Parents' involvement in their children's education

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In this paper, the nature of parental involvement in children's education in the early years of school is investigated, as well as the relationship between parental involvement and children's learning competence. The analyses use Wave 2 data from *Growing Up in Australia*: The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) for children in the kindergarten cohort, who were recruited at age 4 into the study. At the time of the Wave 2 data collection in 2006, these children were in Year 1 and 2 at school. Research findings on parental involvement are first briefly reviewed, and then the analyses using the LSAC data are discussed.

Questions considered include: What expectations do parents have for their child's education? How responsive do parents believe that schools and teachers are to their needs? What contact do parents have with their children's school and teachers in the early years of school? Does parental involvement predict children's learning competence?

Engaging families in the education of their children at home and at school is increasingly viewed as an important means to support better learning outcomes for children. When schools and families work together, children have higher achievement in school and stay in school longer (Henderson &

Mapp, 2002; Jeynes, 2005; Pomerantz, Moorman, & Litwack, 2007; Reynolds & Clements, 2005). Although there has been considerable research on how parents influence children's development, less is known about the specific ways in which parents socialise their children in terms of school-related behaviours. While extensive research indicates that there are important links between parenting and children's academic and behavioural competence at school, there is less research on "academic socialisation", which is conceptualised as the variety of parental beliefs and behaviours that influence children's school-related development (Taylor, Clayton, & Rowley, 2004, p. 163).

Various definitions of parent involvement have been proposed. It can be defined broadly as parental behaviour with, or on behalf of children, at home or at school, as well as the expectations that parents hold for children's future education (Reynolds & Clements, 2005). Ho and Willms (1996) defined parent involvement through four constructs—home discussion, home supervision, school communication and school participation. Dimock, O'Donoghue, and Robb (1996) proposed a range of dimensions that include: school choice (i.e., parents select the education institutions and experiences for their children); involvement in school governance and decision-making (i.e., parents participate in formal school structures); involvement in teaching and learning activities in the classroom and at home (e.g., parents volunteer in the classroom, converse with teachers outside of formal meetings, help with homework and discuss school-related issues with children); and communication between home and school (e.g., parents contact the school and receive communications from the school).

Socio-demographic characteristics of families and parental involvement

Variation in levels of parental involvement in children's learning at home and at school is strongly influenced by family socio-economic status (SES) (Boethel, 2003). Parents in families with lower SES often have fewer years of education and, possibly, have had more negative experiences with schools. They may feel unprepared to be involved. Parental involvement may also vary because of differences in ethnic and cultural backgrounds between parents and teachers (Desimone, 1999). Teachers are less likely to know the parents of children who are culturally different from their own background and are more likely to believe that these parents are less interested in their children's schooling (Epstein & Dauber, 1991). Parents' language difficulties may also cause difficulties in understanding participation

opportunities. It is unfortunate that parents with low SES and from different ethnic and cultural background than the mainstream culture, whose children would most benefit from parental involvement, are more likely to find it difficult to become and remain involved (Lee & Bowen, 2006).

Parents with social and cultural backgrounds different from the dominant social groups in the society may also have quite diverse expectations and interpretations of what it means to be educationally helpful to their children. For example, Vogels (2002; cited in Drissen, Smit, & Sleegers, 2005) distinguished four groups of parents in research conducted in the Netherlands. The first group, *partners*, were highly active in informal and formal engagement activities, from volunteering to engagement in the formal governance of the school. These parents were more likely to have a high SES. A second group was called *participants*. They were highly involved in informal activities at the school and had middle to high SES. The third group were *delegators*, who viewed teachers as the appointed experts and therefore responsible for the education of their children. The fourth group were the *invisible* parents, who were not engaged or visible to the school. The invisible parents were primarily parents with a low SES.

Parental beliefs and the nature of parental involvement

A greater appreciation of the beliefs that underlie parents' decisions about becoming involved in their children's education is needed (Taylor et al., 2004). The way in which parents feel about schools and the emotional connections that they had to school may influence the kinds of attitudes to school and learning that their children assume. These feelings may be positive or negative, depending on the nature of those previous experiences. Negative feelings about school may prevent parents from making connections with their children's schools. Positive feelings about school experiences are likely to enhance parental involvement. Additionally, the expectations that parents hold for their children's future achievement are important. If parents expect high levels of academic achievement and commitment to schooling, the child is more likely to adopt these positive attitudes (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005).

There is a need for increased understanding about how, and why, parents understand and construct their involvement in different ways. Parental participation may be active because parents believe that they bear the primary responsibility for children's educational achievement. Other parents may hold a notion of partnership with schools that responsibilities for children's learning are shared between parents and schools. Still other parents may not believe that they should take an active role or may lack the confidence to be involved. For these latter parents, developing personal self-efficacy beliefs that one can be effective in supporting children's learning at home and at school requires encouragement by teachers and schools, as well as opportunities to participate (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005).

The role of teachers and schools in supporting parental involvement

Parents' communication with schools and parental involvement are also influenced by school characteristics (Feuerstein, 2001). Schools play a strong role in determining the level and nature of parental involvement. Critical factors include teachers' beliefs about parents' role in the classroom and their responsibility to provide involvement opportunities to parents. Schools can help parents become involved by offering a range of options for engagement. Supporting parental involvement requires knowledge by teachers on how to involve parents, as well as leadership and support from the school administration. Kerbow and

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Bernhardt (1993) noted that some schools seem to have more ability than others to promote parent involvement. Schools can help parents decide to be involved by offering a range of options for interactions that take parental needs into account.

Invitations to parents to be involved convey to parents that their involvement is welcome and valued and provide motivation to be involved. Important invitations come from three sources: the school, teachers, and children themselves (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). A school climate that conveys to parents that they are welcome in the school is essential. Parents can also be kept well-informed about their children's learning. The school staff can show respect for parental concerns and suggestions. Such a school climate sets a strong foundation for involvement. Invitations from the teacher build personal trust that is the basis for creating a partnership around children's learning at home and at school. Invitations from children for help with their learning can also prompt involvement. This is consistent with developmental research that children's behaviours can influence parents' socialisation practices.

Theoretical explanations of parental involvement: Social and cultural capital

Theories of cultural and social capital have been used to explain why parental involvement has an impact on children's achievement and adjustment to school. While there are some inconsistencies in how these theories have been used to explain the impact of parental involvement, there are also commonalities (McNeal, 2001).

According to theories of social capital, parental school involvement increases parents' access to social networks and information (Coleman, 1988, 1991; Lareau, 1987; Lareau, & Horvat, 1999). Social capital is represented by parental contact and involvement in the organisational and social aspects of the life of the school. As parents establish relationships with teachers, they learn important information about the school's policies and practices. They also meet other parents, who provide information and insight about the school's expectations. Social capital is also represented through the extent of conversation that parents have with their children about school and through parental monitoring of their children's school engagement. Discussion with the child about school conveys interest about the importance of education.

Cultural capital is usually explained as the level and nature of direct parental involvement in the educational process (Lareau, 1987). The theory of cultural capital proposed by Bourdieu (1977) argued that there are inequalities in the amounts of cultural capital that individuals either hold or can obtain. Higher levels of cultural capital, developed through access to relevant resources over time, increase the likelihood that any individual can access additional capital. For example, parents who hold strong cultural capital because they completed school and hold post-secondary educational qualifications are more likely, as a consequence, to have a higher SES, as well as knowledge of educational systems. Because schools represent and produce middle-class values and forms of communication, teachers are more likely to communicate more effectively with these parents from middle and higher SES backgrounds, with whom they are more likely to share similar values and beliefs. Teachers are likely to have more difficulties relating to parents who have a different cultural frame of reference because of socio-economic circumstances or ethnic backgrounds. This bias of schools to represent, but also to promote more middle-class values, places many parents at a disadvantage and makes it more difficult for these parents to participate in their children's education.

Families with more social and cultural capital tend to be more involved at school because these families are more comfortable with teachers and schools and are more likely to have supportive social networks. This allows them "to construct their relationships with the school with more comfort and trust" (Lareau & Horvat, 1999, p. 44).

Parent involvement in children's schooling: An Australian perspective

Data from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) are used in these analyses. A description of the study is available in Gray and Smart (see pp. 5–13 of this issue). The analyses in this paper on parental involvement use Wave 2 data collected in 2006 for the kindergarten cohort (children born between March 1999 and February 2000). In 2006, these children were in Year 1 and Year 2 of school. The mean age of these children was 6.8 years. Descriptive information on the children and the families is presented in Table 1. The

analyses use parent report data from the Parent 1 Interview (Parent 1 is typically the study child's mother) and data from the child's teacher. A teacher questionnaire was sent to the teachers of the child if Parent 1 provided permission.

The analyses reported in this paper use the data available for the 3,380 children whose teachers completed and returned the teacher questionnaire. Children in the cohort who did not have teacher data ($n = 764$) did not differ significantly from those children included in these analyses by age ($M = 6.8$, SD 3.2); sex (53% were male); CALD status (16% had CALD status); ATSI status (3.5% had ATSI status); family type (84% came from two-parent families); or mothers' education (65% held a post-secondary qualification).

In the following sections, a number of descriptive analyses are presented on a range of parent involvement variables. Following this description of the nature and level of parent involvement in their child's education, relations between parent involvement and child competence in language and literacy skills, mathematical thinking skills, and approaches to learning are described through regression analyses.

What expectations do parents hold for their children's future education?

In the parent interview, parents were asked a single question on how far they would like their child to go in their education. This question has been used in a number of previous studies that relate parental involvement to child outcomes (e.g., Feuerstein, 2001; Lee & Bowen, 2006; Sy, Rowley, & Schulenberg, 2007). It has proved to be an important predictor of children's achievement over time. Parents responded to the question: "Looking ahead, how far do you think [child] will go in his/her education?" The response options on this question were: "obtain post-graduate qualifications at a university"; "go to university and complete a degree"; "complete a trade or vocational training course"; "complete secondary school"; and "leave school before finishing secondary school".

Most parents (99%) expected that their child would complete their secondary schooling and 41% of parents expected that their children would obtain some form of post-secondary qualification (e.g., post-graduate qualification, university degree, or vocational course). The responses on this question are represented in Figure 1.

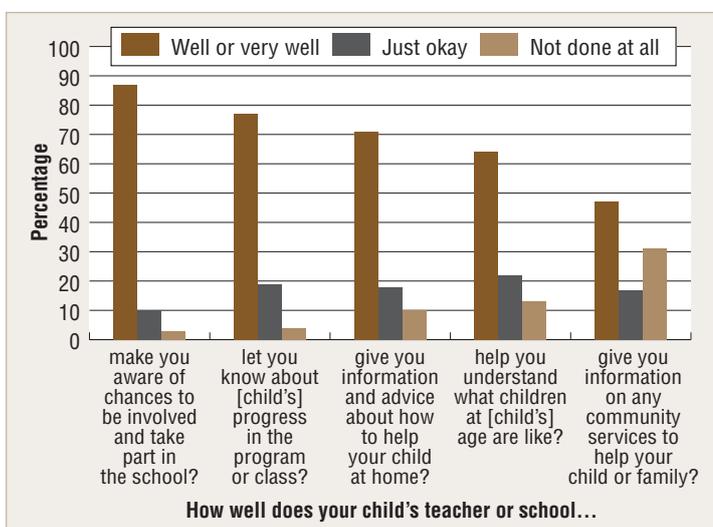### How do parents perceive the responsiveness of schools to their needs?

Parents responded to five questions on a scale rating the responsiveness of schools to their needs. The items were rated on a 4-point scale ("very well", "well", "just okay", "not done at all"). The scale was adapted from a measure in the Early Childhood Study of Kindergarteners (ECLS-K)–Base Year (National Center for Educational Statistics, n. d.) that is also used in other large educational survey studies in the United States. The percentage responses for each item are presented in Figure 2, combining the response categories of "well" and

"very well". Most parents thought that schools were doing well or very well at making them aware of chances to be involved and take part in school activities (87%), as well as letting them know about their child's progress in the class (77%).

| Table 1	Sample characteristics ($n = 3380$)
Characteristics	**Descriptive statistics**
Mean age	6.8 years
(SD)	(2.6)
Sex	
Male	49%
Female	51%
School year level	
Year 1	68%
Year 2	32%
Child has CALD status	15%
Child has ATSI status	3.6%
Family type	
Two-parent family	88%
Single-parent family	13%
Mother's education	
< Year 12	16%
Year 12	20%
Post-secondary qualification	64%
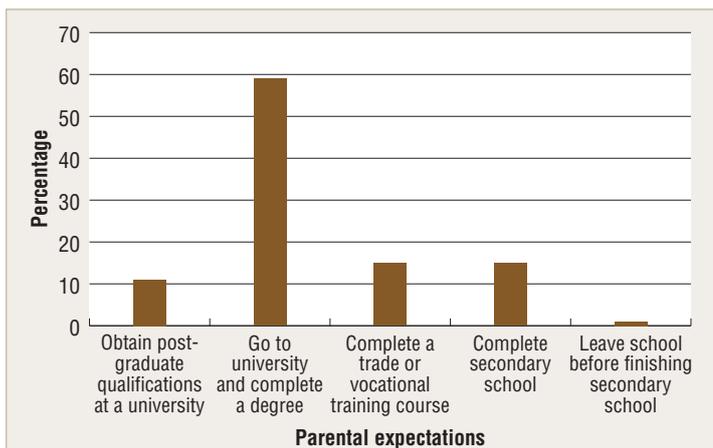
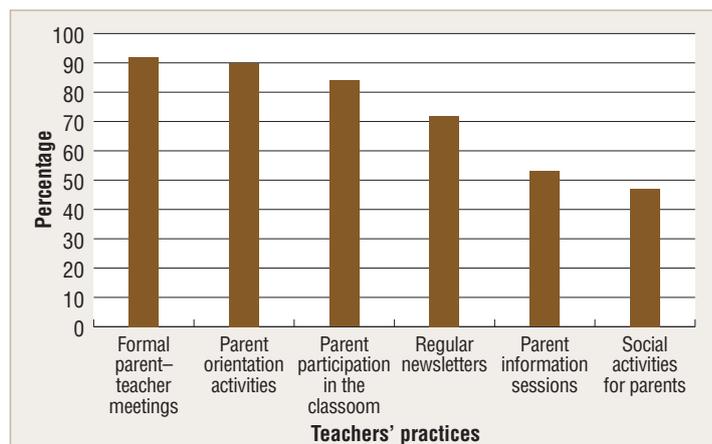| Figure 1 | Parental expectations about their child's education |

| Figure 2 | Responsiveness of school to family's needs |

How do teachers judge the degree of involvement of parents in their child's education?
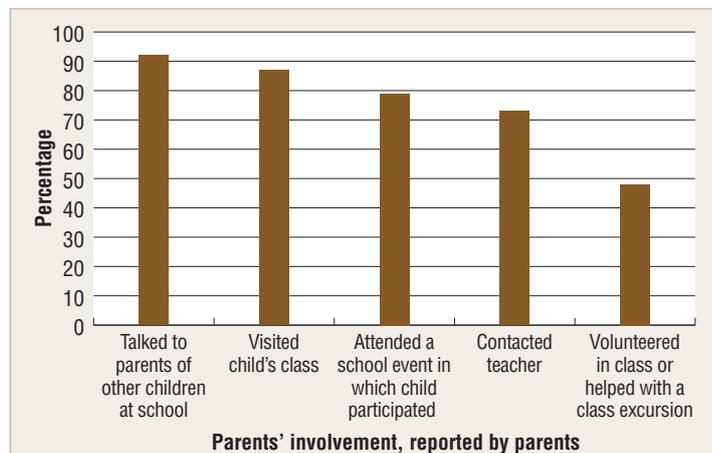
Teachers responded to a question that asked for their global judgement on the question: "In your opinion, how involved are this child's parents in her/his learning and education?" Response options were "very involved", "somewhat involved", and "not involved". Teachers reported that 60% of parents were very involved in their children's education and that 37% of parents were somewhat involved. Percentages are presented in Figure 3.
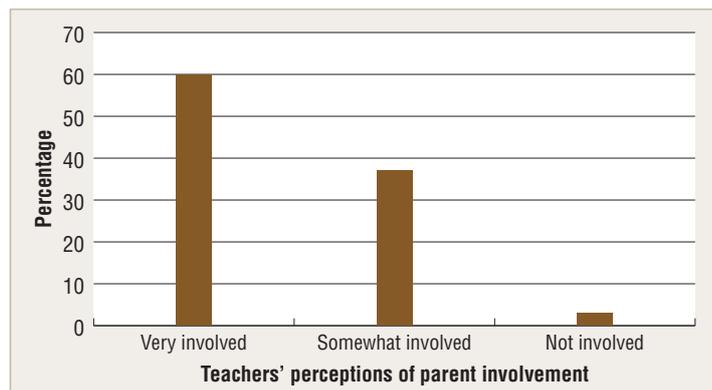
| Figure 3 | Teachers' perceptions of parent involvement |

| Figure 4 | Teachers' practices to involve parents |

| Figure 5 | Parents' involvement in activities at school, reported by parents |

### What practices do teachers use to involve parents?

Six items were used to measure the nature of practices that teachers used in their classroom to involve parents. A number of activities were identified to which teachers could offer a yes/no response: "In your class, which of the following practices have you used (or will you use) this year to involve parents?"— "parent orientation activities early in the year" (e.g., meeting for parents); "parent participation in your program" (e.g., as a classroom volunteer); "formal parent–teacher meetings about child's progress"; "parent information sessions"; "social activities for parents that promote contact or support"; and "regular newsletters about your program and events". Percentages representing the use of these practices by teachers are presented in Figure 4. Teachers were most likely to have offered formal parent–teacher meetings (92%) and parent orientation activities at the beginning of the year (90%). They were least likely to offer social activities to parents (47%).

What contact with the child's teacher and school do parents report?

Five items were used to assess parents' contact with their child's school program. A number of activities in which parents may have participated at their child's school were identified to which parents could give a yes/no response: "During this school term, have you …"—"contacted child's teacher"; "visited child's class"; "talked to parents of other children at the school"; "attended a school event in which your child participated"; and "volunteered in the classroom or helped with a class excursion". Engagement in three or more activities was indicated by 76% of parents. Percentages for these various activities are shown in Figure 5. Parents were most likely to have talked with other parents at the school (92%) or visited the child's classroom (87%), and least likely to have volunteered in the classroom or helped with a class excursion (48%).

What parental contact with the school do teachers report?

Seven items were used to assess parents' contact with their child's school program, as reported by teachers. A number of activities in which parents may have participated at their child's school were asked for, to which the response options were yes/no: "To the best of your knowledge, during this school year, has a parent of the study child done any of the following?"—"spoke to, visited or wrote to you"; "visited the child's class"; "attended a school event in which child participated" (e.g., sporting event); "volunteered in child's class or helped with a class excursion"; "helped elsewhere in the school, such as in the library or computer room"; "attended a meeting of the parent–school committee"; and "assisted with fund-raising". Teachers reported that 57% of parents had engaged in four or more activities. Percentages for these various activities are shown in Figure 6. By teacher report, parents were most likely to have been in direct contact with the teacher (95%). They were least likely to have helped elsewhere in the school aside from participation in the child's classroom (16%).
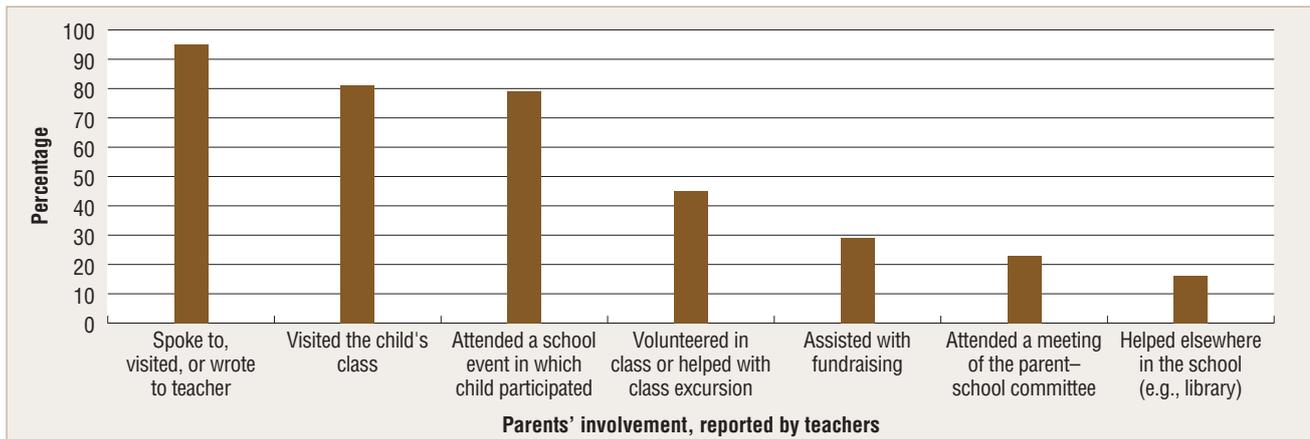
Figure 6   Parents' involvement in activities at school, reported by teachers

Is there a difference in the amount of contact reported by parents or teachers according to the household income of the family?

Household income was banded by quintiles. Means and standard deviations for the count of the types of activities with the school reported by parents and teachers, by income band, are shown in Table 2. An analysis of variance showed that the effect of income was significant for the level of parent-reported contact, $F(4, 3264) = 7.61$, $p = .000$, and level of teacher-reported contact, $F(4, 3264) = 26.18$, $p = .000$. As reflected by the means presented in Table 2, the higher the income, the more likely it was that parents engaged in more activities with the school, as reported by both parents and teachers.

What relationships exist between parental involvement and child competencies?

Regression models were developed to examine the predictive value of the measured parent involvement variables on child outcomes. A range of child and family socio-demographic characteristics were entered first in these analyses. These variables were: child sex; child age; child speaks a language other than English at home; child has ATSI status; maternal education; and household income; as well as school characteristic of the sector (i.e., public, independent and Catholic). The set of parent involvement variables used in the analyses were: schools' responsiveness to family needs (categorised as high, medium, low); level of parental contact with the school (categorised as high, medium, low), as reported by parents and teachers; and the global teacher rating of parental involvement (very involved, somewhat involved, not involved).

The measured competencies of children used in the regression analyses related to language and literacy, mathematical thinking, and approaches to learning. Teacher ratings on the Academic Rating Scales (ARS) from the ECLS-K (National Center for Educational Statistics, n. d.) were used to measure language and literacy outcomes skills and mathematical thinking skills. The Language and Literacy Scale of the ARS has ten items rating the child's proficiency in particular communication and early literacy skills (e.g., reads most words correctly and answers questions about what was read, makes predictions while reading, and retells story after reading. The items are rated on a 5-point scale (not yet, beginning, in progress, intermediate, proficient). The Mathematical Thinking Scale of the ARS has eight items rated on the same rating scale as for language and literacy. The items rate the child's proficiency for numeracy, as well as understanding of measurement and spatial concepts (e.g., demonstrates an understanding of place value; models, reads, writes, and compares whole numbers). Approaches to learning were measured on a teacher rating scale of six items drawn from the Social Skills Rating Scale (Gresham & Elliot, 1990). This measure is also used in ECLS-K. These items rate the level of children's engagement in learning (e.g., to work independently, to persist in completing tasks, to pay attention) on a 4-point scale (never, sometimes, often, very often).

Language and literacy: In the first regression model, the degree to which parent involvement predicted children's language and literacy competence was examined. The model accounted for 11.2% of the variability in child outcomes. Over and above the contribution of child and family factors, 8% of the variability in literacy and language outcomes was accounted for by the set of parent involvement variables. The single-item measure of teachers' judgement on the level of parent involvement with

Table 2	Means and standard deviations for parental contact activities, reported by parents and teachers by weekly household income				
	Quintile 1 (< $797) M (SD)	Quintile 2 ($797–1240) M (SD)	Quintile 3 ($1240–1632) M (SD)	Quintile 4 ($1632–2194) M (SD)	Quintile 5 (> $2194) M (SD)
Parent report of contact with school	3.61 (1.19)	3.75 (1.21)	3.80 (1.14)	3.88 (1.27)	3.93 (1.02)
Teacher report of contact with school	3.38 (1.90)	3.91 (2.00)	4.14 (1.92)	4.22 (1.94)	4.34 (1.77)

their child's education was positively associated with higher language and literacy outcomes ($p < .001$), as was higher parent contact with their child's school program through various activities ($p = .05$).

Mathematical thinking: In the second regression model, the degree to which parent involvement predicted children's competence in mathematical thinking was examined. The model accounted for 8% of the variability in outcomes. Over and above the contribution of the child and family factors, 6% of the variability in mathematical thinking was accounted for by the set of parent involvement variables. The single item of teachers' judgement of the level of parent involvement with their child's education was positively associated with higher competence ($p < .001$).

Approaches to learning: In the third model, relationships between parent involvement variables and the child's approach to learning were analysed. This model accounted for 14% of variability, with 6% of the variability in the approaches to learning score accounted for by the set of parental involvement variables. The single item measure for teachers' judgement of the level of parent involvement with their child's education was positively associated with higher competencies ($p < .001$).

In each regression model, it was the teachers' judgement of how involved the parent was in the child's education that had the highest association with child competence.

Discussion

The findings of these exploratory analyses of parents' involvement in their children's education indicate relatively high levels of parental engagement. This was evident by parental self-report and teacher report. In a global rating of engagement, teachers indicated that almost two-thirds of the parents were very involved in their children's education, although this still leaves a substantial proportion of parents who were not seen by teachers to be highly involved. Most parents expected that their child would complete school and go on to post-secondary

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study, either to complete a university degree or a vocational course. Parents reported that schools were relatively responsive to family needs and supportive of family involvement. Schools were viewed by parents as doing very well in making them aware of opportunities to be involved in their child's schooling. The level of engagement in particular school-related activities, as reported by parents, indicated that parents most frequently talked with other parents at the school or visited the child's classroom. Teachers reported that direct contact with the parents through some form of communication (face-to-face or written) was the most frequent way in which parents were involved. Higher levels of parental involvement were evident for families with a higher household income.

In relating parental involvement measures to children's level of competence in language and literacy, mathematical thinking, and approaches to learning, it was found that parental involvement variables contributed to child outcomes, after controlling for family and child characteristics. The global teacher rating of how involved parents were in their child's schooling had the strongest association with the measured child competencies used in the analyses.

While a range of studies over time (see reviews by Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jeynes, 2005) have found evidence for associations between child learning outcomes and parental involvement, these studies share many of the limitations found in other areas of educational research. First, the link between parental involvement and children's learning outcomes should not be regarded as causal. While the regression analyses reported in this paper incorporated a number of variables that have been found to influence children's competence, such as child's ethnicity, maternal education and family income, we cannot be certain that such a set of control variables captures all important variables that influence child outcomes. Bias also arises if scores on the scales for language and literacy and mathematical thinking reflect underlying cognitive abilities and not just parent involvement per se. It may also be that parental involvement is an effect of children's competence as much as a cause. Second, researchers cannot necessarily assume that parental involvement is always positively associated with children's learning. Increased parental involvement may also occur in response to learning difficulties.

Practices in school that increase parent involvement are important. Reynolds and Clements (2005) reported that school programs that provide support and resources for parent involvement in their children's schooling yield greater and longer-lasting benefits than many efforts that consume a large share of public educational spending, such as smaller class sizes and after-school programs. While a prescription to increase contact with parents sounds simple, changes in school practices require the investment of resources and the professional development for teachers to enhance their capacities to work with families.

School-based parental involvement is typically activity-driven, though gaining parental cooperation is not primarily a function of the activities provided.

Offering involvement activities without forming strong family–school partnerships is unlikely to yield increased parental participation, especially for those families that are most alienated by traditional schooling practices (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Lee & Bowen, 2006). While the frequency of family–school contact can foster relationships, the quality of contacts makes the largest difference. Engaging parents in strong partnerships requires schools to solicit and respond to parents' suggestions and concerns. Schools must ask what they can do to make parents feel more confident and comfortable with involvement and to provide the activities and resources that parents need to feel empowered.

It is early days in the school careers of these LSAC children and it will be important to continue to track the level and nature of parental involvement with children's schooling over time. In the early years of school, there is likely to be higher involvement by parents. Much of the research focuses on parental school involvement when children are in primary school. Parent involvement is known to decrease in secondary school, which may not necessarily reflect parents' wishes because it may be influenced by changed structures in the delivery of secondary school programs or that parents may believe that they cannot assist with more challenging secondary school subjects. However, it is unlikely that parents stop caring about or monitoring the academic progress of their children throughout their schooling. Thus, it remains important that LSAC continues to track the impact of parent involvement on children's school achievement and adjustment.

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