to the school needed to be included in any theory involving possible determinants of student learning. Over the past decade, the results of nearly 8000 research studies conducted in Western countries have been synthesised. These syntheses have been facilitated by advances in computer technology and the ability of researchers to combine the results of many studies in order to produce a general result. Nine potent, consistent and widely generalisable factors have been identified as the chief influences on student cognitive, affective and behavioural learning (Fraser, Walberg, Welch, & Hattie, 1987; Walberg, 1991). Table 1 shows these nine factors and their placement in three groups: Student Aptitude, Instruction, and Psychological Environments. The most striking aspect of the information in Table 1 is that schools (and teachers) do not control learning to the extent that many educators

assume. In fact, parents and students themselves are responsible for the impact of several factors. This does not mean that formal schooling has only a marginal effect on student outcomes. Rather, teachers need to accept that some of the factors in this educational productivity model are largely outside their control in the usual school environment.

Apart from these nine factors, the influence of sociological, political and economic forces is acknowledged. However, these forces 'appear to operate mainly through the nine factors in the determination of achievement' (Fraser et al 1987: 152). Therefore, while not denying the fact that such forces exist, they do not form part of the educational productivity theory.

### Discussion of educational productivity factors

As shown in Table 1, three factors - ability, development and motivation - pertain to student aptitude. Without some amount of these factors, students can learn little. Indeed, productivity research shows that intrinsic characteristics of students are crucial to student learning. In recent years, there has been a growing trend by educators to believe that all students can learn to the same level provided that the environment is managed. Such a view is nonsense. The research evidence shows that different students have different aptitudes for

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TABLE 1

**Nine Educational Productivity Factors According To Walberg (1991)**

**Student aptitude**

1. *Ability* or preferably prior achievement as measured by the usual achievement tests
2. *Development* as indexed by chronological age or stage of maturation
3. *Motivation* or self concept as indicated by personality tests or the student's willingness to persevere intensively on learning tasks

**Instruction**

4. The *amount* of time for which students engage in learning
5. The *quality* of the instructional experience including method (psychological) and curricular (content) aspects

**Psychological Environments**

6. The 'curriculum of the home'
7. The *morale* of the classroom social group
8. The *peer group* outside school
9. Minimum leisure-time *television* viewing

learning and that the best efforts of teachers cannot always compensate for such differences. This result suggests that equality of outcomes cannot be achieved without purposefully slowing the progress of more capable students.

Another two factors, namely, the amount of time students are engaged in learning and the quality of the instructional experience are controlled, to some extent, by the school. However, cultural, political and economic forces both inside and outside the school seriously limit the school's ability to alter the instructional experience. For example, changing the length of the school day or length of the school year would most likely encounter industrial, political and cultural resistance.

The final four factors refer to psychological influences, only one of which is school-centred. The influence of home and classroom learning environments, an individual student's peer group outside the school and the quantity of leisure-time television viewing impact on educational productivity. These influences on productivity can be direct as well as indirect. For example, the negative correlation between television viewing time and productivity could be direct in that the television programs viewed by students are rarely academically stimulating. Additionally, time spent watching television is time foregone on academically orientated pursuits (eg. homework, research in libraries, wider reading). Clearly, the quantity and quality of television viewing is a major issue for educational productivity. In the USA, it is estimated that high school students watch television for 28 hours per week on average. Anecdotal evidence suggests that a similar state of affairs exists in Australia.

**Diminishing returns**

Because nine factors have been shown to influence educational productivity, it is important to recognise that no one factor by itself will be a panacea for improving student productivity. All nine factors need to be worked at simultaneously for substantive productivity gains to occur. The law of diminishing returns suggests that increasing one factor without attention to other factors will realise increasingly smaller gains in learning.

As indicated above, one factor might influence another factor. For example, increasing the length of the school day for students could have these ramifications: greater amount of engagement in learning, reduced television viewing, improved student ability and increased motivation. According to this educational productivity theory, these benefits would manifest themselves in improved student learning. Clearly, the multi-factor nature of this theory of educational productivity reinforces the importance of both family and school in the educative process. This partnership between family and school offers the best direction for all types of Australian schools that wish to improve student outcomes.

**Implications for parents**

Given the above empirical results, what can parents do to support the educational process? Three implications for parents from these productivity results are apparent. Parents should:

- monitor and take responsibility for the quality of the home learning environment;
- support the homework policies of the school; and

- minimise the amount of television viewing time.

**THE HOME LEARNING ENVIRONMENT**

Parents need to appreciate that the curriculum of the home is a strong predictor of student learning. In fact, many empirical studies have highlighted the importance of the nuclear family to student learning (see: Marjoribanks 1991; Wynne & Walberg 1994). In families, children learn attitudes and values that set the tone for academic achievement. It is simply insufficient for parents to expect the school to take sole responsibility for the education of their child. Indeed, parents directly influence a major amount of a child's waking time. Furthermore, parental values influence the productivity of the relatively small amount of time spent in school.

The term 'Matthew effect' has been used to describe the influence of parents on the educative experiences of their children (Walberg 1991; Walberg & Tsai 1983). Matthew effects refer to the strong cumulative advantages afforded to students whose parents show a genuine interest in their progress. It is taken from Matthew 25:

For to everyone who has will be given more, and he will have more than enough; but from the man who has not, even what he has will be taken away'.

That is, research in the United States has shown that parental help at an early age has very positive, cumulative benefits for the child.

Even a casual observer would accept that family break-up, unhappy relationships and the massive shifts in how families are constructed have contributed to the serious decline, for many children, in the quality of Australian family life over the past two decades. Increasingly, the values which traditionally belonged to families are being viewed as anachronisms. Government is equating family with co-habitation. Children simply are not exposed to the role models that once were taken-for-granted. The potential harm that this deterioration is creating is underscored by the fact that the importance of the family has been accepted for many years as pivotal to the education of the young and the nature of our society. In 1921, Lee asserted:

The education of the child was subject to two great influences – home and external. If education in the home failed, no other agency could make good the failure. The home was the primary and fundamental educational institution. Of the other influences, the school should and did play a very important part, although the Church, occupation, and recreation each contributed towards the mental development of the future adult of the State.

(Lee 1921: 6)

According to Coleman (1987), schools and formal institutions of child-caring concentrate on providing opportunities, demands and rewards. By contrast, families have focused traditionally on attitudes, effort and conception-of-self which interact with institutional structures. Clearly, schools are formal structures which, despite the rhetoric of individualism, cannot be fine-tuned to the affective needs of each child. It follows that schools cannot act as proxies for families. Schools might adopt the rhetoric of families ('care and concern', 'individual needs', 'happy family' etc.) but the reality is that they cannot fulfil the parental role. Good family environments foster three characteristics of influential groups: intimacy, stability and persistence (Wynne & Walberg 1994). On all three characteristics, contemporary schools fall down. They usually have low levels of intimacy. Additionally, persistence and stability afforded to students and teachers has mirrored the decline in these areas in wider society. Both formal and informal aspects of the school curriculum have been in a constant state of change over the past decade. It follows that parents need to be aware that surrogate forms of parenthood in child-care centres or schools are distortions of true parenthood.

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Given the results of productivity research, it would appear that students who come from stable family backgrounds where there is still a genuine parental presence are at a distinct educational advantage. It has become too trendy for parents to talk in terms of 'quality time' when, in fact, the variable is enough time. Therefore, parents need to make arrangements to be with their children and avoid passing their responsibilities to other people. Over the past decade there has been a strong decline in the role of unstructured, home-based or neighbourhood-based activities for children supervised by parents, and an astronomical rise in the role of structured, school-based activities under the supervision of so-called professionals. In essence, family units and local neighbourhoods, which have formed the basis of socialisation for many years, have been

stripped of responsible adults to the extent that television programs, and a child's peers are becoming the important socialising variables.

According to Walberg and Redding (1989), the curriculum of the home is twice as predictive of academic learning as family socioeconomic status. Indeed, the way in which parents relate with their children and provide opportunities for personal growth are very important predictors of learning. Some clear avenues parents could follow include:

- encouraging and supporting a child's industry;
- expressing interest with affection in the child's academic and other growth areas;
- discussing current events;
- demonstrating how to set goals and see them through to fruition;
- developing routines that inculcate the importance of academic work;
- analysing and discussing television programs that are viewed as a family;
- providing study facilities that are conducive to academic work.

#### HOMEWORK

A second issue concerning the curriculum of the home is the degree of support afforded to homework by parents. In many cases, homework provides the clear link between the routine events of classrooms and the home. Walberg and Redding's (1989) empirical work suggests that assigning and monitoring homework by teachers had three times the effect on student work compared to family socioeconomic status. As mentioned earlier in this paper, some parents do not feel confident in assisting their children with homework because they are not familiar with content. But how many parents are familiar with content? Rather than attempting to teach subject matter, parents should focus on establishing good attitudes and study habits in their children. For example, research for assignments might need access to libraries. Parents can assist by finding out how to access information. They do not need to 'know' the information. The parental role is focused more on valuing the child and emphasising the importance of academic work rather than the actual teaching of content. That is, in terms of Bloom's Taxonomy (Bloom et al. 1956), the parent role falls more in the affective rather than cognitive domain. Parents need to take time to guide their children in how to go about their tasks. Organisation of time and prioritising tasks do not need an intimate knowledge of content. On a very practical level, students need access to a congenial study area that is free of distractions. Doing homework on the kitchen table while the evening meal is

being prepared is not conducive to efficient learning and yet many students attempt homework under these types of conditions.

Some parents are willing to go further than merely encourage; they become involved in the subject matter. For example, a dedicated parent might enrol in a secondary school subject through night school so that they can study with their child. In doing so, the parent becomes a genuine learning partner whose witness cannot be ignored. A parent might purchase two textbooks so that they can follow the course of study with their child. Finally, parents must demonstrate to their children that as parents they take their children's homework very seriously. Individual family commitments (eg, rounds of golf) should not take precedence over a commitment to helping a child with homework. There is simply no substitute for dedication and commitment by parents.

#### TELEVISION VIEWING

Educational productivity data shows that more than 12 hours per week of leisure-time television viewing had a weak negative or deleterious influence on student learning (Fraser et al. 1987). Clearly, parents need to monitor the quantity and quality of television programs viewed by their children. The necessity of children having televisions in bedrooms is a case in point. It is open to conjecture whether such practices actively hinder academic work. Perhaps the affluence of Western culture does not engender academic work. In some homes, the rhetoric of the importance of academic work, is not matched by the reality of television sets in bedrooms.

One productive way of developing a culture on television usage is to critique some trendy programs. Such 'joint critical analysis of television viewing' may have the effect of turning children away from television and onto academic pursuits. Some questions that need to be answered include:

- Does this program show that postponing gratification is important?
- Does the program show how to make informed decisions?
- Does the program show that accepting responsibility for one's behaviour is important?
- Does the program show that making and adhering to commitments is important?
- Does the program show how conflict resolution occurs?

Because time on task is linked to student achievement, it is not surprising that reducing leisure-time television viewing enhances student learning.

### Conclusion

This paper has argued that educationally productive strategies in families are very important to student learning. Although schools have a great responsibility for the education of children, parents have an equally important role to play. By drawing on empirical results of nearly 8000 studies, research has identified nine educational productivity factors. Three issues that focus attention on the parents' role, namely, home environment, homework and television viewing and possible family responses have been discussed.

Strengthening the role of families is needed because the widening gap between the 'haves' and 'have nots' has a lot to do with family resources rather than financial resources. It follows that the dispossessed of the future will most likely

be those adults who never had genuine family support during their school years. As the Matthew effect suggests, the multiplier effect of this deprivation will mean that these children will be severely disadvantaged in terms of job opportunities and playing an active and fruitful role in Australian society.

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