Family Structure and Parent Involvement in Children's Education

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The effectiveness of parents' involvement in their children's education—through participating in school activities or through more home-based processes—is a topic of debate. Some scholars have found a positive association between parental involvement and student outcomes (Green et al. 2007; Domina 2005; McNeal 1999), but have have argued that such effects are inconsistent or spurious (Robinson and Angel 2014). Still, parental involvement remains central to the policy agenda for improving the performance of the educational system, especially in schools serving disadvantaged populations. Recently, Crosnoe and Benner (2012) argued that discussions of parental involvement need to be more closely tied to the changing demography of the nation, particularly the diversification of the family structures in which American children live. After all, the parental involvement model in U.S. schools is predicated on the type of active investment that may be difficult to meet for parents who are unpartnered, unstably partnered, or partnered with someone beside the child's other parent. In this way, parental involvement may be a mechanism of documented associations between family structure—defined by marital ties between parents and by biological ties between parents and children—and children's academic outcomes. Despite this fact parental involvement has received little attention relative to the socioeconomic correlates of family structure and even relative to other parenting behaviors, and, in addition to the socioeconomic correlates of family structure, academically relevant parenting behavior.

In this spirit, this study investigates the links between a diverse array of family structures and parents' educational involvement when children are in elementary school. Drawing on multiple waves of data, we are able to leverage fixed effects techniques to estimate within-family associations rather than making cross-family comparisons. These analyses are geared towards answering two questions: 1) Are changes in family structure related to changes in parents' educational involvement at school and at home? and 2) Does this association operate in similar ways across various groups defined by the family context of involvement (SES, nativity) and educational settings eliciting and responding to involvement (school sector and SES)?

Data and Methods

The Early Childhood Longitudinal Survey–Kindergarten (ECLS-K) is a nationally representative dataset that is well-suited to our goals, not only because it follows children for several years through elementary school but also because it repeatedly surveyed parents about their families and parenting. The analytical sample included the 16,261 children who participated in data collection during the kindergarten, first grade, third grade, and fifth grade waves. In addition to the independent and dependent variables of interest, described below, this study will utilize control variables for socioeconomic status (SES) and other time-variant measures that could be linked to both family structure and parents' educational involvement.

Family structure. Combining parental reports that measure current marital status and the number and relation of adults in the home, family structure is coded into five mutually exclusive categories: married biological parents, married step parents, cohabiting biological parents, cohabiting step parents, and single parent.

Parental involvement. School-based involvement is a scale that sums responses to six yes/no questions about whether a parent has participated in several school events, including

attending an open house, attending a parent organization meeting, attending a school event, volunteering at the school, or participating in a fundraising event. Home-based involvement is measured using a composite variable based on the well documented H.O.M.E. scale, averaging parental assessments of the frequency with which they engage in a number of home learning activities with the child, including parent engagement in educational activities with the child at home, the presence of reading material at home, the child's participation in organized classes and lessons outside of school, and attendance at cultural events..

Analyses. Fixed effects linear regressions use family structure to predict both parental involvement outcomes. Importantly, this framework overrides the potential impact of stable unobserved confounds to provide evidence about whether family structure changes are associated with changes in parental involvement (i.e., whether parents' involvement is higher during periods in which they are married vs. unmarried). The baseline models linking family structure and parental involvement and controlling for various time-varying covariates can be expanded to also include interactions of family structure with other child, family, and school factors as a means of .elucidating variations in involvement with specific family structures.

Results

Initially, descriptive analyses have established an association between family structure and parental involvement in school, as depicted in Figure 1. Married biological parents report considerably more involvement in their children's education at school than parents in all other family structure groups, followed by married stepparents and single parents and finally by cohabiting biological parents and stepparents.

In multivariate analyses, our first fixed effect linear model predicting educational involvement by family structure (see Model 1 in Table 1). We then iteratively added controls for child grade (Model 2) and family SES (Model 3). Across the three models, results suggest that the key distinction is between married biological parents and all others. The former report more school-based involvement than the latter. The difference is significant for cohabiting stepparent and single-parent families and marginally significant for married stepparent. Parents in married biological parent families and cohabiting biological families did not differ from each other in this parenting outcome. These findings suggest that having a partner is important to parental involvement, that the biological relation of that partner to the child matters, but that the marital status with that partner does not matter.

Additional Analyses

Moving forward, we will explore potential sources of variation by incorporating interaction effects between family structure and the sociodemographic individual-level and school-level measures outlined in the Data and Method section above. Analyses will then be replicated using parents' educational involvement at home as the outcome. We will then compare the findings to piece together a comprehensive evaluation of the ways in which family structure is linked to parental involvement across all potential access points: at the home and at school. These findings will lead towards a better understanding of how programs and policies at school as well as public policy in general can promote more effective parental involvement in children's education.

Works Cited

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Figure 1

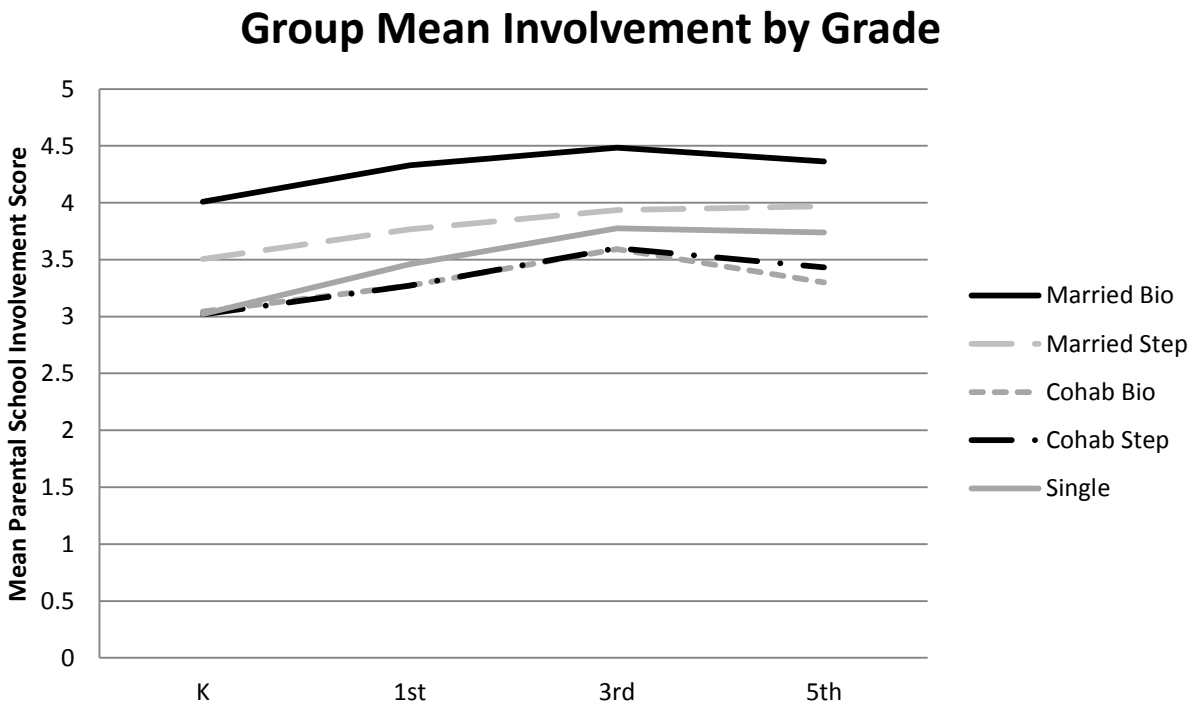

Table 1. Fixed Effects Regression Models Predicting Parent Educational Involvement at School

	Model 1 B (*RSE*)	Model 2 B (*RSE*)	Model 3 B (*RSE*)
Family Structure (Ref: Married Biological)			
Married Step	0.086	-0.174†	-0.179†
	(0.103)	(0.105)	(0.105)
Cohabiting Biological	-0.140	-0.132	-0.133
	(0.102)	(0.101)	(0.101)
Cohabiting Step	-0.069	-0.232*	-0.237*
	(0.108)	(0.109)	(0.109)
Single	-0.124†	-0.264***	-0.255***
	(0.072)	(0.072)	(0.072)
Grade (Ref: 5th Grade)			
Kindergarten		-0.344***	-0.350***
		(0.030)	(0.029)
1st grade		-0.006	-0.007
		(0.027)	(0.027)
3rd grade		0.140***	0.142***
		(0.028)	(0.028)
Socioeconomic Status Composite			0.095*
			(0.045)
Constant	3.930***	4.054***	4.061***
	(0.027)	(0.037)	(0.036)
n observations	48,269	48,269	48,269
n respondents	16,261	16,261	16,261

Note: *** p < 0.001, ** p < 0.01, * p < 0.05, † p < 0.1.