SCHOOL COMMUNITY JOURNAL

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School Community Journal

THE
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Editor's Comments

We have a nice variety of articles for you in this issue, with the common thread of considering various stakeholders' perspectives running throughout. Willems and Gonzalez-DeHass start us off with an essay describing how school–community partnerships can be a vital part of using creative contexts such as authentic instruction, problem-based learning, and service learning to motivate students and maximize learning. Next, Voyles describes a needs assessment conducted for a plan to create a community school which revealed just how important it is to listen to parents *before* planning an intervention.

Xu continues his research on homework; his current study found that neither race nor location (urban vs. rural) affected high school students' homework interest. However, teacher feedback on the homework did have varying influence for the Black and White students surveyed. Bennett-Conroy gives us a promising practice to consider. Using interactive homework as a catalyst for parental involvement and teacher–family communication, her study highlights the success of a low-cost intervention implemented in a low-income, high immigrant and minority middle school.

Hilgendorf's case studies of three African American boys—including a comparison of the perceptions of the three students, their family members, and teachers—remind us of the opportunities that are so easily missed without communication and careful examination of perceptions of what constitutes "family" and "involvement." Hourani, Stringer, and Baker also examined various stakeholders' perceptions, but in the context of Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. Their lessons from this city undergoing major education reform may be relevant for other areas undertaking similar new forays into the quest for improved parent involvement. Zedan also obtained parent perspectives, but from a quantitative approach and in the context of the Arab ethnic minority in Israel, finding different patterns of parental involvement based on the child's gender and age.

Finally, Vera and her colleagues report on a study conducted among diverse immigrant parents of English learners in a large metropolitan area of the U.S. Midwest. They found that different types of involvement were predicted by various personal (ethnicity, comfort using English) and school (climate, perceptions of barriers) factors, which should be helpful in forming more effective school policies and programs to engage this growing population.

Lori Thomas
November 2012

School–Community Partnerships: Using Authentic Contexts to Academically Motivate Students

Patricia P. Willems and Alyssa R. Gonzalez-DeHass

Abstract

The opportunities school–community partnerships pose for students' learning continue to generate the attention of educational stakeholders. Children learn through a variety of social and educational contexts, and the goals for student academic success are best achieved through the cooperation and support of schools, families, and communities. The purpose of this article is to examine several instructional approaches that use diverse contexts to facilitate students' meaningful learning of academic subject matter: authentic instruction, problem-based learning, and service learning. Building upon the premise of a community of learners, school–community partnerships within each of these approaches are discussed.

Key Words: school–community partnerships, authentic instruction, problem-based learning, service learning, motivation, contexts, real world applications

Introduction

School–community partnerships refer to the connections between schools and community individuals and organizations that are created to enhance students' social, emotional, and intellectual development (Sanders, 2006). A central principle to Epstein's theory of overlapping spheres of influence is that goals for student academic success are best achieved through the cooperation

and support of schools, families, and communities (Epstein, 2011). In this spirit, there has been a growing interest in school–community partnerships in education (Epstein, 2010a; Faulconer, 2010; Gestwicki, 2013; Sanders, 2006, 2008; Sheldon, 2007). In this article, we propose that engaging students in activities that are consistent with environmental and sociocultural structures existing outside school walls will ensure a greater degree of parallel between school environments and real-life tasks that will facilitate students' meaningful learning of academic subject matter. These efforts will hopefully begin to address the commonly reported concern by educators that students, especially older students, do not see the meaningfulness in much of the academic subject matter they are exposed to in school. Instead, students see many academic tasks in terms of short-term learning necessary to secure a grade and do not grasp the learning's utility in the real world beyond the classroom. We discuss three context-based instructional approaches that can be utilized amidst school–community partnerships that help students to make meaningful connections between academic content and real-world applications of knowledge: (a) authentic instruction, (b) problem-based learning, and (c) service learning.

Social Contexts of Learning

Current research demonstrates that school–community partnerships lead to many benefits, including creating a caring community, improving the school's programs and climate, supporting families, enhancing student achievement, improving behavior, increasing attendance and graduation rates, and helping students to succeed both in school and in later life (Epstein, 2010a, 2010b). Growing interest in school–community partnerships can also be connected to a rich theoretical tradition in diverse areas of the literature that address the social contexts of learning, including that of situated learning, social constructivism, and learner-centered education.

Situated Learning

Situated learning or situated cognition proposes that learning and knowledge are situated in physical and social contexts and that the transfer and use of knowledge is affected by the context in which learning took place (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989). Situated learning's viewpoint suggests that individuals learn by interacting with their environment, and cognition is essentially created through the interactions between learners and situations. The situated learning outlook can provide information about the ways in which the organization of classrooms may affect the opportunities for productive learning (Koran, Willems, & Camp, 2000). Brown, Collins, and Duguid (1989) argue

that students often acquire knowledge in school that is tied to the school context and cannot be used in the context of everyday life. This is because students are not being exposed to the community of learners in which the information will be used. It is through these communities that individuals understand how information is interpreted and how it is used. Creating a breach between the learning and the use of information leads students to separate what is learned from how it is used (Brown et al., 1989). In contrast, an individual's capabilities appear more efficient and effective across contexts that are more authentic and familiar to the individual. This finding has been demonstrated in pioneering research in various skill areas such as time monitoring, memory tasks, and mathematical calculations (Ceci & Bronfenbrenner, 1985; De Loache & Brown, 1983; De Loache, Cassidy, & Brown, 1983; Lave, 1988; Lave, Murtaugh, & De la Rocha, 1984; Nunes, Schliemann, & Carraher, 1993). More recent work on situated learning that highlights the role that context plays in learning has also been demonstrated with second-language writing and teaching economics (Broome & Preston-Grimes, 2011; Tsui & Ng, 2010). One of the hidden truths to improving instruction, according to McCann, Jones, and Aronoff (2010), is that student learning should be situated within the context of a coherent curriculum with the teacher linking instructional outcomes to future activities.

Social Constructivism

From the social constructivist perspective, it is important that students' experiences at school are connected with the world outside the classroom (Santrock, 2011). Social constructivism emphasizes the belief that knowledge is constructed when individuals interact socially and talk about shared tasks or dilemmas (Driver, Asoko, Leach, Mortimer, & Scott, 1994). In Vygotsky's contextual theory, the pathway to expertise is associated with immersion in a particular social situation over time, with individuals acquiring skillful knowledge and the ability to engage successfully in the discourse, norms, and practices of the particular community of practice (Vygotsky, 1962). "From a Vygotskian perspective, the teacher's role is mediating the child's learning activity as they share knowledge and meaning through social interaction" (Dixon-Krauss, 1996, p. 18). Teachers (or knowledgeable peers) can offer guided assistance through an individual's zone of proximal development (those tasks that a student cannot handle independently but can once they have assistance).

Therefore, from the social constructivist perspective, learning occurs during social negotiation and through the opportunity to discuss multiple perspectives as people make sense of their world. Collaboration within a community of learners is an opportunity to reflect and share one's perspective with others

and to negotiate meaning and develop better solutions (Alesandrini & Larson, 2002; Driscoll, 2005). Individuals come to be exposed to multiple perspectives on a particular subject that may help to better inform and broaden their own current conceptions. Thus, this approach would afford students the opportunity to jointly construct meaning for an activity while enabling them to look beyond their individual point of view. Teaching practices that build on the social constructivist perspective allow for social dialogue and exploration in an atmosphere of shared learning, foster group reflection and multiple viewpoints, and encourage meaningful group activities around common interests and authentic real-world problems (Bonk & Cunningham, 1998). In addition, constructivist practices emphasize the importance of stimulating students' self-regulated and active learning, connecting learning to authentic and real-life contexts, and encouraging students through open-ended questions and guided discovery (Erdogan & Campbell, 2008; Mayer, 2004; Thoonen, Sleegers, Oort, Peetsma, & Geijsel, 2011).

Learner-Centered Instruction

The social influences on learning are also echoed within the American Psychological Association's 14 learner-centered psychological principles that emphasize the active and reflective nature of learners (Learner-Centered Principles Work Group, 1997). These principles are intended to apply to all learners regardless of age and summarize what research has revealed about how students learn (McCombs, 2003). Of particular interest to this paper is Principle 11, "Social influences on learning," which states that learning is enhanced by social interactions and communication with others during instructional tasks. "In interactive and collaborative instructional contexts, individuals have an opportunity for perspective taking and reflective thinking that may lead to higher levels of cognitive, social, and moral development, as well as self-esteem" (Learner-Centered Principles Work Group, 1997, p. 6).

Further, in a classroom based on learner-centered principles, decision-making is shared, whereby students are involved in decisions about how and what they are learning, and students assume increased responsibility for their learning (McCombs & Miller, 2007; Pierce & Kalkman, 2003; Weimer, 2002; Weinberger & McCombs, 2001). Choices can be offered to students that are developed from within teacher- and state-mandated curriculum constraints. When students are given choices, it feeds an innate need for autonomy, and they are more likely to feel a sense of ownership, empowerment, and enjoyment in their learning; they are more likely to be intrinsically motivated and satisfied with instruction (Cornelius-White & Harbaugh, 2010; McCombs & Miller, 2007; Weinberger & McCombs, 2001).

Suggestions for School–Community Partnerships

The instructional suggestions for school–community partnerships that follow build on these themes that emphasize learning in social contexts. Strategies presented in this article situate learning in authentic contexts and encourage student choice and shared decision-making in order to foster students' academic motivation and meaningful learning of subject matter. In addition, they engage students in opportunities for collaboration and group reflection with their teachers, peers, families, and members of the community.

Parent Involvement

Epstein (2010b, 2011) proposes six different types of involvement: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with the community. For instance, when parents are involved with students' learning at home, students have more positive attitudes towards schoolwork and show gains in related skill areas, while parents get a better awareness of their child as a learner and are more equipped to support and encourage student learning at home. When parents volunteer, student learning is enhanced for those skills that receive targeted attention from volunteers, and parents gain the awareness that families are welcome and valued at school. Research has found relationships to exist between parent involvement and students' academic achievement, sense of well-being, attendance, attitudes toward school, homework readiness, time spent on homework, motivation, and educational aspirations (Gonzalez-DeHass, Willems, & Doan Holbein, 2005). When parents show an interest and enthusiasm for what their children are learning, they provide a support system at home that buttresses the child's academic learning and reinforces the value of schooling (Ames, de Stefano, Watkins, & Sheldon, 1995). Parents can also play a vital role in modeling effective learning strategies and encouraging students' achievement motivation and self-regulated learning skills. As we will discuss later in this article, teachers can involve parents in their child's learning through authentic and meaningful learning activities.

Community Partners

Teachers can also turn to a variety of members in the community whose expertise or experiences naturally complement curriculum subject matter. Potential community partners might include local businesses and national franchises, colleges and universities, high schools, fire and police departments, volunteer organizations like the YMCA or United Way, senior citizen organizations, libraries, museums, zoos, faith-based organizations, or individuals living

within the community (Sanders, 2006). As we will discuss later in this article, school–community partnerships take authentic instruction and problem-based learning (PBL) to another level of collaborative learning by exposing students to real-life experts during meaningful and enriching learning activities. Collaboration between schools and members of the community is beneficial for students because it can provide students with opportunities for mentorships and afterschool programs that extend the classroom curriculum to the real-world setting (Ferreira, 2001). Exposing students to positive adult mentors through service learning can help students learn academic content and skills through community service experiences. School–community partnerships help to improve the school's programs and climate, enhance student achievement, increase graduation rates, and help students succeed (Epstein, 2010a, 2010b).

Establishing Effective Partnerships

Research has identified several essential components for effective school–community partnerships:

- *Awareness of the overlapping spheres of influences on student development*: The goals for student academic success are best achieved through the cooperation and support of schools, families, and communities. In addition, there is consideration for the various types of involvement for schools, families, and communities to work together (Epstein, 2010b). School–community partnerships are most effective when all parties see the benefits that the alliance will bring to all stakeholders involved, and because the collaborative efforts are viewed as fruitful and valuable, then each individual's commitment to the success of the partnership is encouraged (Hands, 2005).
- *Leadership from an action team.* Action teams may include school administrators, teachers, students, parents, and community representatives who can offer diverse perspectives on partnership program development (Epstein, 2010b; Sanders, 2006). The team takes responsibility for assessing current practices and implementing and evaluating next steps for building partnerships (Epstein, 2010b). Ultimately, these practices should take into account the particular needs of students, teachers, and families in their school.
- *Student- (or learner-) centered environments:* In this vein, community partnerships are undeniably connected with the school's efforts to support students, enhance achievement, and nurture possibilities for their future careers (Sanders, 2006). Partnership programs are inexorably linked to an organized program of collaborative activities to help students succeed (Epstein, 2011). Rather than being seen as an isolated occurrences to involve family and community members, a systematic program for partnership is

linked to school improvement goals and becomes a fundamental goal for teachers to support students' learning and success.

- *State- and district-level support:* In addition to strong school leadership support, support from state and district leaders is also important for effective partnerships (Epstein, 2010b; Sanders, 2006). This support includes leaders facilitating ongoing dialogue and feedback about educational practice, policy creation for building school partnerships, and creating opportunities for professional development.

Authentic Contexts to Academically Motivate Students

Authentic Instruction

Authentic instruction utilizes classroom activities that have some connection to real-life tasks students will face outside the classroom. Authentic learning involves real-world problems that mimic the work of professionals in that discipline; utilize open-ended inquiry, thinking skills, and metacognition; engage students in discourse and social learning among a community of learners; and empower students through individual choices to direct their own learning projects (Rule, 2006). It is through these authentic activities that learners are exposed to a particular community of practice or culture's use of a particular skill and, as a result, enhance their learning and transfer of that skill. Teachers might have children learn the importance of mapping in a realistic setting by having them navigate the neighborhood to locate important landmarks such as the fire station, police station, grocery store, and post office. Older students might create and adjust budgets using real monetary transactions (such as bank statements and checkbooks). Problem-based learning (PBL), which we discuss later in this article, refers to a type of authentic instruction where students acquire knowledge and skills by solving real-life problems.

Research on authentic instruction has demonstrated that students benefit from the use of authentic tasks which essentially embed real-life context into school-related subjects like reading (Laster, Ortilieb, & Cheek, 2009; Parsons & Ward, 2011), writing (Jago, 2002), and science and mathematics (Buxton, 2006; Dennis & O'Hair, 2010; Turner, Gutiérrez, Simic-Muller, & Díez-Palomar, 2009). Of most relevance to this article, research has shown that authentic tasks enhance students' motivation (Blumenfeld et al., 1991; Duke, Purcell-Gates, Hall, & Tower, 2006; Parsons & Ward, 2011). Authentic projects contextualize academic learning and may enhance deep understanding because students are required to apply information and concepts, set goals, test their ideas, and evaluate their progress in contexts similar to those seen outside of school (Blumenfeld et al., 1991). Students become interested and perceive

the value in the activity when tasks are seen as authentic and having worth, there is choice about what work is done, and the teacher affords students opportunities to work collaboratively (Blumenfeld et al., 1991).

Authentic instruction can utilize school–community partnerships and involve both parents and community members in the educational experience. Meaningful homework connects school learning to real-life situations, encourages family participation, and has students create products that will be used in meaningful ways (Alleman et al., as cited in Bembenutty, 2011). Use of out-of-school contexts (such as zoos, planetariums, museums, or botanical gardens) and information technology (internet and virtual world "field trips") in science education may lead to instruction that is more valid, authentic, and motivating (Braund & Reiss, 2006). Supplementing traditional instruction with online education, which has become more popular and accessible in K–12 schools, can provide students with learning opportunities to investigate real-world issues through authentic and collaborative learning environments with students, teachers, and subject experts (Doering, 2006). Teacher observations and anecdotal evidence speak to the power of this instructional strategy for capturing students' interest and enhancing meaningful learning:

- Middle school and high school students engaging in authentic research assignments connected to their own interests might interview school staff, parents, or subject matter experts in the community and then create multimodal products—artwork, digital slide shows, oral presentations, written reports, or portfolios—appropriate to the project and intended audience (Krovetz, Casterson, McKowen, & Willis, 1993; Schack, 1993).
- Elementary school classes where students engage in hands-on and environmentally focused authentic learning themes across subject areas show enhanced test scores, better attendance, and increased parent and community involvement (Irvin, 2007).
- Field trips to museums become more powerful, authentic, and meaningful when students develop research topics for these excursions beforehand that are linked to classroom work (Hobart, 2005).
- Authentic learning can even occur on a school-wide level when community experts and parents share their expertise on themed topics, teachers collaborate with community members to create organized and visually stimulating presentations that will hold students' interest, students are engaged in active and hands-on learning relevant to the subject, and learning of curriculum-driven topics is emphasized over any pure entertainment value of such activities (Black, 1993).

In analyzing recent journal articles addressing authentic learning in different contexts, Rule (2006) offers some insight into the components for its most effective use: allowing the student to take the role of the inquirer who engages in critical, creative, and metacognitive thinking; affording student choice to empower and motivate students; and establishing a collaborative community of learners who can scaffold each other's learning. Still, authentic instruction can pose some challenges to teachers due to the innovative nature of the lessons and the flexibility required of the teachers to implement them. Lack of time to cover material and plan lessons, expenses incurred to purchase materials, teachers' views on nontraditional educational perspectives, issues with assessment, and student attendance can all prove challenging with regard to authentic instruction (Burke, 2009; Dennis & O'Hair, 2010). Conversely, authentic instruction is likely to be really time consuming only the first time the lesson is taught; some teachers are able to reallocate funding to purchase materials, and if authentic instruction is effectively engaging students in real-life situations that they see as beneficial then they are more likely to want to attend (Dennis & O'Hair, 2010). The challenge of how to effectively assess authentic instructional activities is covered in the next section.

Authentic Assessments

Students can also be evaluated through the use of authentic assessments in the classroom by using assessments created to mirror the real-life context (Moon, Brighton, Callahan, & Robinson, 2005; Svinicki, 2004). Authentic assessments are different from traditional assessments in that they vary in nature, and although they can include the use of paper and pencil, they often do not. Some examples of authentic assessment might be for students to translate aloud a foreign language passage in a book, conduct a science experiment, play a musical instrument, write a newspaper editorial or literary critique, or parallel park a car. This type of assessment truly tries to capture whether the student can think like a foreign language expert, a scientist, a musician, a newspaper editor, or an effective driver. Authentic assessment can also require students to utilize knowledge from different subject areas. For instance, a science problem may require students to read and reflect on the current research literature, apply scientific and mathematic principles, and yet also take into account complex social or geographical dynamics. In sum, an authentic assessment can be as creative as the jobs and tasks that people perform in everyday life, for these assessments are a direct reflection of the real world.

Some of the proposed benefits of using authentic assessments include teachers gaining a richer understanding of student learning, student motivation and engagement in learning, students seeing the value and meaningfulness in the

activity, opportunities for embracing multiple intelligences, a focus on higher-level thinking and problem-solving, and greater transfer of student learning to the real world (Darling-Hammond, Ancess, & Falk, 1995; Day, 2002; DeCastro-Ambrosetti & Cho, 2005; Gulikers, Bastiaens, & Kirschner, 2004; Janesick, 2006; Svinicki, 2004; Wiggins, 1998). However, as one might expect, using authentic assessments brings a bit of complexity. They can require a great deal of time and effort for students and teachers (Svinicki, 2004), although some have found this only to be perceived as a drawback early on in the process (DeCastro-Ambrosetti & Cho, 2005). There are also issues where consistency in grading is concerned (Svinicki, 2004).

An effective way to evaluate students might be through the use of rubrics which outline important criteria students should demonstrate in their product or performance (DeCastro-Ambrosetti & Cho, 2005; Fischer & King, 1995; Janesick, 2006; Moon et al., 2005; Wiggins, 1998). Rubrics provide a description of student performance that designates requirements for each rubric score's points, and their usage adheres to the belief that effective assessment begins with reflection about what test-takers should know and how that knowledge will be appraised (Mabry, 1999). Rubrics help students to understand what is expected of them, establish a clear channel of communication between teacher and students, make grading more objective and less time-consuming, and take the guesswork out of the assessment process (DeCastro-Ambrosetti & Cho, 2005). In addition to rubrics, assessing authentic instruction can be achieved through the use of portfolios and checklists; the teacher would make the choice of which assessment technique to utilize depending on the type of authentic instruction used (Burke, 2009).

Research offers other general criteria for the effective use of authentic assessments (Gulikers et al., 2004; Moon et al., 2005; Wiggins, 1998). Assessments should reflect the usage of information or skills in the real world, be conducted in situations similar to the real-life context, and occur in a social context that is present in real-life contexts. Ideally, this assessment would require judgment and innovation in solving unstructured problems, lead to a quality product or performance that incorporates a full array of tasks, and allow for multiple ways students can demonstrate mastery of criteria. Overall, authentic assessments should allow for feedback, practice, and revision, and be evaluated against valued criteria and competencies that are used in the world outside the classroom and that are clearly articulated beforehand.

Problem-Based Learning

Problem-based learning (PBL) refers to students acquiring knowledge and skills through real-life problems that are presented in context with the support

of teachers and experts (Hung, 2002) and occurs as a result of students' efforts to solve a complex problem by identifying their own learning needs, locating resources to meet those needs, and applying what they have learned to the problem situation (Pedersen & Liu, 2002). This instructional strategy is particularly distinctive in that learners are typically allowed to seek out a variety of resources to help them develop solutions (Driscoll, 2005). PBL is focused on engaging students in a problem-solving activity that students can relate to and see as meaningful, and it has been discussed as a viable instructional approach, particularly with older students from middle school into higher education.

Similar to situated learning, PBL emphasizes the authentic aspect of learning in context. Teachers can create a real-world problem that students will attempt to solve within a particular educational situation. PBL is made up of these real-world problems that are meaningful to students, collaborative problem-solving communities where students are self-directed and actively involved in critical thinking and other higher-order thinking skills (such as the ability to apply, analyze, synthesize, and evaluate), opportunities for scientific thinking (identification of problem, generation of hypotheses, inquiry, and investigation), incorporation of multiple learning resources, and culminating/assessment activities that allow learners the opportunity to demonstrate their mastery of material (Echeverri & Sadler, 2011; Hung, 2002; Hushman & Napper-Owen, 2011; Own, Chen, & Chiang, 2010; Savoie & Hughes, 1994; Sears, 2003; Stepien & Gallagher, 1993; Yadav, Subedi, Lundeberg, & Bunting, 2011).

The teacher's primary role becomes that of a resource (Aspy, Aspy, & Quinby, 1993) and a model for metacognitive and self-directed learning (Stepien & Gallagher, 1993). Teachers must adapt their instructional repertoire to allow for more listening to students, helping students to frame effective questions, aiding students in the location of appropriate resources, and becoming fellow learners (Aspy et al., 1993). The framing of student questions becomes a central task whereby teachers aid students in asking questions like "What do we know?", "What do we need to know?", and identifying consequential hypotheses and relevant learning resources (Stepien & Gallagher, 1993).

School–community partnerships take PBL to another level of collaborative learning by exposing students to real-life experts during meaningful and enriching problem-solving activities. First-hand accounts of teachers and schools using problem-based learning in connection with community partnerships illustrate the potential outcomes for students' learning:

• Working with community biologists studying the impact of human development on cougar habitats, high school biology students show enhanced engagement, participation, interest, and student learning (Quitadamo & Campanella, 2005).

- Working with teachers, members of community environmental groups, and government officials to protect watersheds in the Gulf of Maine bioregion promotes middle and high school students' enthusiasm and confidence and reinforces the important role of scientific dialogue and transfer of knowledge from the classroom to the real world (Miner & Elshof, 2007).
- Asking students to design scientific problems while encouraging scientists to participate as community partners engages students in authentic scientists' roles; this activity addresses important National Science Education Standards that emphasize science as inquiry and motivates students who see the activity as more authentic and meaningful to them (Sterling & Frazier, 2006).

In general, teachers report that problem-based inquiry helps students' attentiveness and active participation, motivation and self-directed learning, and acquisition of subject matter knowledge and overall learning (Havorson & Wescoat, 2002; Savoie & Hughes, 1994; Stepien & Gallagher, 1993). Empirical research is beginning to document evidence supporting PBL's instructional benefits. Although much of the research comes from medical schools and gifted education, PBL does seem to help students develop flexible knowledge, effective problem-solving skills, and self-directed learning skills (Hmelo-Silver, 2004). Other research has documented the benefits of PBL in K–12 education. Pedersen and Liu (2002) found that a cognitive modeling instructional technology PBL unit helped sixth grade science students apply effective problem-solving strategies, influenced their reasoning ability and presentation of convincing and well-developed solutions, and overall helped students to act more in line with the way an expert scientist would approach the problem of sustaining alien life forms on a newly established space station. In comparison to lecture-based learning, fourth grade students using a multimedia based PBL unit showed higher intrinsic motivation, equal gains in declarative knowledge, and better long-term retention (Zumbach, Kumpf, & Koch, 2004). House (2010) found that PBL computer activities were positively related to science achievement for middle school students in his cross-cultural study. And while quantitative data reveals that sixth grade students show more intrinsic motivation during PBL than during regular class activities, qualitative data indicates this might be because of greater opportunities for collaboration and student control of class activities (Pedersen, 2003).

Other researchers also emphasize the important role of social collaboration inherent to PBL and its benefits for student motivation. Sungur, Tekkaya, and Geban (2006) found that tenth grade biology students instructed with PBL earn higher academic achievement and performance skill scores than students in traditional classes, and students utilizing PBL were more proficient at or-

ganizing relevant information, constructing knowledge, and coming to better conclusions. "PBL allows students to interact with their environment and their peers; in a typical PBL class, students work in groups cooperatively which allows evolvement of knowledge through social negotiation" (Sungur et al., 2006, p. 159). In addition, PBL students have higher levels of intrinsic goal orientation, task value, use of elaborative learning strategies, critical thinking, and metacognitive self-regulation in comparison to students instructed in a more traditional teacher/textbook-centered fashion (Sungur & Tekkaya, 2006).

There are potential obstacles that educators will need to address for PBL to become a viable instructional method in public schools or institutions of higher education. Most practically, teachers may resist such changes despite apparent benefits, given they will have to overhaul their lesson preparation and instructional methods (Gil, 1992, as cited in Aspy et al., 1993). PBL requires much time and effort on the part of both teacher and students (Chin & Chia, 2004). However, comprehensive curriculum built around full-scale PBL units may not be the only, or necessarily the best, option. Stepien and Gallagher (1993) offer the use of "post-holes" which are short problems that can be employed when teachers cannot design entire curriculum around PBL but wish to supplement their other instruction with opportunities for PBL. Use of such "post-holes" still retain fundamental elements of PBL and have resulted in attentive and actively learning participants who were more likely to recognize the benefits of having access to real-world experts as guest speakers on the subject matter to be learned that day (Savoie & Hughes, 1994).

There is also the question of whether or not younger students will benefit from PBL methods. While it is true that some research has demonstrated potential for PBL being used with younger elementary students (Hickey, Moore, & Pellegrino, 2001; Zumbach et al., 2004), more studies on PBL have been conducted with students in middle school and high school (Chin & Chia, 2004; House, 2010; Pedersen, 2003; Pedersen & Liu, 2002; Sungur & Tekkaya, 2006; Sungur et al., 2006). In addition, reviews of PBL (Dochy, Segers, Van den Bossche, & Gijbels, 2003) and articles simply promoting the use of PBL (Miner & Elshof, 2007; Quitadamo & Campanella, 2005; Savoie & Hughes, 1994; Stepien & Gallagher, 1993) are generally geared towards teaching middle school, high school, and college students. Some researchers have expressed a genuine concern that PBL assumes a level of planning and reflection skills that some students might not have (Pedersen & Liu, 2002), and in absence of effective models of problem-solving, students risk adopting ineffective strategies resulting in frustration (Williams, 1993).

However, Pedersen and Liu (2002) have begun to address this shortcoming via the use of PBL instructional materials incorporating apprenticeship-like

support that serves as a scaffold for students' work during self-directed study. Here, students are exposed to experts modeling their problem-solving strategies through realistic and visually rich technology that students can replay at their desire.

> Through the use of audio, video, animation, and context-sensitive timing, a hypermedia program can be designed to offer modeling of pertinent strategies as students are engaged in problem-solving by providing expert opinions at appropriate points throughout the program. These "experts" can be hypermedia-based characters who pop up at key points within the program to share relevant stories or explain useful strategies. (Pedersen & Liu, 2002, p. 357)

Technology may aid teachers by providing alternative "expert-scaffolds" and thereby may overcome a genuine concern with PBL—that many students might need special scaffolding in the thinking skills necessary to reap the benefits from PBL approaches.

Service Learning

Another opportunity to offer enriching educational activities via school–community partnerships is through service learning. Service learning is a teaching method whereby students learn academic content and skills through community service experiences. Typical service learning is made up of (a) preparation by teacher and students involving identifying learning needs and planning a project, (b) action by carrying out the service learning activity, (c) reflection on the learning experience, and (d) demonstration and celebration of the skills or content mastered (Duckenfield & Madden, 2000; Kaye, 2004). Much different from our conception of volunteering or of doing community service, service learning involves academic and personal learning goals; service is connected to the curriculum, and learning is enhanced by reflection on the service experience (Thomsen, 2006). Projects are actually integrated into the academic curriculum. In this vein, both academic learning and civic responsibility are enhanced.

This method has shown to be beneficial for students across K–12 education, although it is predominantly employed with high school students (Dymond, Renzaglia, & Chun, 2008). Service learning also appears to work for a variety of subject areas, affording students opportunities to expand upon their understanding of academic content by providing a needed service in the community. Perhaps history students become better informed on historical events by interacting with older citizens at a senior center, or students studying physical science can help with planting a community garden or assisting at a local

park. Other common types of service learning projects include tutoring, assisting in a daycare center, or collecting food for shelters. Service learning may even overlap with some of the other methods described in this manuscript. For instance, problem-based learning projects become intertwined with service learning when students target a community need and a way to fill that need.

Service learning is increasing in popularity, with some estimates showing that approximately 30% of all public schools and 50% of high schools include service learning as part of their curriculum (Dymond et al., 2008; Koliba, Campbell, & Shapiro, 2006). Some high schools now require students to complete a form of service learning or community service to be eligible for graduation. Advocates and researchers of service learning have uncovered the following benefits for various stakeholders in education, including benefits to students, schools, and the community (Billig, 2000; Decker & Decker, 2003; Kaye, 2004; Thomsen, 2006):

- Schools benefit because students who are engaged in service learning are less likely to engage in risky behaviors. Service learning also helps reduce behavioral concerns surrounding misbehavior, poor attendance, and tardiness. This partnership also helps create more mutual respect between students and teachers, more community support for schools, more positive links with the community, and a more positive school climate.
- Students benefit because they see the academic curriculum as more relevant, they become more motivated, take on more responsibility for their learning, become more adept at problem-solving and higher order thinking, and improve academically. In addition to the academic benefits, there is also a positive impact on interpersonal development including benefits to students' empathy and acceptance of cultural diversity. They also have the opportunity to forge strong ties in the community and meet caring adult role models who might help students gain realistic insights about career choices.
- Members of the community benefit because of the contributions students make during service learning and because service learning helps to promote a productive citizenry, civic responsibility, and a sense of community in students.

On a larger scale, a study of over 4,000 high school students showed that while participation in any service activity is linked with beneficial outcomes, students who work with individuals in need have better academic adjustment, while those who work with organizations have better civic outcomes (Schmidt, Shumow, & Kackar, 2007). Action research corroborates the benefits of authentic educational activities during service learning on fifth grade students'

attendance and learning of standard core curriculum content: "Students exposed to service-learning in this study were more likely to make real-world and authentic connections between their in-class learning and their personal world" (Soslau & Yost, 2007, p. 49).

However, careful planning of service learning experiences is critical in order to reap the educational rewards associated with this method. Planning on the part of teachers, administrators, and field supervisors helps to ensure experiences are connected to the school's curriculum and are meaningful and productive for students (Sanders, 2006). Teachers should consider how appropriate standards for the grade levels they teach and students' preexisting talents might be interwoven in service learning projects (Sagor, 2003). Connecting important curricular objectives to service learning projects is one very basic way to ensure learning is at the heart of service learning projects. Also, by giving students some choice in their service learning projects, educators afford students the opportunity to draw on their own special talents, thereby increasing their sense of usefulness in offering a valuable contribution to a specific need in the community. By including students in indentifying genuine needs in the community, they are more likely to see their involvement as making a significant difference even as they further their own academic learning (Kaye, 2004). Planning also must allow students a period of reflection to tie their field experiences with academic content (Sanders, 2006). Journal writing, more formal written assignments, collaborative discussion, or self-evaluations are great opportunities for students to make these meaningful connections.

> To really work, reflection must go beyond students simply reporting or describing what they are doing or have done. When students can compare their initial assumptions with what they have seen and experienced in the real world, reflection can be a transforming experience. (Kaye, 2004, p. 11).

Eyler (2002) explains that any modest effects reported for service learning may be attributable to limited opportunities for reflection, one of the critical components for transforming a typical community service activity into a quality service learning project in which students link their experience to their academic study. By organizing service learning with opportunity for reflection before, during, and after service, Eyler (2002) feels educators can design instruction that integrates field experience with academic content in their courses.

Reflections can then be synthesized into the demonstrations students make to share what they gained from their service experiences. Individual papers, presentations, or artwork are all considered to be typical ways students can demonstrate mastery and learning gained from service learning projects. Concluding with an assessment of the service learning experience allows teachers to

evaluate the reciprocal benefits for student learning and contributions made to the community before making note of ways to improve the experience for next time (Kaye, 2004).

Final Comments

We have presented work that shows promising applications for building school–community partnerships while striving to enhance students' meaningful learning and academic motivation. However, there are many questions that will require ongoing discussion and reflection in the educational community. For instance, which practices are most likely to be supported by various stakeholders (in terms of teachers' willingness to use, administrative and district support, and community likelihood to be involved)? Which methodologies have the best chance of addressing teachers' needs to meet significant curricular objectives amidst pressure for accountability and time demands associated with statewide standardized testing? As researchers and educators continue to address these questions, opportunities for school and community partnerships can be crafted into valuable learning opportunities in the real-world environment. Teaching methods like authentic instruction, problem-based learning, and service learning hold great promise for effective contextual instruction that will complement more traditional or direct instruction. Learning becomes more meaningful with authentic, problem-based activities that involve real-world tasks. Service learning opportunities grounded in academic requirements encourage students' interests, reflection, and self-regulated learning. Infusing these opportunities for contextualized learning into academic activities will help students begin to see the meaningfulness of academic subject matter and its relevance beyond the classroom setting.

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Perceived Needs of At-Risk Families in a Small Town: Implications for Full-Service Community Schools

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Abstract

Researchers agree that a needs assessment is a critical first step in designing a full-service school, but the large task of orchestrating the necessary community collaboration for such projects has occupied most of the literature to date. This study examines the process of planning and implementing a needs assessment for a rural school serving low-income students. It illustrates how needs assessments necessarily reflect the planners' assumptions about at-risk families. Caseworkers interviewed 13 at-risk and 16 not-at-risk families. Rather than finding the need for improved delivery of services that is commonly reported, especially in urban areas, what families most sought was respect. In addition, teachers and parents held different perspectives on many issues, and a successful project would need to address those differences directly.

Key Words: full service community schools, needs assessments, rural, families, low-income students, family, respect, perspectives, teachers, planning, services

Introduction

Schools that serve a preponderance of at-risk students struggle to educate them because of the students' multiple and interrelated needs. The adverse impact of problems such as poverty, violence, substance abuse, and lack of affordable medical and mental health care takes its toll on children's daily lives

and hinders students' ability to benefit fully from their education (Barton, 2004; Cummings, Dyson, & Todd, 2011; Dryfoos, Quinn, & Barkin, 2005; Marks & Lawson, 2005). A promising approach for schools that serve these at-risk students is to collaborate with community agencies and programs to provide a holistic and integrated approach to meeting students' needs. Such approaches are described variously as full-service community schools, collaborative community schools, or as schools with school-linked or integrated services. The interest in this approach to ameliorate what have often seemed to schools like intractable problems is evidenced by a growing literature about such efforts. In fact, several journals have devoted issues to articles about community–school collaborations [*Educational Leadership, 53*(7), 1996; *National Association of Secondary School Principals Bulletin, 83*(611), 1999; *New Directions for Youth Development, 2005*(107), 2005; *Reclaiming Children and Youth, 11*(4), 2003].

The relevant literature provides many accounts of individual full-service school projects (Abrams & Gibbs, 2000; Deslandes, 2006; Dryfoos & Maguire, 2002; O'Donnell, Kirkner, & Meyer-Adams, 2008; Oppenheim, 1999; Paige, Kitzis, & Wolfe, 2003), as well as projects involving entire districts (Bundy, 2005; Diehl, Gray, & O'Connor, 2005; Ferguson, 2009) and multiple sites in a variety of cities and states (Dryfoos et al., 2005; Tagle, 2005). To date, many articles have focused on the complex task of project planning and implementation. They discuss the need for collaboration among multiple community entities, the many challenges of orchestrating such collaboration among bureaucracies (each with its own objectives), qualifying criteria, application processes, regulations, and the elements that promote success.

In addition, there is evidence that the outcomes of community schools justify the considerable effort involved. In 2002, Dryfoos reported that much of the data about project outcomes was in the form of unpublished project reports; she located 49 such reports. She acknowledged that much of the assessment data was preliminary and often collected using inadequate research designs. However, she found encouraging signs of effectiveness in terms of improved student attendance, greater parent involvement, and increased student achievement. Cummings et al. (2011) reviewed the outcome reports of community schools internationally, and in England, specifically. They characterize the evidence on outcomes as "reasonably consistent," including improved achievement and school climate and increased attendance and parent involvement. However, they acknowledge that results are variable. Several reasons for this variability have been suggested and are supported by research. First, two studies report that the greater the extent and fidelity of implementation, the greater the positive outcomes (Comer & Emmons, 2006; Kalafat, Illback, & Sanders, 2007), and Anderson-Butcher, Stetler, and Midle (2006), in surveying teachers

at schools with school–community partnerships, found that often partners did not engage in sufficient communication and coordination to maintain a genuine collaboration. Third, Dryfoos (2008) and Smith, Anderson, and Abell (2008) point out that achievement outcomes develop slowly, only after a successful project has been in place for a number of years, so evaluation data from the early years of a project may not be an accurate estimate of the project's full potential. Fourth, Comer and Emmons (2006) and Dyson and Todd (2010) argue cogently that typical input–output research designs are not adequate for evaluating full-service school projects which involve multifaceted treatments in complex family, school, and community contexts, and their insensitivity may lead us to abandon strategies that are actually promising. They recommend a theory of change approach.

In 2003, Elias, Zins, Graczyk, and Weissberg suggested that future research needs to provide more detailed descriptions of project elements and examine linkages between specific elements and outcomes. Sanders, Sheldon, and Epstein (2005) agree and add that we also need to know more about the basis for selecting project elements. That is, which elements address which needs?

Needs Assessment

Many authors and resource organizations such as the Coalition of Community Schools strongly assert the necessity of doing a needs assessment in order to plan services and activities that the constituent families truly need and want (Cummings et al., 2011; Dryfoos & Maguire, 2002; Pryor, 1996), not just ones that schools and health and welfare professionals think the families need. Anderson-Butcher, Lawson, and Barkdull (2003) and Gardner (1993), among others, emphasize that full-service schools should not be one-size-fits-all programs, and most projects do begin with a needs assessment. However, with the exception of a study by Novins, LeMaster, Thurman, and Plested (2004), studies typically do no more than name the method or methods used and describe a few general areas of need. This lack of detail gives the impression that collecting information about needs and then planning a project to address those needs is straightforward. It also makes it difficult to understand the relationships between specific project elements and particular needs. In the present study of a needs assessment, the steering committee found that even the process of designing the needs assessment was anything but straightforward. The process raised policy and programmatic questions that had implications for the as yet unplanned project.

Methods that have been employed in doing needs assessments include using public statistics on variables such as local family income, youth crime, confirmed child abuse reports, and numbers of teen mothers (Abrams & Gibbs,

2000; Dryfoos & Maguire, 2002) or school statistics on variables such as student attendance, referrals for behavior problems, parent–teacher conference attendance, and weapon confiscations (Harris & Hoover, 2003; Paige et al., 2003). Projects have also used focus groups of parents (Cummings et al., 2011; Dryfoos & Maguire, 2002; Pryor, 1995), parent interviews done by a principal (Dryfoos, 1994; Hatch, 1998) or caseworker (Jehl & Kirst, 1993), and surveys of parents (Maguire, 2000; Paige et al., 2003) or teachers (Jehl & Kirst, 1993). Another form of needs assessment is for agency representatives to share information about their individual efforts and challenges in assisting low-income families (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2003; Jehl & Kirst, 1993). When parents serve on a project planning committee, they are another source of information about the needs of school families (Abrams & Gibbs, 2000). Although most projects begin with a needs assessment, they typically provide little information about its effectiveness or the reasons for choosing a particular method. Only Pryor's (1996) general discussion of the pros and cons of various methods provides guidance for selecting a method. However, Cummings et al. (2011) have a helpful discussion of obstacles involved in what they characterize as the "boundary crossing" work of getting opinions from parents and community.

Parent Involvement

A critical focus of full-service school projects is that of increasing student achievement by increasing parent involvement in their children's education (Abrams & Gibbs, 2000; Gardner, 1993; Smrekar, 1993; Williams, Horvath, Wei, Van Dorn, & Jonson-Reid, 2007). Anderson-Butcher and Ashton (2004) call for a relationship in which the school views parents as the experts on their children's needs and on what should be done to address those needs. Others describe the desired collaborative relationship with words such as partnership, empowerment, joint ownership, and power-sharing.

A common challenge to developing the desired parent–teacher relationship is that parents and teachers do not necessarily have the same vision of what a school–parent collaboration would look like (Baker, 1997; DePlanty, Coulter-Kern, & Duchane, 2007). Baker asked focus groups of teachers what they wanted from parents. Although the teachers used the language of collaboration in talking about the ideal relationship, when they elaborated on their vision, what they most wanted to come out of the collaboration was for parents to recognize the teachers as skilled professionals whose decisions were in the best interests of their child. They wanted parents to follow through at home to reinforce the teachers' instruction and disciplinary decisions and felt that the resulting continuity of messages would communicate the importance of education to the child. Moles (1993) reports that this attitude is widespread among

teachers of low-income students, and Pushor (2010) says that in U.S. school culture, we privilege educators' professional expertise over parent knowledge. Parents, on the other hand, may expect that collaboration will give them more direct participation in their child's education. For example, the parents at the Vaughan Center Project (Oppenheim, 1999) insisted that parents were the experts on their children's needs. Likewise, parents in the project studied by Abrams and Gibbs (2000) expected to have a voice in which types of instruction would best meet their children's needs, while teachers saw instructional decisions as the teachers' purview. Ideally, the needs assessment process would be a positive first step in developing the desired parent–school relationship and would avoid making assumptions solely on the viewpoints of school personnel.

Rural Schools

The literature on full-service schools suggests that while project elements should differ from school to school, the basic concept of developing a school that is a one-stop shop (Dryfoos, 1994; Oppenheim, 1999) in terms of providing integrated services to families is an approach that is widely applicable. However, the preponderance of data comes from urban schools (e.g., Abrams & Gibbs, 2000; Dryfoos, 2005; Ferguson, 2009), often with substantial minority populations. Low-income, rural, White populations have not received as much attention, although many of them also struggle with low student achievement. It would be useful to future projects in the many schools that serve rural populations to know if the needs of their families vary in predictable ways from those of urban families.

Goals

The current study examines the process by which a rural elementary school developed its needs assessment, including an analysis of the steering committee's consideration of the possible effects of the method they chose and the underlying assumptions of the questions they planned to ask. Then it analyzes the themes identified from the needs assessment interviews and discusses their implications for project elements. The results include information from at-risk and not-at-risk families.

Method

Overview

The method for this study is that of participant observation. As the research consultant for the project, I was asked by the school principal to provide advice and assistance to the project steering committee as it planned a needs

assessment of school families. The data were notes I made during committee meetings and my written summaries of those meetings that were then sent to the project leaders: the school principal and the representative from the county Community Action Agency who were the authors of the grant requesting funds to do a needs assessment. Those summaries served as the basis of the work that I did between meetings, the major task being to draft a set of possible survey items based on the committee's discussion of the kinds of things they wanted to know from parents. The principal and I met at least once between committee meetings to review my summary and make sure that he and I agreed about my understanding of what transpired at the meeting and to discuss what I should do before the next meeting. The several possible surveys that I drafted as the committee's ideas developed were another source of data documenting the committee's ideas. Once the committee had decided on a survey protocol and questions, the principal and I met with the social workers who were to do the interviews, and I subsequently collected the recorded interviews from the caseworkers, talked with them about their interviews, and analyzed the interviews to identify themes.

School and Project

Fuller Elementary School (pseudonym) is located in the low-income neighborhood of a small, rural Iowa town of 9,000 people. Of the roughly 240 children Fuller serves, about 80% qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. Over 90% of the school's families are Caucasian, and many have a multigenerational history of low socioeconomic status. About 20% of Fuller's students are bused in from the surrounding countryside. While the low-income families are concentrated in one neighborhood, everyone in the community shops in the same few stores, and all the town's adolescent children attend the same middle and high school, fed by Fuller and two other elementary schools.

Fuller School received a grant from the New Iowa Schools Development Corporation to do a needs assessment. The results of the needs assessment would then serve as the basis for future program development.

Steering Committee Participants

The principal began the needs assessment work by inviting representatives from a variety of community organizations, services, and constituencies to serve on a steering committee. The committee's task was to plan and oversee the needs assessment and then use the results to make recommendations for a project that would address the identified needs of at-risk students and their families. Among the committee members were three Fuller School teachers, two parents from families the principal considered to be at risk, several

school- and area-based psychologists and social workers, and representatives from the county Community Action Agency, the county extension office, the Department of Human Services (DHS), a neighborhood church, and law enforcement. The committee also included a research consultant whose primary responsibility was to draft and execute the needs assessment planned by the steering committee.

Interviews

In the past, the school had had very poor return rates on written surveys. They had tried getting parents to complete brief multiple choice surveys during parent–teacher conferences with pick up and return boxes prominently placed at each school entrance. Despite the fact that attendance at the fall conferences was often over 90%, the return rate for the surveys was less than 10%. Although some schools have reported acceptable return rates with written surveys (Clark, 1993; Dryfoos & Maguire, 2002; Pryor, 1995), Pryor (1996), in her summary of assessment methods, says that low rates of response are common even for something like focus groups where families initially respond that they will attend. Given the previous experience of Fuller School and the decision to use open-ended questions, the committee decided that interviews would give the best response rate.

The steering committee asked the principal to make the initial contact with the families to describe the project and request participation. He explained that the interviewers would be from out of town, the information given would be confidential even from school staff, and participation was voluntary. Families were given a choice between being interviewed in their home or at the school.

The principal arranged for five caseworkers from Community Action Agencies in adjoining counties to do the interviews over several weekends, and the grant compensated them for their time and mileage. The committee felt that caseworkers' experience in developing rapport with low-income families and being sympathetic and nonjudgmental listeners would be helpful. Pryor (1996) recommends their use for similar reasons. The interviewers had an orientation meeting with the principal and research consultant to review the interview protocol and come to agreement about anything they felt was unclear in the questionnaire. The interviewers were not aware that the families were in different risk groups, and every caseworker interviewed families in both groups. The caseworkers audiotaped their interviews.

Participant Families

The steering committee wanted to get information from at-risk and not-at-risk families, so the principal developed a checklist of the following indicators

of risk: (a) more than five absences in the first semester, (b) more than three tardies, (c) receiving Special Education or Title I services, (d) not living with two natural parents, (e) suspected child abuse, (f) suspected substance abuse, (g) classroom behavior problems, (h) frequently not completing school work, and (i) qualified for free lunch. He asked the teachers to check all the characteristics that applied to each of their students, and students with three or more risk factors were considered to be at risk. The principal was prepared to use his own judgment in cases where students in the same family were rated differently by their teachers, but that happened in only one case. Teachers identified between 35% and 50% of their students as being at risk. Given that 80% of the school's children qualify for free and reduced price lunch and what we know about the high likelihood of co-occurring risks in that population (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2003), those estimates seemed reasonable. A random sample of 20 families was taken from each risk group.

In the initial contacts, two of the at-risk families and one of the not-at-risk families declined to participate. However, others who agreed to be interviewed failed to meet the interviewer at the scheduled time. The caseworkers doing the interviews tried to reschedule missed interviews, but that was often not possible. In the first round of interviews, thirteen (65%) of the families in the at-risk group, and nine (45%) of the families in the not-at-risk group completed interviews. The committee decided it wanted ideas from more than nine families in the not-at-risk group, so another eight families were randomly selected to add to the original sample. Seven of those eight completed interviews, so the sample of families with children deemed not at risk was 16 out of 28 (57%).

Instrument

After much deliberation, the steering committee decided to address six broad areas in the needs assessment: (a) child growth and development, (b) schooling, (c) neighborhood, (d) mobility, (e) community services, and (f) specific ideas about family needs and how to meet them. The Appendix lists the open-ended questions that the interviewers used, along with the follow-up questions to address any areas not mentioned in the initial response. The questions were carefully phrased so as not to imply criticism. For example, the questions about child discipline began with an acknowledgement that all children from time to time argue or misbehave. Another example is the questions about reading in the home. Rather than asking parents how much they read to their children or what reading materials they had in the home, the questions asked for a description of a typical day, what kind of books their children liked, and whether the children had a preference between active play and reading. In the process of responding to such questions, parents typically volunteered information about their literacy practices.

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed in two ways. For those questions that leant themselves to tabulation, the responses were categorized as affirmative, negative, or maybe for each risk group. For the responses to the more open-ended questions, the project consultant used grounded theory to code the responses into themes that emerged from the data. In addition, after the caseworkers completed their interviews, the consultant asked each of them what they considered to be major themes from the six or seven families they interviewed. These caseworker interviews served as a check on the consultant's ongoing coding and contributed to the refining of the coding categories.

Findings and Discussion

Committee Deliberations

The following account of the steering committee's deliberations illustrates the ways in which a needs assessment necessarily makes assumptions about the nature of the existing problems that will be identified and shapes the project even before any information has been gathered. Further, it demonstrates how the data collection is also the beginning of the relationship between the proposed school project and parents. The committee's conversations developed in three distinct phases, each one characterized by a different set of assumptions.

Phase 1

The steering committee quickly and unanimously adopted the project goal of insuring that all Fuller School children would come to school prepared to benefit fully from their education. Then the committee began discussing what kind of information they needed to obtain from the needs assessment. The representative from the county Community Action Agency was a proponent of the view that the primary problems causing children to be at risk were the various systemic problems that affect low-income families. She suggested it was important to know the extent to which families were experiencing substance abuse, domestic violence, divorce, unemployment, poor nutrition, lack of health care, and other factors commonly identified in the research literature as risk factors. She had had experience with a full-service school project in a neighboring town in which the major community services had collaborated to establish offices in the school. That project provided caseworkers who met with families to develop family goals and then connected them with services that could help them achieve their goals. Initially, her ideas influenced the kinds of questions the committee considered asking, and much of the discussion

focused on the best way to obtain accurate estimates of such sensitive information and how to do so in a way that was ethical and would not alienate families.

Phase 2

After discussion at several committee meetings about various risk factors and how to measure them, some committee members began to express their discomfort with the assumption that these risk factors directly and inevitably caused children to be at risk of not benefiting from their education. They had some intuitive ideas about the concept of resilience that is shown by some children and families despite adversity (Anthony, 2008; Jozefowicz-Simbeni & Allen-Mears, 2002). The principal, in particular, related several of his experiences with children who lived in circumstances that suggested they should be at risk but who were not. Eventually this view was generally accepted by the committee and led the committee to turn its focus to parenting skills such as parents reading to their children, the amount and kinds of television children watched, latch key children, and child discipline. However, as the committee began drafting specific questions they wanted to ask, some members of the committee, in particular the school psychologists, felt that such questions still made too many assumptions about the causes of children being at risk, although most felt that parenting practices were more directly related to risk than the economic and family risk factors they had originally discussed. The committee also became concerned about whether questions about parenting practices could be phrased in a manner that asked for information without implying criticism. For example, the importance of parents reading to their children and limiting television viewing are questions to which the right answers are a matter of public knowledge.

Phase 3

Finally, the committee decided to address several broad areas with a set of open-ended questions that asked parents to describe their children's experiences and identify concerns they had about their children's development and schooling and what things they thought might be helpful to improve readiness to learn. The proposed questionnaire also asked families about the presence and effectiveness of services already available in the community and what else they would use if it were available or more accessible. The questions still reflected the committee's underlying assumption that the proposed project would be some variation on the full-service school model, but the open-ended questions left more room for parents to provide their perspective on what problems they saw and possible ways to address them.

Cummings et al. (2011), who used change theory to evaluate a number of community school projects, found similar differing theories among project

leaders, even within the same project. Additionally, they found that some project elements had no logical reasoning behind them and were considered beneficial in and of themselves.

Participation of Committee Members

The committee drew members from a variety of constituencies in order to get as broad a perspective as possible and to lay the ground work for future collaboration on the proposed project. To some extent, that did happen as is illustrated by the various views expressed in successive iterations of the needs assessment planning. However, there were voices that did not get heard, mostly because their representative members either stopped attending or attended only occasionally. Meetings were held during the day, and school personnel (teachers, psychologists, and social workers) attended as part of their jobs. The grant paid for substitutes for the teachers. These people attended regularly. Representatives from other organizations such as DHS who could count meeting attendance as part of their work day also had good attendance. Others like the county extension representative and the local minister never spoke and stopped attending after a few meetings, perhaps because they saw themselves primarily as helping with future programming after the needs assessment was completed. The participation of the two parent representatives was also limited. There were two parents: (1) a young married mother of two boys with ADHD who had had her first child while in her teens, and (2) a single father of three young children who was receiving assistance to attend a job training course at the local community college. Several studies report that it is more affluent, middle-class parents who are the most likely to involve themselves in their child's education, and that lower-class parents serving on project committees or coming to the school to volunteer need a clear welcome and lots of encouragement in order to participate (Abrams & Gibbs, 2000; Dryfoos & Maguire, 2002; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). The parents were infrequent participants in the committee's conversation, which was not surprising since they were significantly outnumbered by college-educated professionals. The principal chaired the meetings and made a point of occasionally asking the parents direct questions, especially in areas where he knew they had opinions or experience, and then they would speak. However, as time went on, both parents had irregular attendance. Unfortunately, the committee was too involved in planning the needs assessment to give official attention to the fact that their first effort to collaborate with parents had failed. Instead, the spotty attendance of the parents likely confirmed the belief of many committee members that these parents did not really value and support education. In turn, the experience likely confirmed for the two low-income parents what they already believed—committee members viewed them as people in need of fixing and

were confident that the answer was some combination of improved services and parent education. Pryor (1996) suggests that parents be paid to participate, and, in retrospect, since the other committee members served as part of their work responsibilities, that should have been done in this case.

Comparison of At-Risk and Not-At-Risk Families

Gardner (1993) suggests that it is a practical and financial necessity for projects to identify their target group, because it is not feasible to provide services for everyone in a school. The committee for the Fuller School project had this in mind when they planned to distinguish between at-risk and not-at-risk families and provide what the at-risk families most needed. If they had fully discussed the ramifications of this idea, they might have considered the political difficulties of serving some children and not others and of labeling a subset of children and their families as being at risk, issues Gardner identifies as creating problems for projects.

In any event, the steering committee did not have to face this problem, because the analysis of the interviews showed few differences between the two risk groups. One likely reason for a lack of differences is that the interview questions deliberately allowed families not to volunteer information about the full extent of the challenges they faced. Families did talk openly about financial and family relationship difficulties and various parenting concerns, but the only accounts of problems like substance or physical abuse were those that had been resolved. Even though families knew the information they provided would be confidential, some information may have been too personal to reveal to anyone. In addition, even at-risk families genuinely seemed to believe that on the whole they were all right and wanted to convey that to the school.

Resilience may also have contributed to not finding differences. Research has established that some children, for a variety reasons, are able to weather adversity (Anthony, 2008; Benard, 2004), so some children may have been categorized as not at risk by virtue of resilience rather than because they experienced fewer stressors than others. Lastly, we know that some of the students who seem not to be at risk in elementary school will become more vulnerable in adolescence and move into the at-risk category (Alexander, Entwisle, & Dauber, 1996).

Given the finding of no differences and the problems of singling out particular families, especially in a small town, the steering committee could decide—project element by element—who would be served. Some services have their own well-accepted qualifying criteria. For other project elements, like programming for preschoolers and parent support groups, it might be desirable to include families from both risk groups, as those not at risk might serve

as role models or as sources of ideas. Also, for some programming, including families not at risk might not require additional expense.

Themes Identified From Interviews

Eight themes were identified from the interviews: (a) respect and acceptance, (b) ambivalence toward school, (c) professionals' attitudes, (d) normal childhood concerns, (e) neighborhood influences and family values, (f) mobility, (g) opposition to locating social services at the school, and (h) specific programming ideas. Most of the themes are related to specific sections of the interview, but the themes of respect and acceptance and of the attitudes of professional staff ran across sections of the interviews. Because the results for at-risk and not-at-risk families were more similar than different, the results are reported by theme, and any differences between the two risk groups are discussed with the theme.

Respect and Acceptance

The central theme of the interviews, expressed in a variety of ways and across many questions, was that what families most wanted was to be respected and accepted. The salience of this theme was also mentioned by all of the interviewers when they summed up their interviews, and several commented that they saw this same issue in their daily work with low-income families. Families felt that they were too often disrespected, and they felt that this lack of respect had a detrimental effect on their children's success at school and created barriers to the family's participation in many types of school and community activities. From the denigrating looks given them in the store when they used food stamps to assumptions about inadequate parenting based solely on their low income, Fuller School parents felt that the community looked down on them, and it rankled. They believed that open invitations from the school or community organizations were not really for them, and that while their participation would be tolerated, they would not really be welcomed. Two interview quotes illustrate these views: "What I think people really need is just plain respect for each other. Just respect and accepting people, living your own life," and "If you don't have a lot of money or a nice house, they [Child Protective Services] can be quick to take your children away for normal things like spanking or accidental stuff." Another quote illustrates how an organization like Little League can unwittingly be viewed as disrespecting families who hold other values: "I don't know why softball is about the shirts, attending practice, parents, and winning. I wish it could just be about some kids getting together to play ball."

The steering committee had expected families to describe myriad needs and frustrations with accessibility and coordination of services. In fact, much of the

committee discussion could be characterized as taking what Keith (1996) calls a service provision perspective with the underlying premise that the goal is to fix broken families by providing more or better services. They had not considered that the families might resent being characterized as needy. Nor had they anticipated that respect would be so universally important to these families.

This yearning for respect is not prominent in the full-service school literature, probably because much of it focuses on organization, leadership, and implementation, but the same desire underlies the views of the Mexican American parents at the Vaughn Family Center (Oppenheim, 1999). They did not want handouts. They acknowledged having a variety of problems in their community, but they believed they had the capacity to help themselves and provide for their families. In contrast, the literature focused directly on parent involvement does identify respect as an important aspect of school–parent relationships that parents too often feel is lacking (Lindle, 1989; Ramirez, 2003). The National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS) provides resources, training, and support for schools wanting to develop school–family partnerships, and its director, Joyce Epstein, has developed a framework of six types of parent involvement that is used by network schools. The framework lists as a desired outcome for teachers, "Respect for families' strengths and efforts" (Epstein et al., 2009). Although many schools have benefitted from participation with the NNPS, Lopez and Stoelting (2010), in the same vein as Oppenheim (1999) and Cummings et al. (2011), are critical of an approach that is not respectful in that it attempts to change nonparticipating parents into the White, middle-class view of properly involved parents who support school operations as they are currently. They contend that this type of thinking benefits schools because it allows teachers to believe that there is nothing they can or should do about the poor achievement of the children of uninvolved parents.

Oppenheim (1999) suggests that a community development approach is more productive and sustainable over the long run than a service provision approach, because it develops community leadership and builds capacity rather than maintaining the dependency that characterizes the continuous receipt of services. Cummings et al. (2011) express a similar opinion about England's full-service schools. They say that no matter how caring and respectful service providers are, there is an inherent inequality in the roles of provider and recipient, and they believe that community development is key to lasting change. The clear implication of this theme is that the Fuller School Project should not think solely in terms of providing services. Instead, the planned project should be explicit that its goal is to promote self-governance and leadership in the Fuller neighborhood so that families, teachers, and the community work together as equal partners to support Fuller children.

Ambivalence Toward School

The teachers on the steering committee said that one of the biggest problems at Fuller was that parents did not value education. They based their opinion on what they perceived to be a lack of parental concern and support in terms of homework completion, responses to notes sent home, and a lack of follow through in reinforcing the importance of school rules, especially when children broke rules. They believed that addressing this problem of uninterested and unsupportive parents was crucial to improving student achievement.

The school portion of the interview began with an open-ended question asking parents to describe the school experience of their oldest child who currently attended Fuller. Parents were universally positive in their initial responses, saying that Fuller was a good school and that their children liked their teachers. Parents were not asked directly whether they valued education, but nearly all spoke positively about the benefits their children derived from education, and a number even used the phrase "valuing education" in describing themselves.

However, as parents elaborated on their responses or responded to follow-up questions, their ambivalence came through in several ways. Parents were not asked about their own school experience, but they repeatedly brought it up. Both at-risk and not-at-risk parents admitted that they did not get as much out of their schooling as they could have. Most blamed themselves in part, but they also blamed the schools for favoring more intelligent, more affluent, and more athletic students. As one parent said, "School was a place for the kids who were bright or athletic. They didn't really care about me." Therefore, while parents asserted the importance of education, they were also understanding of their children's school problems, since they had often experienced similar problems themselves.

In explaining their views, some parents stressed the importance of loving and accepting their children despite their weaknesses or faults. Others acknowledged their child's difficulties in a subject and then excused it to some extent by saying the parent had had similar problems. Still others believed that their major focus in raising their children should be on teaching responsibility, so at home they emphasized doing household chores and helping parents. A few expressed the view that education was the school's responsibility, and the parents' job was to deal with the child the rest of the time. These families felt they had little influence over their child's behavior at school.

With respect to homework completion, the responses of at-risk families differed somewhat from those not at risk. A number of the at-risk families said that when they asked their children about homework, the children claimed not to have any or to have completed it at school, and they had no way of knowing otherwise. Parents also talked about the importance of spending time with

family, including extended family, and saw this priority as a legitimate reason for occasionally not completing homework. An indication of the importance of family at Fuller was an event called grandparents' day when grandparents ate school lunch with their grandchildren and visited their classrooms after lunch. Often as many as 70% of the children in a classroom would have at least one grandparent in attendance. Similar to the low-income parents surveyed by Chavkin and Williams (2001), Fuller parents said that they would spend time helping their children with homework if they knew what the assignment was and what kind of help they should provide. They wondered whether they should correct wrong answers or if that would be cheating.

The needs assessment only asked about the elementary school, but families with middle school children frequently mentioned that their most serious concerns and problems were at that level, and they felt the problems were a consequence of the larger, more impersonal middle school. They found communication difficult and intimidating when their children had so many different teachers and felt the school rules were more arbitrary and rigidly applied than at the elementary level. Some complained that their children were treated unkindly by middle school peers and that the school culture was overly concerned with social standing and appearance. Alexander et al. (1996) note that the decrease in some students' academic engagement and self-confidence coinciding with the move to middle school has been well documented. During steering committee meetings, the principal and teachers said that when they move to the middle and high school, Fuller Elementary students rarely participated in extracurricular sports or activities and were rarely on the honor roll. They believed this was an indication of the students' at-risk status. Nonetheless, no one anticipated that the transition to middle school would be of such concern to parents that they would bring it up unasked.

These disparate views between teachers and parents about the extent to which low achievement is due to home problems and whether the school has some culpability is reported in the literature (Abrams & Gibbs, 2000; Baker, 1997) as a source of conflict that creates a serious obstacle to developing collaborative school–parent relationships. Clearly this is the case at Fuller. More and better communication is needed, especially with respect to the regular education program and homework, to increase parent knowledge and promote better understanding between teachers and parents. In addition, grandparents and other extended family may be an untapped resource.

Professionals' Attitudes

Families made it clear that they were sensitive to how they were treated by school and social service agency staff. In their description of their child's school experience, many parents spontaneously cited the principal, who was often

in the halls greeting parents before and after school, as contributing to their positive attitude toward Fuller. Parents felt the principal would always listen to them and were confident that whatever the concern, it would be addressed in a fair and caring manner. Parents claimed to feel respected even when the principal initiated conversations about problems, such as a child's poor attendance or misbehavior. They described the principal as friendly and caring but never, in the words of one parent, "pulling any punches." Several families related how the principal had used his community contacts to obtain assistance for something like a child's glasses, winter clothing, or participation in an extracurricular activity. The principal and the committee viewed these individual efforts as stop gap measures and envisioned that the proposed project would provide a better organized and integrated system of assistance. However, the families who gave these examples seemed to benefit as much from the caring expressed as from the assistance received.

The six families who had children with learning disabilities were similarly positive about the special education teachers. Parents talked about Individual Education Plan (IEP) meetings, individual notes sent home, and phone calls from the teacher as keeping them well informed and providing a means for them to respond with their concerns or ideas. Several said that the special education teacher viewed their child as an individual and described how parent and teacher worked together to develop strategies that would benefit the unique needs of their child.

Parents were positive but much less fulsome in their praise of the regular classroom teachers, and after some thought about follow-up questions, such as those about parent–school communication, many said that they really did not know much about the regular education program. They reported that their major communication with the school was the semiannual parent–teacher conferences and routine notes sent home about things like the annual music program and candy sale. When specifically asked about it, they acknowledged that their children brought home graded schoolwork, but they did not initially consider this a means of communication. They claimed to look at it but seemed uncertain as to what information they might get from it, especially if it had a number wrong or percent right rather than a letter grade. None had visited their child's classroom except for their turn to bring food for a class party, and few expressed the desire to do so.

The contrast between the parents' relationships with the principal and special education teachers on the one hand and the regular education teachers on the other corresponds to the two types of school–parent relationships characterized by Smrekar (1993), one of which develops truly cooperative relationships with parents and one which outwardly seems to do so, but in reality does not.

Smrekar says that too often schools send mixed messages. For example, they might encourage school visits in their print materials but require advance notice and limit the times and length of visits. Fuller's approach to parent–teacher conferences seemed to be an example of mixed messages. Conferences were scheduled from 8:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m., and the school expressed its desire to meet with all parents by encouraging those who worked to take time off work to attend. Some parents complained that while they could leave work, they were not paid for the missed time. In addition, notes sent home urged parents to arrive promptly, plan their questions ahead of time, and not go over their allotted fifteen minutes. At the conferences, teachers showed examples of the child's work, often without evaluative comment, and left little time for questions or an exchange of information.

Smrekar (1993) contends that parents and schools need to engage in frequent informal as well as formal communication in order to develop the trust that is necessary for effective collaboration. Fuller could benefit from developing opportunities for informal communication, especially between regular education teachers and parents. This will take special effort because classroom teachers serve as many as 30 students and families, and their days are tightly scheduled with less flexibility than other school staff.

Families were also outspoken about their treatment by various agencies. For the most part they found the staff at the town's agencies to be compassionate and respectful. In particular, they appreciated the public health nurse who ran the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) nutrition and health program and in whom clients confided and from whom they sought advice on a variety of family concerns and problems. The receptionist at the Community Action Agency—by design a former client of the agency—was also singled out as being understanding and providing helpful advice.

In contrast, the staff at Job Services and Child Protective Services were viewed negatively. Job Services was perceived as disdainful and doing little more than processing unemployment applications. Families expressed frustration with Job Services while acknowledging that a lack of jobs was not their fault. Families universally supported the existence of Child Protective Services, but they were fearful that children who were not actually being abused might be removed from their homes. One mother deeply resented the accusative attitude of the investigators when she was investigated, and the finding that she was not guilty did little to make her feel better.

On the whole, the community has many professionals who are respected and effective and can provide project leadership and training for others. Families spoke in terms of the attitudes of the professionals they dealt with, but it is likely that circumstances and procedures also contribute to client perceptions.

For example, the required procedures of developing individual and specific goals, describing specific accommodations, and including the parents' vision as part of the IEP seemed to promote communication and develop a collaborative relationship between the special education teacher and parent. In addition, in situations such as unemployment or accusations of child abuse, it may be more difficult for staff to appear compassionate and respectful.

Normal Childhood Concerns

One might expect that families concerned with respect and presenting themselves in a favorable light would not admit to many concerns or problems with respect to their children, but that was not the case. Families were asked about a list of possible childhood concerns in four areas: (a) child behavior (responsibility, obedience, activity level, tantrums, and friendships), (b) development and learning, (c) family relationships, and (d) child care and basic needs. Families in both risk groups reported concerns about their children. More than half of the families interviewed had concerns about child behavior, and the patterns were similar across risk groups, with the exception that more at-risk families expressed concern about hyperactivity, with one at-risk family characterizing their child as violent. Parents said they would be interested in suggestions and support to help them address these parenting concerns.

Overall, the parents' attitude toward their children's rate of learning and development was that differences were normal and not matters of concern unless extreme. Most had no way of judging what was outside the range of normal. Almost all of the concerns in the areas of learning and development had first been noticed by health professionals, preschool screenings, or Fuller staff. In most cases, parents shared the school's assessment of their child's problems, but a number had been surprised at first. Families whose children received in-home services prior to formal schooling were overwhelmingly positive about the caring shown by the child development workers and genuinely enthusiastic about their children's progress. Families who qualified for Head Start were also positive about that program, and most praised the related parent participation aspects, although a few complained about them.

Parents uniformly said that their children liked books and that they had read to their children when they were young, but few mentioned reading to older children in their descriptions of a typical day. Some characterized their children as more interested in active pursuits than reading, and some said that reading was difficult for their children and so not a common pastime. The most common pastime was watching television.

The one area of difference in childhood concerns between the two risk groups was that the not-at-risk families more often reported trouble finding affordable daycare, and their biggest concern was cost rather than the quality

of child care. Fuller did have an afterschool program, but even its sliding scale rates were steep for some families, leading to latch-key children. The greater concern for affordable daycare among the families not deemed to be at risk was not explained by the employment rate, which was similar in the two risk groups. The fact that afterschool care is primarily a concern of families whose children are not at risk argues for making it a low priority for the Fuller project. However, since afterschool care could be designed to serve other needs of at-risk students, such as homework help, it might be included for that reason.

Neighborhood Influences and Family Values

Housing in Fuller's low-income neighborhood consists of small, single-family dwellings interspersed with a few larger homes, many of which have been converted into apartments that are minimally maintained. In addition, the town's two aging trailer parks are in the neighborhood, and there is one modern apartment complex that offers subsidized housing. Inexpensive rentals, often with inadequate insulation or other amenities, are also available in the country surrounding the town. When asked about their neighborhoods, mothers and fathers described themselves and their neighbors as holding to what several called "family values" or "decent living." Most of those who lived in town described neighborhoods where their children had playmates and in which residents respected and looked out for one another. Country families were more isolated.

In contrast, families in or near the town's subsidized apartment complex had many concerns about their neighbors. They complained of drugs being openly used and sold, fights, undisciplined children, and teen mothers who served as poor role models. One mother talked of being upset at a neighbor's lack of cooperation in the control of lice. The steering committee had expected the proposed project might address a lack of neighborly cohesion and support, but it had not anticipated the magnitude of the problems reported at the apartment complex. It was discouraging to learn that housing designed specifically for low-income families actually provided an incentive for moving to less adequate housing. A clear need was identified, and addressing it would require the kind of collaborative effort between residents, law enforcement, apartment management, and social service providers that was originally envisioned by the steering committee.

Mobility

Teachers on the steering committee felt that changing schools during the academic year was a chronic problem that put students at risk, especially since it seemed that those least able to adjust were the ones most likely to move. The teachers expressed frustration that they had no advance notice of a child being

added to their class and that records from other schools were of limited use since they did not provide information about specific skills. Because the moves were seldom related to better employment, the teachers saw the moves as another indication that parents did not value education.

The literature makes it clear that student mobility is a universal problem in schools that serve low-income children. The positive correlation between high mobility and low achievement is well established (Rumberger & Larson 1998; Smith, Fien, & Paine, 2008), as is the fact that those in the lowest income brackets have the highest mobility (Engec, 2006; Offenberg, 2004; Smith, Fien et al., 2008), although the likely confounding among the variables of low income, low achievement, and high mobility makes attributing causality to high mobility problematic. Further, the moves of low-income families are typically short distances and are necessitated by financial or family crises rather than better employment (Longoni, 2000; Schaft, 2008). While mobility is a problem in both urban (Alexander et al., 1996; Nelson, Simoni, & Adelman, 1996) and rural (Schaft, 2008) schools, Scahft believes that rural schools are less able to meet the needs of incoming students because they have fewer administrative and fiscal resources.

Since a major focus of the proposed project was to improve the school readiness of incoming kindergarteners, it was important to know how many of them lived in the Fuller School neighborhood prior to kindergarten. Interviewers asked families about their moves into or out of the neighborhood between the birth of their oldest elementary-aged child and the child's entrance into school. The results showed that 46% of the at-risk and 50% of the not-at-risk families had resided in the neighborhood for all five years prior to their child entering kindergarten. That is comparable to the rate found by Engec (2006) for the state of Louisiana, and somewhat less than those reported for some inner city districts (Alexander et al., 1996; Lash & Kirkpatrick, 1990; Offenberg, 2004). Similar to the studies of Longoni (1990) and Schaft (2008), the primary reasons given for moving were family circumstances such as divorce or unemployment. This mobility rate of several students a year per class does not seem like a lot, but when Lash and Kirkpatrick (1990) interviewed teachers, they found that from a teacher's perspective, each incoming student requires considerable teacher time to teach new routines, assess achievement, and fill in gaps due to curriculum variation between schools.

The parents surveyed were concerned that adjustments to a new school might be difficult especially since moves were often related to other stresses the family was experiencing, but they either thought there was not much they could do besides sympathize with their children or they chose actions that teachers viewed as counterproductive. One parent expressed the opinion that

giving her children a break from school for a week or two during the move had been helpful. Another parent reported she did not want her child's records transferred quickly because she wanted her child to have a fresh start at a new elementary school.

It is unlikely that Fuller School can reduce the mobility rate among its families, although better delivery of community services might prevent some moves. However, knowing that most moves are to and from neighboring school districts suggests that sharing curriculum guides that detail the sequence in which skills are taught for each grade would be helpful. In addition, Fuller could routinely educate parents about the best ways to ease the transition to a new school. Planners must weigh the relative merits of providing services as early as possible against the percentage of children that will eventually attend Fuller.

Opposition to Locating Services at the School

The section of the interview that asked about existing community services began with a broad question asking families what services were available and whether they felt the services were sufficient, accessible, and responsive. This initial broad question was then followed with questions about any community services and programs the family did not mention initially. The committee expected to hear some of the frustrations commonly reported in the literature of a piecemeal approach with too many agencies with differing qualifying requirements, duplication in terms of paper work, and a lack of accessibility or responsiveness. However, they found that those problems were not foremost among the families' concerns. Instead, families in both risk groups opposed locating offices of social services at the school. Such resistance is reported in the literature (Black, 2004; Dryfoos, 1994), but the major objection is usually that such noneducational services should not be the purview of the school and would dilute its educational mission. In contrast, the major objection of Fuller School parents was that it would jeopardize a family's privacy. Perhaps a family resource center like those in other full-service schools around the country (Dryfoos, 1994; Oppenheim, 1999; Strahan, Carlone, Horn, Dallas, & Ware, 2003) would bring parents into the building for so many reasons that those coming for some sort of financial assistance could not be singled out, but privacy was a strong concern, and that concern is consistent with the families' desire for respect. One of the few parents who favored having offices at the school was a doctor's wife who volunteered regularly in her daughter's classroom. Her attitude was one of service provision, and she explained her support by saying, "Fuller school has so many kids with so many problems. Anything to improve the delivery of community services would have a positive effect."

Families strongly asserted that they would and could access services when they needed them. Most were familiar with the available services, but the

fact that some were not suggests an ongoing need for publicity. Services were deemed to be accessible, although a few said that evening hours would be helpful. In addition, several said that the location of mental and public health agencies on the outskirts of town created access problems. A few families expressed concerns that not knowing whether they would qualify prevented them from applying and that some families lied and received services for which they did not qualify.

Families favored locating health, recreation, and adult education services at the school. They were relatively satisfied with the availability and accessibility of health care, although several families characterized themselves, as one father said, "not running to the doctor for every little thing." This satisfaction was unexpected, because the teachers on the steering committee talked of families who could not afford their child's Ritalin or glasses or failed to follow through with health referrals. While families did not express a need for additional a health services, they did report relying on the school's vision and hearing screenings and favored expanding the school nurse job to full time. Despite their claim of satisfaction with their health care, the interviewers characterized many families who did not qualify for Medicaid as doing no more than getting by with a combination of free services, postponing care (especially dental), and paying medical bills in installments.

Opinions about recreation ranged from too much to not enough and from very interested to not interested at all. Expense was the most often mentioned barrier to participation in recreation opportunities. Families were unaware of or unwilling to inquire about fee waivers, a problem that should be easy for the project to address. Those who wanted additional recreational activities mentioned a need for family activities, teen activities, and noncompetitive activities.

Specific Programming Ideas

When the interviewer asked parents about what problems Fuller School families faced and what services might be helpful to address them, most did not see any pervasive problems. Parents were asked their opinion about nine ideas suggested by the committee: (a) cooperative preschool where parents pay by working one day a week; (b) assistance with school transfers; (c) home visits to help parents promote development in preschoolers; (d) general classes in child development; (e) school organization for parents; (f) parent organizations by grade; (g) neighborhood support groups; (h) parent–infant classes; (i) small parent support groups organized by topic. The interests of the two risk groups were similar, and the ideas that were most favored were parent support groups (16), home visits by a child development specialist (14), cooperative preschool (14), and parent–infant classes (14). In addition to these affirmative responses, others responded to those four ideas with a maybe. Although the

existing Parent Teacher Organization was actually a committee of six parents that primarily organized fundraising and did no public programming, many parents said that there already were parent organizations, and more were not needed. Only two parents knew about existing parent–infant classes offered by the Area Education Agency (AEA), and no parents reported having attended. Clearly, there is a need for more and better publicity about parent education and involvement opportunities.

In the interviews, families indicated that they would participate in those activities they favored, but there was always a proviso about the convenience of the meeting time. Unfortunately for the sake of project planning, there was absolutely no consistency in the days or times that parents suggested as being convenient. Parents did express interest in home visits which have the advantage of flexible scheduling and an opportunity for informal conversation, but those advantages would need to be weighed against the costs.

Conclusion

The needs assessment results pose questions of how the teachers and parents could have such different perspectives and which view is more accurate. Fuller families see themselves as good parents who love and care for their children despite limited material resources. They say that they value education, consider any problems they have to be the kinds of things that could happen to anyone, and feel capable of obtaining assistance if necessary. The teachers, on the other hand, see struggling families who do not value education and have unmet needs that prevent their children from receiving the full benefit from their education. Developing a community school project requires considerable human and financial resources, so planners would like to be as certain as possible that the programming will make a difference. Therefore, while there is merit in the advice that it is not sensible or effective to provide services that parents do not want or need, it is also important to ask whether parents' views should be the only consideration. Certainly the teachers need to understand how their students' parents view themselves and school and how their views are shaped by their past schooling experiences as well as their current relationships with school staff. Parents might also benefit from hearing the teachers' views if they can be presented in a way that is not blaming or demeaning.

Much of the literature on parent involvement is enthusiastic about its potential benefits (Chavkin, 1989; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Moles, 1993; Sheldon & Van Voorhis, 2004). However, Lareau and Shumar (1996) are more cautious. Based on their in-depth study of middle- and lower-class families, they say that the social inequality of low-income parents creates differences

that cannot be ignored and must be addressed directly. This seems to be the case at Fuller, where it is likely that there is truth in both parents' and teachers' perspectives that cannot be resolved by discussion and better understanding. Instead, the project needs to recognize the differences and somehow accommodate them.

The needs assessment yielded much useful information. However, the results did not lead as clearly to courses of action as the steering committee anticipated. Families identified two specific needs: (1) improving the quality of life for those in or near the subsidized apartment complex, and (2) a smoother transition to middle school. Neither of those needs can be addressed primarily by providing more or better-delivered social services. Nor is either directly related to the goal adopted for the proposed project, although improving the conditions at the subsidized apartment complex is more nearly like what was envisioned. In addition, both of those problems apply only to a subset of parents, although all families will eventually face the transition to middle school. Families also professed an interest in information and strategies they might use to assist with the daily challenges of parenting including providing homework assistance. They view such education as something any parent could use rather than a particular need of Fuller families. In contrast, the teachers' ideas about critical programming was something that would address unmet needs and change the behavior of Fuller families so they would provide the environment and supports their children needed to be successful at school. The committee must decide whether to begin by tackling a parent-identified need or to work on something more directly related to the teachers' concerns.

Hatch (1998) provides an argument for beginning with a parent concern and gives several examples of successful projects that began in this way. Working on a parent-identified need (over more immediate teacher concerns) demonstrated the project's willingness to listen to parents and laid the groundwork for further school–parent collaboration. Another project focus that might more directly achieve some of the goals of the teachers and that parents favored was the idea of a cooperative preschool. This approach to educating children and their parents also has research support (Reynolds, Temple, Robertson, & Mann, 2001; Schweinhart & Wiekart, 1999). In the course of training the parent volunteers, the preschool teacher could teach about developmental benchmarks, demonstrate strategies for teaching preschoolers, and begin the collaborative relationships the school wants to have with its parents. The teacher would also be in a position to refer families to community resources. Eventually, experienced parents might assume some of the responsibility for recruiting and training new parents, and with additional education, some might move into paid paraprofessional positions at the school. In these ways the project would be building the capacity of its parents.

Several studies discuss issues of power and trust (Abrams & Gibbs, 2000; Cousins, Mickelson, Williams, & Velasco, 2008) as obstacles to collaboration between schools and parents, but none we found report the strong sensitivity to disrespect that was the dominant theme expressed by Fuller families. This finding could be a function of using interviews, or perhaps this issue is particularly acute in a small, rural, White community where citizens of all social classes meet one another on a regular basis in public places, and some low-income families have a multigeneration reputation in the town. In retrospect, it is hard to explain why the steering committee expected that their needs assessment would reveal the same needs that a neighboring community project was addressing for its Mexican immigrants.

Likewise, the relative satisfaction with social services and health care may also be due in part to the nature and size of the community. Most services are centrally located in a town that is only four square miles in area, and many families have connections with well-liked and compassionate staff, some of whom have been in their jobs for decades. The medical (but not eye and dental) health care community jointly has a policy of providing care regardless of ability to pay. In addition, the presence and policies of the local Community Action Agency provides some coordination of services. Lastly, the strength of extended family ties contributes to families' sense of well-being. Osher and Fleischman (2005) explain how connectedness can act as a buffer to mitigate adverse circumstances. However, strategies such as moving in with a relative are effective for only the most temporary problems and can create additional stress.

The unanticipated findings from Fuller School's needs assessment confirm how essential it is for schools to do a needs assessment. Without the needs assessment, the Fuller project would likely have begun with collaboration among existing agencies to provide integrated social services located at the school building. That approach would have run into strong opposition from Fuller families who resent being seen as needy and want their use of services to be private. This does not necessarily mean that Fuller's families would not benefit from a more holistic and coordinated approach to family development, but any such efforts must first garner families' support and must explicitly espouse the goal of building on family strengths rather than that of remedying deficits and promoting dependency. In addition, using interviews gave an adequate response rate, and the use of open-ended questions revealed useful information that would not have been anticipated and therefore not found with a multiple choice survey or even a short-answer survey.

Three important limitations to this study should be kept in mind. First, although the percentage of responses was adequate, it is possible and even likely that those who either refused to participate or did not show up for their in-

terviews are systematically different from those who did complete interviews. Second, the needs assessment almost certainly did not uncover the full extent of the problems that Fuller families face, particularly in the areas of substance and family abuse. Third, more research is needed on rural children and their families to support or question the tentative findings of the present study. Despite these limitations, the needs assessment provided important information about unexpected strengths as well as problems, and at the same time was a positive first step in developing relationships with Fuller parents.

Recommendations

The present case study suggests several strategies that could improve the functioning of a steering committee as it begins its initial planning and needs assessment:

1. *Use the term "needs and assets assessment" instead of "needs assessment."* The term "assets" should include strengths of the families as well as community resources. In fact, the Children's Aid Society (2001) uses the phrase "assessing community needs and strengths," although strengths refers mainly to community resources rather than family strengths. That small change of phrase, if used consistently, would have altered the initial steering committee discussion by beginning with the expectation of finding family and community strengths as well as needs. In the present study, the open-ended nature of the questions did identify some strengths, but that was fortuitous.

2. *Include more parents on the steering committee.* Since the various stakeholders each had one representative on the committee, having two parents seemed generous. However, from the parents' perspective, the school had many representatives—albeit only one from each staff category such as principal or special education teacher—and the parents were vastly outnumbered by college-educated professionals. Parents likely thought that their voice would not carry much weight.

3. *Pay parents.* All the other participants were paid because they could attend committee meetings as part of their job, so it was a major oversight not to pay the parents. In addition, depending on need, child care and transportation should be provided, and the parent's stipend should be sufficient for them to cover any expenses associated with their service on the committee and still earn some money. Paying the parents would have emphasized their importance as members of the committee.

4. *Training for committee members.* In her review of school–community partnership efforts, Sanders (2003) identifies a lack of professional preparation for collaboration to be a common and serious obstacle; Collins, Carrier, Anderson, and Paisano-Trujillo (2010) also make that recommendation

based on their experiences with full-service schools in New Mexico. The current account is a case in point. The committee prided itself on realizing that the needs assessment would be the beginning of its relationship with families but totally failed to realize that the steering committee meetings were actually the beginning of their relationship with parents. Some training should have been done with the whole committee, but to some extent, the parents and professionals needed different training. The teachers needed to develop an awareness of ways in which their views of parents as deficient were disrespectful and likely wrong and develop more sensitive ways to express their real concerns based on their observations of children in their classes. They also needed some training to make sure that they behaved in ways that communicated to the parents that they wanted to hear their ideas and that they listened to the parents' contributions. The parent representatives needed reassurance that the committee cared about their opinions, and they should have had one person on the committee—in this case either the principal or a special education teacher because they had established good rapport with parents—who would check with them after each meeting to make certain they had had sufficient opportunity to express their views. The parents might also have felt more confident if they had been able to meet with other parents between meetings and could then say at committee meetings that they spoke for more than just themselves.

In the present case, all the committee members and the parents who were interviewed genuinely wanted the best for Fuller's children. However, even with the best intentions, there were important differences in perspectives that had the potential to become obstacles as the project moved forward. Such obstacles are not insurmountable, but they require that someone notice them and help participants address them directly. The steering committee did some of this work when, in planning items for the parent interviews, they examined their own ideas about the reasons for low achievement among children living in low-income families. However, other differences were revealed that were not addressed and that could hinder the success of a future project.

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Appendix. Questions for Semi-Structured Interviews

Child Growth and Development

1. Describe the growth and development of your oldest elementary-aged child.
2. Who did you turn to if you had questions about your child's development? What do you think would help families address concerns?
3. Describe a typical day for your child. Follow up: friendships, reading, and television preferences

Schooling

4. How has school gone for your child since kindergarten? Have any years been better than others?
5. How does the school communicate with you, and what works best? Follow up: parent–teacher conferences, homework, phone calls, and notes sent home
6. What could the school do to help children be ready for school?

Neighborhood

7. Describe the neighborhood you live in and things that are positive or of concern to you.

Mobility

8. How many times has your family moved between the birth of your oldest elementary-aged child and the time that child entered school?

Community Services

9. If you or a friend needed food or help with energy bills or rent, do you feel it would be easy to access those services in our community? Repeat for mental and physical health care and for child, substance, and sexual abuse.

10. What challenges do Fuller families face? What would make it easier for families to get the help they need? Would it be a good idea for agencies to have offices located in or near the school?

Specific ideas

11. Which of the following specific suggestions do you think are good ideas, and would you participate? (a) cooperative preschool where parents pay by working one day a week; (b) school transfer assistance; (c) home visits to help parents promote development in preschoolers; (d) general classes in child development; (e) organization of school parents; (f) parent organizations by grade; (g) neighborhood support groups; (h) parent–infant classes; (i) small parent support groups organized by topic, such as learning disability

Secondary School Students' Interest in Homework: What About Race and School Location?

Jianzhong Xu

Abstract

This study examined models of homework interest at the secondary school level to assess whether homework interest varies across race and school location and whether the influence of race on homework interest depends on characteristics of the context (e.g., school location and teacher feedback). Student- and class-level predictors of homework interest were analyzed in a survey of 866 eighth graders from 61 classes and of 745 eleventh graders from 46 classes in the southeastern United States. Results revealed that homework interest did not vary across race (Black students vs. White students) or school location (rural settings vs. urban settings). On the other hand, Black students considered homework more interesting in classes with more frequent teacher feedback than in classes with less frequent teacher feedback, but exactly the opposite was observed for White students.

Key Words: homework, interest, racial difference, White students, Black students, multilevel modeling, secondary school, high schools, rural, urban, teachers, feedback, motivation, academic engagement

Introduction

Homework is a common, well-known, and important part of most school-aged children's daily routine (Cooper, 1989; Cooper, Robinson, & Patall,

2006; Corno, 2000). It has long been an active area of investigation among educational researchers (Cooper et al., 2006; Corno, 1996; Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2001). It is surprising to note, however, that homework interest as perceived by children is notably absent from much contemporary homework research (Warton, 2001).

Informed by research and theorizing on interest in general, and theoretical models of homework in particular, the present researcher (Xu, 2008a) examined empirical models of variables posited to predict homework interest at the secondary school level. However, that study did not examine whether homework interest was related to race and school location.

Thus, there is a need to examine whether students' interest in homework is influenced by race and school location. This line of research is important, as homework interest is positively related to the amount of homework completed (Cooper, Lindsay, Nye, & Greathouse, 1998; Xu, 2008a) and academic achievement (Cooper et al., 1998), and as Black students have consistently underachieved in comparison to White students (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Lee, 2002). In addition, rural students tend to have lower educational aspirations in comparison with urban students (Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, & Dean, 2005; Hu, 2003). As educational aspirations may influence how students approach academic tasks such as homework assignments, it is important to examine whether there is a difference in homework interest as perceived by rural and urban students.

Related Literature

The present study is informed by previous research on homework interest as perceived by secondary school students. It is further informed by two lines of literature that suggest that race and school location may play a role in students' interest in homework.

Previous Research on Homework Interest

Typically defined as "a motivational variable [which] refers to the psychological state of engaging or the predisposition to reengage with particular classes of objects, events, or ideas over time" (Hidi & Renninger, 2006, p. 112), interest as a psychological construct has been given renewed attention recently (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Hidi & Renninger, 2006; Schiefele, 2001; Silvia, 2008). This is largely because interest is found to be positively associated with a variety of desirable outcomes (e.g., a positive impact on attention, persistence, and deep-level learning; Hidi & Renninger, 2006; Schiefele, 1999) and because educators continue to wrestle with the challenges of working with academically unmotivated students (Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000).

As interest is often defined in terms of engagement (e.g., a psychological state of engaging or reengaging with particular classes of events over time), Corno and Mandinach's (2004) theoretical framework on academic engagement, with homework engagement in particular, bears direct relevance to the present study (Xu, 2008a). Corno and Mandinach view engagement as partly cognitive, partly conative (i.e., purposive striving), and partly affective (i.e., emotions). In the case of homework, the affective and conative aspects of engagement in particular are ever present, as the demand to complete externally imposed academic tasks in a familiar setting often leads to difficulties and frustrations (Corno, 2000), and as students (not just academically unmotivated students) often view homework as routine, mundane, and unappealing (Cooper et al., 1998; Warton, 2001). In addition, students rate their levels of positive affect during homework lower than other activities (e.g., eating and doing chores; Corno & Xu, 2004; Leone & Richards, 1989; Verma, Sharma, & Larson, 2002; Xu, 2005; Xu & Yuan, 2003). It is surprising to note, however, that few studies have empirically investigated students' interest in homework (Warton, 2001; Xu, 2006, 2008a).

Rare exceptions to the lack of attention in this area include a study by the present author (Xu, 2006). That study linked gender and grade level to homework interest, based on survey data from 426 high school students. Students were asked the extent to which they considered homework interesting. The results revealed no significant effect for grade level. On the other hand, gender appeared related to the extent to which students considered homework interesting. Specifically, girls found homework more interesting than boys did.

Recently, the present author (Xu, 2008a) proposed and tested empirical models of variables posited to predict homework interest at the secondary school level, as reported by 1,046 eighth graders from 63 classes and of 849 eleventh graders from 48 classes. The study was informed by relevant literature that pertains to students' interest in homework, including: (a) research and theorizing on interest in general (Ainley, 2006; Hidi & Renninger, 2006; Krapp, 2005; Schiefele, 2001), (b) theoretical models of homework (Cooper, 1989; Corno & Mandinach, 2004), and (c) findings from homework research that suggests several factors that may influence homework interest (e.g., gender and student attitude; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001; Trautwein, Ludtke, Schnyder, & Niggli, 2006; Xu & Corno, 1998). Consequently, the final model included three categories of variables at the student level, including: (a) background variables (gender, parent education, and self-reported grade), (b) adult guidance and monitoring (family homework help and teacher feedback), and (c) the role of the students in the homework process (monitoring motivation; peer-, adult-, and learning-oriented reasons; and affective attitude toward

homework). In addition, it included three variables at the class level (grade level, aggregated parent education, and aggregated teacher feedback).

The study (Xu, 2008a) found that, at the student level, homework interest was positively related to affective attitude ($b = .56$, $p < .01$), learning-oriented reasons ($b = .19$, $p < .01$), peer-oriented reasons ($b = .07$, $p < .01$), self-reported grade ($b = .07$, $p < .01$), and teacher feedback ($b = .05$, $p < .01$). Those students taking more initiative in monitoring motivation considered homework more interesting ($b = .04$, $p < .05$). In addition, boys reported statistically significant lower scores in homework interest than did girls ($b = -.10$, $p < .01$). At the class level, grade level was found to have a positive effect on homework interest ($b = .10$, $p < .01$). That study took one important step forward in addressing a critical gap in previous research on homework interest. On the other hand, as race and school location were not the study's prime focus, it did not explicitly link homework interest to these two variables.

Race

Whereas no study has explicitly linked race to homework interest, research on school engagement bears direct relevance to the present study, given that interest is typically defined in terms of engagement. One branch of study on school engagement that has relevance to the present investigation is research that conceptualizes student effort in doing homework as one important aspect of school engagement (Finn & Rock, 1997; Kelly, 2008a; Lee & Smith, 1993). Past research in this area, however, has produced mixed evidence on racial differences. Several studies found that Black students spent less time on homework than did White students (Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey, 1998; Fejgin, 1995; Steinberg, Brown, & Dornbusch, 1996).

Other studies have found no difference in school engagement between Black and White students as measured by a composite of attendance, class preparedness, and time spent on homework (Kelly, 2008a; Smerdon, 1999). Still other studies have reported that minority students (including Black students) were more academically engaged than White students (Johnson, Crosnoe, & Elder, 2001; Lee & Smith, 1995). For example, in one study based on 10,586 students from 111 middle and high schools, Johnson et al. (2001) found that Black students, compared with White students, were more likely to be engaged at school (going to class, paying attention, and doing homework).

Another branch of research on school engagement involves those studies that include one or two items about students' interest in their classes (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Glanville & Wildhagen, 2007; Marks, 2000). The findings from these studies were just as mixed. For example, Marks (2000) includes student interest in class, along with other items relating to student

effort, attentiveness, and class assignment completion, in her measurement of student engagement in instructional activity. Based on 3,669 students in 143 social studies and mathematics classrooms in a nationally selected sample of 24 elementary, middle, and high schools, she found no difference between Black and White students in the levels of engagement in instructional activity that students experienced in their classes. On the other hand, Shernoff and Schmidt (2008) used a composite variable of engagement measured by concentration, interest, and enjoyment. Based on 586 students from 13 high schools, they found Black students reported higher engagement than did White students.

As these scales on school engagement combined either students' effort in homework or their interest in classes with other items, it is not clear whether these mixed findings were due to students' ratings on their efforts in homework, their interest in classes, or other items in these scales (e.g., attendance, attentiveness, and class preparedness). Consequently, it is important to explicitly link race to homework interest as perceived by secondary school students.

School Location

Research has found that the educational aspirations of rural youth lag behind those of their urban counterparts (Arnold et al., 2005; Hu, 2003; Kampits, 1996; Khattri, Riley, & Kane, 1997). For example, based on descriptive statistics from the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS: 88), Hu (2003) examined educational aspirations and postsecondary access by students in urban and rural schools. Using tenth graders as a baseline population, the study found that lower percentages of rural students had aspirations for four-year college education or beyond (50.2% for rural, in contrast to 61.9% for urban students). Hu also found that smaller percentages of students from rural schools were enrolled in postsecondary institutions (51.1% for rural students, in contrast to 57.4% for urban students).

Related findings from other studies have further indicated that rural students place less value on academics (Ley, Nelson, & Beltyukova, 1996; Stern, 1994). In a study of 2,355 students from 21 rural high schools in 21 states, Ley et al. (1996) asked students to indicate the importance of 21 attributes relating to their personal goals after high school. The data revealed that they placed more importance on personal qualities (e.g., being dependable and having the ability to get along with others) and less importance on academic achievement in specific areas (e.g., being proficient in basic English skills and math skills).

It follows, then, that lower educational aspirations and less importance placed on academics could lead to a sense that "school isn't for me" (Haas, 1992) or that "homework isn't for me." These differences relating to educational aspirations and academic motivation suggest that rural and urban students

may view their homework differently (e.g., interest, relevance, and importance), as students' perception of the instrumentality of the present academic tasks to obtain future goals (e.g., postsecondary educational opportunities) influence the incentive value of the direct outcomes of achieving the proximal goal itself as well as the incentive value of its anticipated distal outcomes (Miller & Brickman, 2004; Schutz, 1997).

The Current Study

Taken together, one line of literature on school engagement raises an intriguing and important question about whether homework interest may be related to race. Another line of literature suggests that school location may play a role in homework interest. Yet, neither line of literature has explicitly focused on homework interest. On the other hand, previous research on homework interest has not explicitly linked this to either race or school location.

Thus, the purpose of the present study is to examine whether homework interest may vary across race and school location. In addition, there is a need to examine whether the influence of race on homework interest depends on characteristics of the context (e.g., school location and teacher feedback at the class level), as self-directed thoughts and feelings (e.g., task values) may be shaped by interactions with others (e.g., the appraisals and evaluations of teachers; Graham & Taylor, 2002), and as racial differences in attitudes may be shaped by contextual influences such as teachers' instructional practices (Shernoff & Schmidt, 2008).

In line with the literature on educational aspirations between rural and urban students, it is hypothesized that urban students would show more interest in their homework. On the other hand, information is lacking regarding whether White students or Black students may consider their homework more interesting, as the literature on school engagement has yielded mixed results.

Method

Participants and Procedures

The participants were 1,611 students in the southeastern United States, including 866 eighth graders from 61 classes and 745 eleventh graders from 46 classes. The sample consisted of 57.5% White students and 42.5% Black (i.e., African American) students. As this study was conducted in a region with more rural school districts, the sample included 1,161 rural students, more than twice as many as urban students (450).

For the present study, the definition of urban and rural is drawn from the U.S. Office of Budget and Management's definition of a metropolitan statistical area (MSA). A MSA includes at least (a) one city with 50,000 or more inhabitants, or (b) a Census Bureau-defined urbanized area of at least 50,000 inhabitants and a total MSA population of at least 100,000 (Hobbs, 1994). Urban is thus defined as MSAs in metropolitan counties, whereas rural is defined as areas outside a MSA (Prater, Bermudez, & Owens, 1997; Semke & Sheridan, 2012; Weiss & Correa, 1996).

Of the 866 eighth graders, 46.6% were male, and 53.4% were female. The eighth grade sample included 57.3% White and 42.7% Black students. Among this sample, 37.2% received free meals. Of the 745 eleventh graders, 45.1% were male, and 54.9% were female. The eleventh grade sample included 57.7% White and 42.3% Black students. Among this sample, 36.0% received free meals. Overall, the survey response rate was 89%.

Superintendents were contacted first to secure their permission to administer the homework instrument. Principals and teachers were then asked to send parental consent forms home to seek parental approval. Finally, teachers administrated the homework instrument in the classroom. Students were told that the purpose was to find out their attitudes toward homework (e.g., homework interest and homework purpose) and their homework completion behaviors. They were also told that "completing the survey is voluntary. Whether or not you answer the questions will not influence your grade in this class. If you are not comfortable answering a question, just leave it blank." In addition, they were assured that "the answers you give will be kept private. No one will know what you write."

Instrument

The homework survey included questions about students' demographic characteristics. Students were asked about their grade average for all their subjects taken during the previous two years. Possible responses included: *below D* (1), *mostly D's* (2), *mostly C's* (3), *mostly B's* (4), and *mostly A's* (5). This item was adapted from the NELS: 88. Concerning the reliability of students' self-reported grades, several researchers found the correlation between self-reported grade and actual academic performance was very strong (Dickhaeuser & Plenter, 2005) or quite high (Kelly, 2008b).

Table 1. Alpha Reliability of Multi-Item Scales

Scales	Items	α (CI)
Teacher feedback[a]	How much of your assigned homework is discussed in class?	.79 (.77, .80)
	How much of your assigned homework is collected by teachers?	
	How much of your assigned homework is checked by teachers?	
	How much of your assigned homework is graded by teachers?	
	How much of your assigned homework is counted in your overall grade?	
Monitoring motivation[b]	Find ways to make homework more interesting	.83 (.82, .84)
	Praise myself for good effort	
	Praise myself for good work	
	Reassure myself that I am able to do homework when I feel it is too hard	
Peer-oriented reasons[c]	Doing homework brings you approval from classmates	.78 (.76, .80)
	Doing homework gives you opportunities to work with classmates	
	Doing homework gives you opportunities to learn from classmates	
Adult-oriented reasons[c]	Doing homework brings you teacher approval	.79 (.77, .80)
	Doing homework brings you family approval	
	Doing homework makes your family more aware of your learning at school	
Learning-oriented reasons[c]	Doing homework helps you understand what's going on in class	.89 (.88, .90)
	Doing homework helps you learn how to manage your time	
	Doing homework gives you opportunities to practice skills from class lessons	
	Doing homework helps you develop a sense of responsibility	
	Doing homework helps you learn to work independently	
	Doing homework helps you develop good discipline	
	Doing homework helps you learn study skills	
	Doing homework helps you get a good grade	
	Doing homework helps you prepare for the next lesson	
Affective attitude toward homework	My motivation or desire to do homework is _____ [d]other after-school activities	.86 (.85, .87)
	My attention while doing homework is _____ [d] other after-school activities	
	My mood while doing homework is _____ [e] other after-school activities	
	Compared with other activities I do after school, homework is my _____ [f]	
Homework interest	Overall, do you think the homework you get is _____?[g]	.83 (.81, .84)
	How do you feel about homework in general?[h]	
	How does your homework affect your interest in school?[i]	

Note: The 95% confidence intervals for coefficient alpha were calculated using a method employing the central F distribution (see Fan & Thompson, 2001).

[a]Responses were 1 (none), 2 (some), 3 (about half), 4 (most), and 5 (all).
[b]Responses were 1 (never), 2 (rarely), 3 (sometimes), 4 (often), and 5 (routinely).
[c]Responses were 1 (strongly disagree), 2 (disagree), 3 (agree), and 4 (strongly agree).
[d]Responses were 1 (much lower than), 2 (lower than), 3 (about the same as), 4 (higher than), and 5 (much higher than).
[e]Responses were 1 (much worse than), 2 (worse than), 3 (about the same as), 4 (better than), and 5 (much better than).
[f]Responses were 1 (least favorite activity), 2 (less favorite activity), 3 (about the same as other activities), 4 (more favorite activity), and 5 (most favorite activity).
[g]Responses were 1 (very boring), 2 (boring), 3 (neither boring nor interesting), 4 (interesting), and 5 (very interesting).
[h]Responses were 1 (don't like it at all), 2 (don't like it some), 3 (neither like it nor dislike it), 4 (like it some), and 5 (like it very much).
[i]Responses were 1 (decreases it a lot), 2 (decreases it some), 3 (does not make a difference), 4 (increases it some), and 5 (increases it a lot).

_____

Two items asked about parent education (one for father/guardian and another for mother/guardian). Possible responses for both items included: *less than high school* (scored 6 years), *some high school* (scored 10 years), *high school graduate* (scored 12 years), *some college or two-year college graduate* (scored 14 years), *four-year college graduate* (scored 16 years), *some graduate school* (scored 17 years), and *graduate degree* (scored 19 years). A composite variable for parent education was constructed by averaging these two items. For single parent or guardian families, the response to either item was used for parent education. In addition, students were asked to indicate the frequency of family homework help, including: *never* (scored 1), *rarely* (scored 2), *sometimes* (scored 3), *often* (scored 4), and *routinely* (scored 5).

As further specified in Table 1, several multi-item scales were used for the present study. Some items were adapted from standard instruments (e.g., Cooper et al., 1998) or based on related literature (e.g., Warton, 2001), whereas others were derived from previously validated measures (e.g., Xu, 2008b).

Reasons for Doing Homework

Three subscales assessed reasons for doing homework, based on the homework purpose scale validated through the use of explorative factor analysis (Xu, 2010b) and confirmatory factor analysis (Xu, 2010a, 2011). Three items measured peer-oriented reasons (α = .78) relating to working with and seeking approval from peers. Three items measured adult-oriented reasons (α = .79) relating to seeking approval from significant adults (e.g., parents and teachers). Nine items measured learning-oriented reasons (α = .89) relating to reinforcing school learning and developing a sense of responsibility.

Monitoring Motivation

Monitoring motivation is one of the subscales on the Homework Management Scale (Xu, 2008b, 2008c). It includes four items to assess students' initiative to maintain or enhance their motivation while doing homework (α = .83), from making homework more interesting to reassuring themselves that they can complete their homework successfully.

Teacher Feedback

This scale includes five items to assess the extent to which teachers provide homework feedback (α = .79), informed by related literature (Murphy et al., 1987; Trautwein et al., 2006; Walberg, Paschal, & Weinstein, 1985). It measured how much of the assigned homework was monitored (e.g., discussed and checked).

Affective Attitude Toward Homework

Informed by related literature (Leone & Richards, 1989; Verma et al., 2002; Warton, 2001), four items assessed the favorability of homework as compared with other after-school activities, relating to students' motivation, attention, and mood (α = .86).

Homework Interest

Three items assessed the level of homework interest as perceived by students (α = .83), informed by literature on interest and intrinsic motivation (e.g., Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000), and on homework interest in particular (Cooper et al., 1998; Xu, 2006, 2007). These items measure the extent to which students consider homework interesting and to what extent they like or dislike homework assignments. The above two scales (i.e., homework interest and affective attitude toward homework) were found to be empirically distinguishable (i.e., factorially distinct) for secondary school students (Xu, 2008a).

Statistical Analyses

Hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) allows for the inclusion of variables at multiple levels while taking into account the nonindependence of observations by addressing the variability associated with each level of nesting (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). Multilevel analyses were conducted using the HLM 6. To enhance the interpretability of the resulting regression coefficients, I standardized all continuous variables ($M = 0$, $SD = 1$) before performing the multilevel analyses. Thus, the regression weights for all variables (except the dummy-coded variables, including race, gender, school location, and grade level) are

approximately comparable with the standardized weights that result from multiple regression procedures (Xu, 2008a).

To assess whether homework interest varies across race (White students vs. Black students) and school location (urban vs. rural), Model 1 included race as a student-level variable and school location as a class-level variable, above and beyond the variables included in the final model of the previous study (Xu, 2008a). In addition, to determine whether the influence of race depends on characteristics of the context, Model 2 expanded the preceding model by adding four cross-level interactions (i.e., race × school location, race × grade level, race × aggregated parent education, and race × aggregated teacher feedback).

Restricted maximum likelihood estimation was used in all models, and all predictor variables were introduced as uncentered variables. There were few missing values, ranging from 0.0% to 7.2% (with a mean of 2.6%). These missing values were imputed using the expectation-maximization (EM) in SPSS 13.0.

Results

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics relating to the study variables. More specifically, parent education for Black students and White students were 13.76 (SD = 2.64) and 13.57 (SD = 2.68), respectively. Meanwhile, family homework help for Black students and White students were 2.56 (SD = 1.37) and 2.38 (SD = 1.28), respectively.

Table 2 also includes zero-order correlations among independent variables and homework interest. Homework interest was found to correlate significantly with all of the independent variables except grade level, school location, parent education at the student level, and parent education at the class level.

The fully unconditional model was conducted to partition the variance in homework interest into between-class and within-class components. The results indicated that most of the variance occurred at the student level, with 10.7% of the variance in homework interest located at the class level.

Model 1 included 11 student-level variables (i.e., race, gender, parent education, self-reported grade, family homework help, teacher feedback, monitoring motivation, peer-, adult-, and learning-oriented reasons, and affective attitude) and four class-level variables (i.e., school location, grade level, aggregated parent education, and aggregated teacher feedback). Model 1 explained 55.8% of the variance in homework interest at the student level, 94.3% of the variance at the class level, and 59.9% of the total variance.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics and Pearson Correlations

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
1. Race (Black = 0, White = 1)	.57	.49	---														
2. Gender (girl = 0, boy = 1)	.46	.50	.02	---													
3. Parent education	13.65	2.67	-.04	.05*	---												
4. Self-reported grade	3.80	.89	.14**	-.17**	.15**	---											
5. Family homework help	2.45	1.32	-.07**	-.01	.15**	-.07**	---										
6. Teacher feedback	3.61	.83	-.19**	-.02	.07**	-.02	.21**	---									
7. Monitoring motivation	2.71	.98	-.29**	-.13**	.09**	.07**	.25**	.23**	---								
8. Peer-oriented reasons	2.33	.73	-.16**	-.09**	.00	.01	.21**	.20**	.33**	---							
9. Adult-oriented reasons	2.56	.70	-.16**	-.08**	.03	.04	.20**	.29**	.34**	.67**	---						
10. Learning-oriented reasons	2.84	.60	-.21**	-.20**	.02	.10**	.17**	.31**	.43**	.59**	.62**	---					
11. Affective attitude	2.17	.85	-.34**	-.14**	.03	.01	.22**	.29**	.41**	.36**	.40**	.50**	---				
12. Location (rural = 0, urban = 1)	.25	.44	-.13**	-.01	.22**	-.02	.10**	.06*	.07**	-.03	-.06*	-.07**	.03	---			
13. Parent education (class)	13.60	.99	-.03	-.01	.37**	.14**	.10**	.03	.08**	-.06*	-.07**	-.06*	.01	.61**	---		
14. Teacher feedback (class)	3.61	.34	-.24**	.00	.02	-.14**	.23**	.40**	.16**	.10**	.17**	.14**	.24**	.12**	.03	---	
15. Grade level (8 = 0, 11= 1)	.43	.50	.00	-.02	-.12**	-.02	-.31**	-.19**	-.08**	.04	-.03	.05*	-.06*	-.17**	-.30**	-.45**	---
16. Homework interest	2.40	.96	-.28**	-.20**	.04	.11**	.18**	.31**	.40**	.43**	.44**	.57**	.72**	.02	.01	.18**	.00

Note. *N* varies from 1, 600 to 1,611 (11 students did not indicate their gender status). * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$

As documented in Table 3, seven student-level variables were found to have a statistically significant effect on homework interest. Homework interest was positively associated with affective attitude ($b = .54$, $p < .01$), learning-oriented reasons ($b = .19$, $p < .01$), self-reported grade ($b = .08$, $p < .01$), teacher feedback ($b = .07$, $p < .01$), and peer-oriented reasons ($b = .07$, $p < .05$). Those students taking more initiative in monitoring motivation considered homework more interesting ($b = .04$, $p < .05$). In addition, males reported statistically significant lower scores in homework interest than females ($b = -.11$, $p < .01$). At the class level, grade level was found to have a positive effect on homework interest ($b = .09$, $p < .05$), after controlling all other variables.

Table 3. Predicting Homework Interest: Results from Hierarchical Linear Modeling

Model Predictor	Model 1		Model 2	
	b	SE	b	SE
Student level				
Race (Black = 0, White = 1)	-.06	.04	-.04	.06
Gender (girl = 0, boy = 1)	-.11**	.03	-.11**	.03
Parent education	.00	.02	.00	.02
Self-reported grade	.08**	.02	.08**	.02
Family homework help	.01	.02	.00	.02
Teacher feedback	.07**	.02	.07**	.02
Monitoring motivation	.04*	.02	.04*	.02
Peer-oriented reasons	.07*	.03	.07*	.03
Adult-oriented reasons	.00	.03	.00	.03
Learning-oriented reasons	.19**	.02	.19**	.02
Affective attitude	.54**	.02	.54**	.02
Class level				
School location (rural = 0, urban = 1)	.05	.05	.02	.07
Parent education	.00	.06	.07	.11
Teacher feedback	.00	.05	.12	.07
Grade level (8 = 0, 11= 1)	.09*	.04	.14*	.07
Cross-level interaction				
Race × School location (class)			.09	.10
Race × Parent education (class)			-.15	.14
Race × Teacher feedback (class)			-.24**	.09
Race × Grade level (class)			-.09	.08
R^2 individual level	.558		.557	
R^2 class level	.943		.959	
R^2 total	.599		.600	

Note. N = 1,600 from 107 classes. b = unstandardized regression coefficient. SE = standard error of b. R^2 = amount of explained variance. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Of primary interest in the present study are the findings relating to race and school location. Neither race (Black students vs. White students) nor school location (rural vs. urban) was found to be related to homework interest. In addition, the inclusion of race and school location did not influence any of the results reported in the previous study (Xu, 2008a). These findings suggest that results from the previous study (Xu, 2008a) may be applicable across race (i.e., Black students vs. White students) and school location (i.e., rural vs. urban).

Model 2 specified several cross-level interaction terms as additional predictors. To test whether four class-level variables may play a role for Black students or White students in particular, interactions of the four class-level variables with race were introduced (i.e., race × school location, race × grade level, race × aggregated parent education, and race × aggregated teacher feedback). The results revealed that the interaction terms of race × school location, race × grade level, and race × aggregated parent education did not yield statistically significant results.
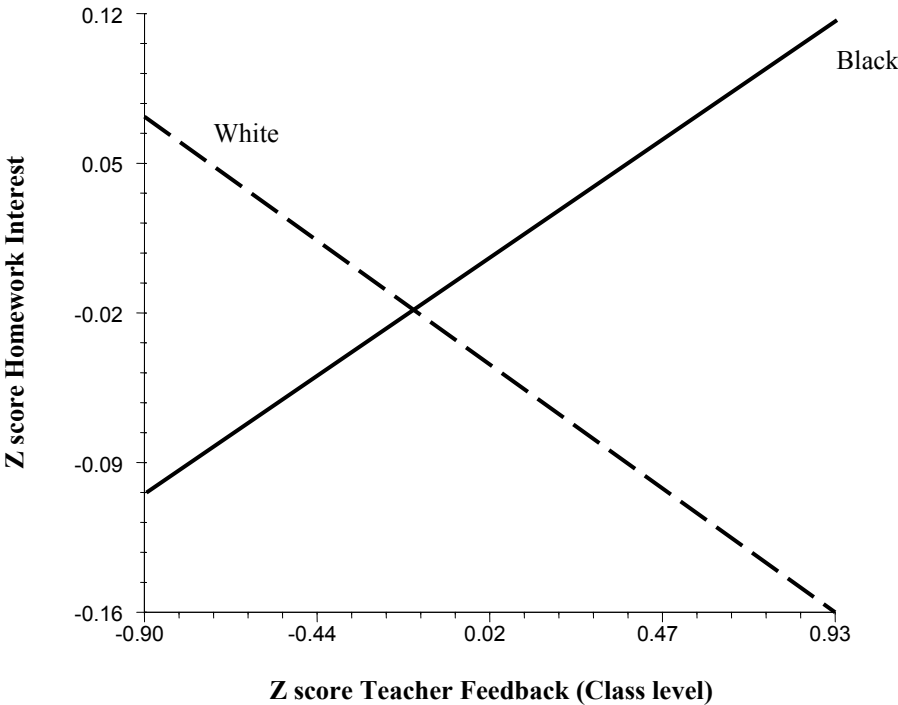
Figure 1. Graphical representation of the significant interaction effect Race × Teacher Feedback (class level) in Model 2.

On the other hand, the interaction term race × aggregated teacher feedback showed a statistically significant negative effect ($b = -.24$, $p < .01$). As illustrated in Figure 1, Black students considered homework more interesting in classes

with more frequent teacher feedback than in classes with less frequent teacher feedback. On the other hand, White students considered homework more interesting in classes with less frequent teacher feedback than in classes with more frequent teacher feedback.

For exploratory reasons, I repeated Model 2 to test a gender interaction with other variables, including 2-way interactions (gender × race, and gender × school location) and 3-way interactions (gender × race × aggregated teacher feedback, and gender × race × school location). None of these interaction terms yielded statistically significant results.

Discussion

The present study examined models of homework interest in secondary school students to assess whether homework interest varies across race and school location and whether the impact of student-level race depends on characteristics of the context. Results revealed that homework interest did not vary across race and school location. Nor did the inclusion of race and school location influence the results reported in the previous study (Xu, 2008a). In addition, results revealed that Black students considered homework more interesting in classes with more frequent teacher feedback than in classes with less frequent teacher feedback, but the opposite was found for White students.

What do we make of the finding that school location, as a class-level variable, was not related to homework interest? Previous literature on educational aspirations of rural and urban youth finds that rural youth tend to have lower educational aspirations compared with urban youth (e.g., Arnold et al., 2005; Hu, 2003). One recent study by Howley (2006) paid more attention to educational aspirations at different levels of schooling among rural and nonrural youth. The findings indicate that rural youth are just as likely to aspire to a high school or an undergraduate education as are nonrural youth. The significant difference in aspirations between rural and nonrural children was found in terms of a postgraduate education: A larger percentage of nonrural than rural youth aspire to graduate studies. As secondary school students more removed from a postgraduate education (as compared with a high school or an undergraduate education), this difference in educational aspirations between rural and nonrural youth may play a less important role in homework interest at the secondary school level.

What do we make of the finding that there is no difference in homework interest between Black and White students? Previous studies on school engagement have produced mixed evidence on racial and ethnic differences (e.g., Johnson et al., 2001; Kelly, 2008a; Marks, 2002). Yet, these studies have

typically conceptualized either students' effort in homework or their interest in classes as one important aspect of school engagement. A recent study by Shernoff and Schmidt (2008) casts a different light by comparing the engagement of White and Black students in three different settings: in public, at home, and in school. Black students reported relatively constant levels of engagement in all three contexts, whereas White students reported engagement peaked when in public and took a significant drop when at school. Their results indicated that engagement at home was relatively neutral and did not significantly vary by race. Thus, it is not surprising that there is no difference in homework interest between Black and White students, given that (a) their engagement scale includes three items on concentration, interest, and enjoyment, and (b) homework is one important aspect of engagement at home.

Finally, what do we make of the finding that Black students considered homework more interesting in classes with more frequent teacher feedback than in classes with less frequent teacher feedback, but exactly the opposite was observed for White students? One possible explanation is that there may be differences in the opportunities for engagement at home and in public among students from different racial and ethnic backgrounds (Shernoff & Schmidt, 2008). Black students, particularly those living in poverty, are faced with greater social and financial hardships accompanied by chronic stress (Alex-Assensoh & Assensoh, 2001; Spencer & Markstrom-Adams, 1990). For students facing these hardships, structured academic settings (e.g., adult attention and supervision) may be more conducive to promoting engagement in general (Shernoff & Schmidt, 2008). Thus, structured academic settings may be more conducive to promoting student interest for these students in particular, as their effort in homework or their interest in classes are often viewed as an important part of student engagement.

In the case of homework, a similar argument can be made. That is, more frequent homework feedback at the class level may be perceived as more engaging and interesting by Black students who tend to experience less adult attention and supervision outside of school (Shernoff & Schmidt, 2008). This is, to some extent, further substantiated by the finding that Black students, as compared with White students, were more concerned about pleasing their teachers (Casteel, 1997). Consequently, more frequent teacher feedback at the class level may be more conducive to promoting Black students' interest in homework.

By contrast, White students may have more opportunities for structured engagement elsewhere (e.g., active leisure activities) and may experience school as relatively less exciting and more confining (Shernoff & Schmidt, 2008). Thus, another related hypothesis is that more frequent homework feedback at the class level may be perceived as more confining and controlling by White

students who are more eager to engage in other available opportunities for structured activities outside of school. Accordingly, more frequent teacher feedback at the class level may downgrade White students' interest in homework, as it may be viewed as preventing them from pursuing other, more appealing activities outside of school.

Although the percentage of the students who received free meals in the present study (37%) was close to the national average (32%; National Center for Education Statistics, 2007), the present study has several limitations. First, it was based on a cross-sectional survey, rather than repeated measures at different time points. Second, it relied on self-reported data and may be subject to social desirability bias (Duncan & McKeachie, 2005; Wentzel & Wigfield, 2007). The students may have wanted to present themselves in a more favorable light (e.g., under-reporting family help). Although it is difficult to determine the exact effects of self-reported data on the findings, some evidence suggests that social desirability bias is unlikely to be a major concern for the present study. For example, the percentage of eighth graders who reported that they received family help in the present study (75%) was close to that found in a nationally representative sample of eighth graders (71%) in the NELS: 88 (Horn & West, 1992). Another limitation relates to the issue of causation. Although much care was taken to control possible confounding variables, other predictor variables might have had an effect on homework interest had they been included (e.g., other community and school factors).

As the present study is the first to link homework interest to race and school location, future research is needed in other settings and over a greater grade span. In particular, longitudinal studies are needed to examine how children from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds rate homework interest over time (i.e., how their sense of homework interest evolves over time) and how their ratings may be influenced by a broad spectrum of variables such as those examined in the present study. In addition, there is a need to (a) link homework interest to major homework outcome variables (e.g., homework performance and academic achievement) in a longitudinal design, and (b) examine whether the linkage between homework interest and these homework outcome variables may be moderated by difference in racial difference and school location.

It would also be informative to conduct qualitative studies to better understand children's interest in homework across different racial groups as well as individual differences within different racial groups (e.g., multilevel antecedents and processes underlying variations in homework interest, and common interest-dependent variations across races or ethnicities). For example, interview methods could be used to ask children from different racial or ethnic groups in rural and urban settings about how they view and define homework

interest. Similarly, it would be important to better understand what factors, in their views, contribute to homework interest (e.g., the role of teacher feedback), how their views evolve over time, and under what circumstances. In addition, in light of the call for multidisciplinary perspectives in race and motivation research (Graham & Taylor, 2002), there is also a need to go beyond the individual-focused boundaries of the discipline in research on homework interest, as relevant constructs from anthropology (e.g., oppositional identity and cultural stereotypes), sociology (e.g., institutional and community-level barriers), and social psychology (e.g., self-esteem and social cognition) may mediate the relation between race and homework interest.

With respect to homework practices, it seems that several implications discussed in a previous study (Xu, 2008a) are equally relevant here. For example, given the finding that affective attitude plays a dominant role in predicting homework interest, it is important to help students plan their time spent on preferred activities and homework on a weekly basis, so that they will be less sidetracked by thoughts of competing activities while doing homework, thereby viewing homework in a relatively more favorable light.

As teachers' perceptions, expectations, and behaviors often interact with students' beliefs, behaviors, and work habits in ways that help to perpetuate the Black–White test score gap, Ferguson (2003) calls for responsive teaching and feedback that affect both test score levels and the achievement gap. Thus, the finding that Black students viewed homework as more interesting in classes with more frequent teacher feedback has important implications for reducing the Black–White achievement gap. In line with recent research reporting that participation in structured extracurricular activities is linked to greater school engagement among Black students, in particular (Dotterer, McHale, & Crouter, 2007), these findings suggest that Black students may benefit from more structured guidance and more frequent follow-up from their teachers regarding their homework assignments. This is particularly important, as (a) homework interest is positively associated with homework completion (Cooper et al., 1998; Xu, 2008a) and academic achievement (Cooper et al., 1998), and as (b) teachers' beliefs and practices are likely to affect Black students more than White students (Ferguson, 2003). Meanwhile, the finding that White students viewed homework as less interesting in classes with more frequent teacher feedback suggests that White students may benefit from more individualized homework feedback, as results from the present study revealed that homework interest was positively related to teacher feedback at the student level for both White and Black students.

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Engaging Parents of Eighth Grade Students in Parent–Teacher Bidirectional Communication

Waveline Bennett-Conroy

Abstract

This article describes the development and evaluation of a classroom-based, low-cost intervention to increase parents' involvement in their children's education. In Phase 1 of the study, 17 parents of 8th grade students in a low-income, high immigrant and minority school district were interviewed to conduct a qualitative assessment of factors related to at-home and at-school parent involvement and to assess the feasibility and acceptability of the planned intervention. In Phase 2 of the study, 192 students in nine 8th grade English classes were given weekly homework for seven weeks that required parent–child interaction to complete the assignment. Three of these classes were randomly selected to receive teacher outreach to initiate parent–teacher bidirectional communication with students' parents. The main hypothesis was that teachers would have bidirectional conversations of at least five minutes duration with a greater proportion of intervention class parents than with control class parents. Additional hypotheses were that intervention class students would submit more homework assignments and have higher homework grades than control class students. These hypotheses were confirmed by chi-square analysis, $p < .001$. The study demonstrated that a low-cost intervention to improve parent involvement at home and at school among 8th grade students' parents is feasible, acceptable to all stakeholders, and effective.

Key Words: parent involvement, middle school, junior high, teachers, communication, interactive homework, role construction, self-efficacy, classroom, minority, immigrant, outreach, families, engagement

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to develop and evaluate a low-cost intervention to promote effective parent involvement among parents of 8th grade students in a low-resource, high immigrant and minority population school district. Many studies and reviews of the literature report that increased parent involvement is associated with improved student achievement (Epstein et al., 2009; Gutman & Midgley, 2000; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Jeynes, 2005; Simons-Morton & Crump, 2003). A study by Parcel and Dufur (2001) of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth found that parent–teacher communication was positively associated with increased reading scores among children in Grades 1–8. These studies argue that there is a preponderance of evidence showing that increased parent involvement will result in improved student achievement. A second position agrees that there is a correlation, but argues that the hypothesis that parent involvement causally promotes student achievement has not been adequately supported by rigorous quantitative research (Agronick, Clark, O'Donnell, & Stueve, 2009; Fan & Chen, 2001; Mattingly, Prislin, McKenzie, Rodriguez, & Kayzar, 2002). However, the debate over whether the relationship between increased parent involvement and student achievement is causal or merely correlational is a moot point for educators of underachieving students if it is not possible to bring about an increase in parent involvement. Figure 1 illustrates the pathway by which programs to increase parent involvement are thought to improve student achievement.
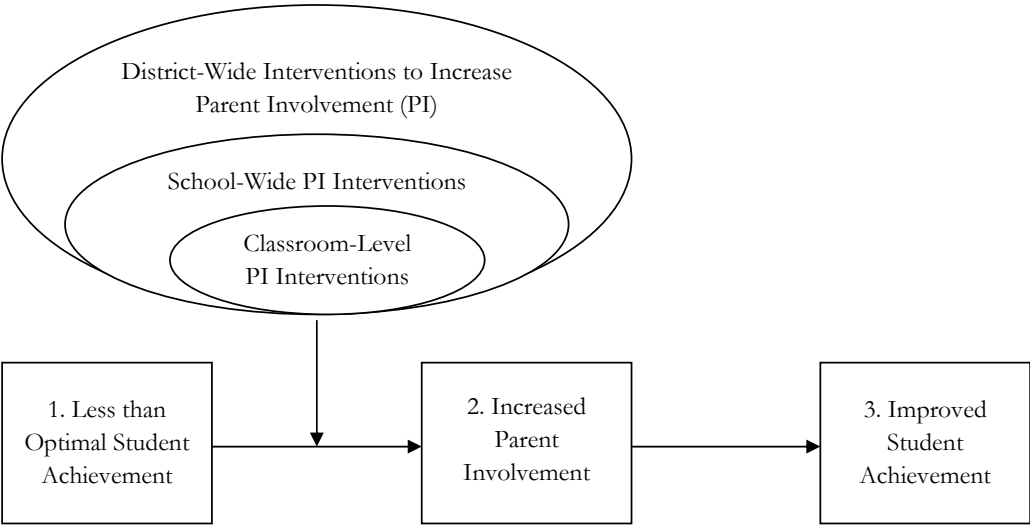
Figure 1. Interventions to Increase Parent Involvement and Improve Student Achievement

The experimental design study presented in this article primarily addresses the relationship between 1 and 2 in Figure 1, not the more widely researched and debated relationship between 2 and 3. The primary aim was to examine the effect of a classroom-level intervention on one type of parent involvement, and the secondary aim was to evaluate the intervention's effect on homework submissions as a limited measure of improved student achievement. Although strategies for increasing parent involvement have been published (Henderson et al., 2007; Epstein et al., 2009), there has been little quantitative evaluation of these approaches. In an overview of the parent involvement field, Agronick and colleagues (2009) stated, "There is little evidence that parent involvement strategies succeeded in increasing parent engagement" (p. 28); "Choices of what to implement to engage parents of students in middle school, and especially in high school, are limited by a lack of evidence of what works once students leave elementary school" (p. 23). Agronick et al.'s survey of nine school districts in four Northeastern states, including New York, found that parent involvement programs "did not necessarily target parent populations that have been difficult to engage or whose children may be at higher academic risk" (p. ii).

Parent involvement interventions may take place at district, school, or classroom levels. Parent involvement practice and the parent involvement literature have been strongly influenced by the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act (2002). NCLB and Title I legislation supported broad-based parent involvement initiatives and research, particularly at the district and school levels. This historical focus is understandable: district- and school-level interventions intend to reach the largest number of students and families, and a wide menu of parent involvement components will give parents choices, may engage more parents than any single strategy, and may permit matching specific parent involvement components with specific needs of students and parents. At this point in history, the dominant parent involvement paradigm is to provide a comprehensive range of interventions at a district or school level. The leading school- and district-level parent involvement programs recommend the simultaneous use of multiple parent involvement strategies such as special events, volunteer opportunities, parent education, parent centers, and dedicated outreach staff (Epstein et al., 2009; Henderson et al., 2007). However, these large scale interventions require expenditures of money and personnel time that may be beyond the capacities of low-resource districts. Second, the individual components of the larger scale interventions have not been quantitatively evaluated. As Agronick and colleagues (2009) point out: "Schoolwide multi-component programs require randomization of a relatively large number of schools to treatment or comparison conditions, a costly undertaking" (p. 29).

The study described in this paper evaluated a classroom-level intervention to promote parent–teacher communication. The NCLB (2002) definition of parent involvement prioritizes communication: "the participation of parents in regular, two-way, meaningful communication involving students' academic learning and other school activities…" (Part A, Section 9101[32]).

Prior Studies of Middle School Parent Involvement Interventions

There are two published comparison group quantitative assessments of classroom-level parent involvement interventions for middle school students. In both studies, Teachers Involve Parents in Schoolwork (TIPS) homework (Epstein et al., 2009) was the independent variable, and student and parent reports of at-home parent involvement was a dependent variable. TIPS are structured, two-page worksheets that guide students to work together with a family member to complete a curriculum-based homework assignment. TIPS assignments do not require reference materials or a high level of subject matter knowledge. Both studies found that the intervention increased parent involvement with homework assistance. Balli, Demo, and Wedman (1998) reported a study in which a single 6th grade math teacher distributed handouts containing TIPS assignments to 74 White, middle-class students that required students to interact with a family member. One group of students received TIPS handouts with no prompts to involve a family member, a second group received handouts with prompts to involve a family member, and a third group received handouts that included the prompts, requested family member comments on the assignment, and requested a parent signature on the assignment sheet. Findings indicated that the second group had more family involvement than the first, and the third group had more family involvement than the second. The students were given 20 TIPS assignments over a 3-month period and had a 100% homework submission rate.

Van Voorhis (2003) conducted an intervention that used TIPS weekly interactive science class homework assignments with 253 6th and 8th grade students. The study population was 53% White, 36% African American, and 11% other. Classes in this school were segregated by five levels of student ability: inclusion, low-ability, average, honors, and gifted. The lowest inclusion and highest gifted level classes were not included in the study. Three teachers each taught both TIPS and non-TIPS classes. Students received weekly TIPS assignments for 18 weeks and had a 74% homework submission rate. The study found improved family involvement in homework and student achievement among 6th and 8th grade students receiving TIPS assignments in comparison to 6th and 8th grade students who received equivalent assignments that did not request the participation of a family member. Neither study sought to obtain or

measure teacher–parent bidirectional communication as a parent involvement outcome variable.

Theoretical Explanations for Why Parents Are Involved

Using a psychological approach derived from Albert Bandura (1986, 1997), Hoover- Dempsey, Sandler, and colleagues (1995, 1997, 2005) argue that parent involvement is motivated by two belief systems: (a) how parents construct their role for parent involvement—defined as parents' beliefs concerning what they should do and how they should do it, and (b) parents' beliefs in how effective they can be in helping their children succeed in school—defined as their beliefs in their ability to produce the desired outcome. The model holds that both belief systems are socially constructed, and hence can be influenced by interventions to promote new beliefs about what parents should do, how they should do it, and how effective their efforts will be. In addition to role construction and self-efficacy, the model argues that parent involvement is also promoted by parent involvement invitations from the school, teachers, and the parent's child. The model might explain the positive effects of a TIPS intervention by pointing out that invitations by the teacher and child to assist with homework create an expectation that parent homework involvement is desirable and normative. Also, all parents are asked to assist with homework, TIPS provides guidance on how parents should assist with homework, and the successful completion of the interactive homework assignment gives parents a sense of confidence and mastery in being involved in promoting their child's educational achievement. Hoover-Dempsey and colleagues also argue that parent involvement is influenced by a component of self-efficacy—perceived life context—defined as parents' beliefs as to whether they have sufficient time and energy for parent involvement, parent awareness of involvement opportunities at the school, and parent skills and abilities sufficient to communicate with the teacher and with the child about schoolwork (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Walker, Wilkins, Dallaire, Sandler, & Hoover-Dempsey, 2005).

The Hoover-Dempsey model does not include a parent involvement variable that Mapp (2003) found to be crucial: the parent's perception that school staff are caring and can be trusted. Mapp conducted a qualitative study of a high-functioning Boston elementary school that included in-depth interviews with 18 involved parents. The parents Mapp interviewed said that they were involved at the school because they felt respected, they felt that the staff cared about their children, and they felt that they could trust the staff.

Existing models used to explain parent motivation for involvement have been developed with studies of parents who are already identified as involved in their children's education. Hoover-Dempsey and colleagues (2005) state:

…we have focused on parents who *are* involved, in whatever degree, in their children's education. Our broader interests, of course, include all parents, because parents are an integral, usually primary, part of the social context that influences their children's educational outcomes. In fact, we strongly suggest that the model itself offers strong support for theory- and research-based interventions designed to test approaches to encouraging parents who have not been involved in their children's education to become so. However, to learn more about our interest in parents' motivations for involvement and the mechanisms that might explain their influence on students, we began with parents who were involved. This limits the generalizability of our review findings. (p. 124)

Although a few qualitative studies have sought to interview parents identified by staff of their children's schools as uninvolved or ineffectively involved (Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Lawson, 2003), the findings of these studies do not seem to have been used to develop quantitatively evaluated interventions to promote parent involvement among these parents.

The parent involvement literature distinguishes between *at-home* and *at-school* parent involvement. At-home parent involvement includes discussing school activities, helping with homework, monitoring the use of out-of-school time, or taking children to community cultural events. At-school parent involvement includes contacts with school staff, volunteering at the school, or attending school events (Ho & Willms, 1996; Trusty, 1999). A number of studies report less at-school parent involvement among parents who have less education, lower income, minority status, or immigrant status (Kim, 2009; Shumow, Lyutykh, & Schmidt, 2011; Turney & Kao, 2009). The intervention reported in this paper was designed to promote the specific type of at-school involvement of parent–teacher bidirectional communication among all parents.

Method

Phase 1 Study Design and Hypotheses

Phase 1 of this study used the theoretical constructs of role construction, self-efficacy, invitations, perceptions of school staff as caring and trustworthy, at-home parent involvement, and at-school parent involvement to conduct semi-structured qualitative interviews with parents identified by school staff as not engaged in at-school parent involvement. The interview instrument's validity is guided by its use of six theoretical constructs identified in the parent involvement literature. All parents interviewed readily understood these six constructs as aspects of parent involvement in their day-to-day lives. (The interview protocol is available from the author upon request.)

The researcher is an administrator in a low-resource, low-income, minority school district in downstate New York that has had underachieving secondary schools for several decades. Based upon factors such as attendance at parent–teacher nights and at PTA meetings, the predominant perception among secondary school teachers and administrators is that the large majority of parents are not involved in their children's education. The purposes of the Phase 1 interviews were to understand current parent involvement attitudes and practices, identify barriers to parent involvement, and obtain information to plan and quantitatively evaluate a low-cost intervention that would engage parents as partners in promoting their children's academic achievement. Phase 1 hypotheses were that homework assignments requiring parents' assistance would be acceptable and feasible and that outreach by the teacher to have bidirectional communication with the parents would also be acceptable and feasible.

Phase 2 Study Design and Hypotheses

In Phase 2, the researcher worked with three 8th grade English teachers to plan TIPS homework assignments that would require that students in all classes and their parents work together to complete the assignment. TIPS assignments had not been used previously in this district. For students in one randomly selected class for each teacher, the TIPS assignments were a basis for a teacher outreach intervention to parents to cultivate phone conversations between teacher and parent on student academic achievement. Hypotheses tested were: (a) a greater proportion of parents of intervention class students will have had bidirectional communication with the teacher by the end of the seven-week intervention period than parents of control class students; (b) intervention class students will complete more TIPS homework assignments than control class students; and (c) intervention class students will have higher homework grades than control class students. This is a quasi-experimental design since the study is randomized at the group level and outcomes are compared between subjects. Phase 1 was conducted with parents of 8th grade students in the 2009–2010 academic year. Phase 2 was conducted with parents and 8th grade students in the 2010–2011 academic year.

Initiation of the Phase 2 intervention with the TIPS assignments and the teacher outreach was delayed until November 2010 so that a prior indicator measurement of parent involvement at school could be obtained. The school held three events during September and October to which parents were invited. The district Parent Liaison supervised parent sign-in at each event. At the end of the study in December, data from the sign-in sheets were used to complete a yes/no box on the class data entry sheets if the parent attended at least one event.

Definitions of Terms

This study used the following definitions:

Parent: Biological parent, guardian, other older relative, or substitute named by the parent to work with the student on the homework assignment.

Interactive homework assignment: TIPS is a parent involvement strategy that requires students and parents to work together to complete weekly homework assignments (Epstein et al., 2009). Assisting with homework is a specific type of at-home parent involvement. TIPS was chosen because it has been used to support parent involvement in a wide range of school and community settings. However, for the purpose of providing a basis for parent–teacher bidirectional communication, other types of parent–child interactive educational activities could be used.

Teacher outreach: Effort by the teacher using messages sent home with the child, messages sent by mail or email, or phone calls to request bidirectional communication with the parent.

Parent–teacher bidirectional communication: At least five minutes telephone or in-person conversation between the teacher and the parent. The conversational topics were the TIPS assignments and the child's overall progress in the class. For the purpose of this study, this definition does not include school- or teacher-initiated communications that primarily concern deficiencies in behavior or attendance. Parent–teacher bidirectional communication is a specific type of at-school parent involvement.

Low-cost: The teacher averaged less than 30 minutes per student during the entire intervention on outreach and bidirectional communication. For a class of 22 students, this is 11 hours or less spent on teacher outreach over a seven-week outreach period, or an average of less than two hours per week.

Data Collection

In March 2010, the larger of two middle schools in this district provided the researcher with a list of more than 300 parents of 8th graders who were not known by school teachers or counselors to have had at-school parent involvement in the current school year. The objective was to conduct face-to-face audiotaped interviews with 15 to 20 parents. Forty of these parents were randomly chosen to receive an Institutional Review Board-approved letter inviting them to participate in an interview on parent involvement. Parents who did not respond to the letter received a phone call inviting them to participate in the study. A $20 reimbursement was offered to each interview participant. In one case, the parent and family had moved out of the community at the time the letter was mailed. Of the 39 remaining parents, 21 were interviewed

by the researcher. Parents provided informed consent. With parent permission, each interview was audiotaped. Four interviews failed to record, but the responses of the parents in the four interviews that failed to record were not materially different from the responses in the recorded interviews. Data analysis was conducted using the 17 recorded interviews. The audiotapes were used to transcribe parent answers to demographic and other categorical questions, as well as significant comments. These abbreviated transcripts were reviewed to obtain summary demographic data, identify proportions of parents with specific answers, and identify common themes organized around the four parent motivation theoretical constructs.

For Phase 2 of the study, the researcher worked with the principal of the same middle school to engage three 8th grade English teachers to participate in the project. In the summer of 2010, the researcher worked with these English teachers to plan TIPS homework assignments to be administered during seven consecutive weeks in November and December 2010 (Van Voorhis & Epstein, 2002). In September, due to enrollment changes in the middle schools and teacher seniority policies, one of the three original teachers was transferred to the district's other middle school and was replaced by a different teacher who subsequently joined the project. The three teachers respectively taught four, three, and two 8th grade English classes. At the end of October 2010, each teacher had one class of students randomly chosen to receive the teacher-to-parent outreach intervention. Students in the teachers' other six classes did not receive the teacher-to-parent outreach intervention. All nine classes in the study received one TIPS homework assignment each week during November and December requiring that the student and a parent work together to complete the assignment. (Students in this study were informed that if a parent was not available, they could work on the TIPS assignments with after-school tutors, and a few did this.) Homework assignments were the same in all classes. Included with the first assignment was a cover letter explaining the purpose of the TIPS homework with a request that parents sign each submitted assignment. The cover letter for the intervention classes included the statement that the teacher intended to contact the parent or guardian to discuss the weekly assignments. Since the Phase 2 study was the evaluation of an educational classroom activity, it was granted an Institutional Review Board exemption from the requirement to obtain informed consent for research on human subjects.

For Phase 2 data collection, a data entry sheet was prepared for each study class that included student name, student gender, student race/ethnicity, a code for the class teacher, a code for the specific class period, seven data entry cells to indicate the completion of each weekly TIPS assignment and grade, and a data entry cell indicating whether the teacher at any time had a conversation of five

minutes or more with the parent concerning student academic achievement. Each teacher was instructed to spend no more than an average of three hours per week in the outreach effort.

Teacher log sheet data on student/race ethnicity were compared to student registration records, which report the parent's statement about student race/ethnicity. In accordance with New York State policy, the parent's statement is the race/ethnicity of record, and this was used to correct teacher data for approximately 20 students. These corrections increased the proportion of Hispanic students. At the end of the intervention period, data were entered into a database with each subject assigned a unique numerical identifier. Three control group students and one intervention group student who transferred out of their English classes during the study period were deleted from the data set.

Analyses of possible significant differences between intervention and control group students in five-minute parent conversation with the teacher, homework submissions, and parent attendance at a parent night were conducted to report the Mantel-Haenszel chi-square result, p-value, and, where appropriate, phi coefficient. Homework assignment grades were assigned to one of three categories: not submitted (grade = 0), partial credit (grade = between 3 and 8 clustering about 5), or full credit (grade = 9 to 10). The analysis of student grade data reports the chi-square test result and p-value for linear trend in proportions for the homework grade outcomes of not submitted, partial credit, and full credit. In March 2011, the researcher conducted debriefing interviews with the English teachers to obtain their overall assessment of the effectiveness of the TIPS assignments and the parent outreach intervention.

Research Context

Both study phases were conducted at a middle school in a suburban community near New York City. The U.S. 2000 Census reported that 60% of the school district's 68,000 residents are African American, 29% are White, and 10% are Hispanic of any race. The district occupies only four square miles, and the community has historically had difficulty maintaining a tax base that is sufficient for its public services. Sixty-three percent of its housing units are renter occupied. The district's median household income of $49,700 is about half the median household income for the suburban county in which the district is located. The district's secondary schools do not have a positive reputation in the community, and historically there has been a drop in district enrollment from 6th grade to 7th grade as parents transfer children to private schools. Recent audits by the New York State Department of Education identified numerous deficiencies in the district's secondary schools and resulted in mandated programs to remediate these deficiencies. This is a low-resource school district that has experienced repeated budget freezes and cuts.

Research Participants

The study was conducted at the larger of the district's two middle schools, with both schools having similar demographic profiles. Demographic data for 8th grade students at the study school are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Student Population Demographic Data

Characteristic	Study School
Total 8th grade enrollment	349
African American Non-Hispanic	249 (71%)
Hispanic	68 (20%)
White Non-Hispanic	27 (8%)
Asian or other	5 (1%)
Male	161 (46%)
Female	188 (54%)
Special Education	74 (21%)
English Language Learner	33 (9%)
Homeless	15 (4%)
Average Daily Attendance (9/13/10 – 10/6/10)	92%

School classes are not tracked by student ability. Special Education students are mainstreamed into regular classes with support. The majority of students are first- or second-generation African American or Hispanic immigrants, predominantly from Caribbean and Latin American nations. In the study school, 70% of 7th and 8th grade students receive free or reduced price lunch. Many students enter 9th grade in the district's high schools academically and socially unprepared for high school studies. In 2009–2010, the larger of the district's two high schools had 575 9th graders and retained 258 (45%). The smaller high school had 244 9th graders and retained 78 (32%). District 9th grade enrollments are higher than district 8th grade enrollments because of 9th grade retentions from the previous year.

Phase 1 Study Participants

Demographic data were collected regarding parent gender, age, race, number of children in the home, gender of child in the 8th grade, and years of residence in the community. Fifteen parents were African American, one was Hispanic, and one was White. Fourteen interviews were conducted with the student's mother, one with the grandmother, and two with both mother and father. Six of the 8th grade children were female, and 11 were male. No family had more than three children in the home, and the mean length of community residency was 19.4 years.

Phase 2 Study Participants

A total of 192 students participated in the Phase 2 study. Table 2 presents student population demographic data for gender and race/ethnicity.

Table 2. Parent Intervention Project Student Demographic Data

Characteristic	Intervention	% Intervention	Control	% Control
Total Number Students	61		131	
Male	31	50.8%	38	29.0%
Female	30	49.2%	93	71.0%
African American Non-Hispanic	45	73.8%	89	67.9%
Hispanic	10	16.4%	32	24.4%
White Non-Hispanic	4	6.6%	9	6.9%
Asian	2	3.3%	1	0.8%

There were 61 students in the three intervention classes and 131 students in the six control group classes. The intervention group was evenly divided by gender, but the control group was majority female. The control and intervention groups were similar in race/ethnicity.

At the conclusion of the study, data on parent attendance at parent night events in September and October (before the intervention occurred) were analyzed to compare intervention class and control class parents. These data are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Parent Night Attendance

Group	Attended a Parent Night (%)	Did Not Attend a Parent Night (%)	Total
Intervention	23 (37.7%)	38 (62.3%)	61
Control	41 (31.3%)	90 (68.7%)	131
Total	64 (33.3%)	128 (66.7%)	192

The difference in proportions in parent night attendance early in the school year for intervention class parents and control group parents (37.7% vs. 31.3%) was not significant (Mantel-Haenszel chi-square result = 0.76 (df = 1), $p = 0.38$). The two groups of parents did not differ on the independently measured parent involvement variable of attendance at a school parent night.

Results

Phase 1 Data Analysis and Findings

Phase 1 of the study involved interviewing 17 parents to assess parent attitudes and practices toward at-home parent involvement and at-school parent

involvement, assessing the extent to which six theoretical constructs in the parent involvement literature were present among these parents, and using these data to help plan the Phase 2 intervention. Phase 1 hypotheses were that homework assignments that required parental assistance would be acceptable and feasible and that outreach by the teacher to have bidirectional communication with the parents would be acceptable and feasible. These hypotheses were confirmed. All parents reported a willingness to have telephone conversations with the teacher. A majority of parents reported regularly or occasionally helping with homework. Several of those who did not help with homework expressed frustration that their child did not bring any home, either because the child managed to complete homework at school, or because (it was suspected) the child did not complete homework assignments.

An unexpected finding was a dramatic difference between perceptions of school staff and of parents regarding parent involvement. School staff were asked to provide the researcher with a list of parents who were not known to have had at-school involvement in the previous year. Parents interviewed were randomly chosen from this list. However, nearly all parents interviewed reported some form of at-school involvement, and in most cases discussed specific episodes and the general character of their at-school involvement in some detail. The phenomenon of school staff underestimating parent involvement is mentioned frequently in the parent involvement literature (Jackson & Remillard, 2005; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Lawson, 2003). In many cases, apparently, the school's teachers, principal, and guidance counselors did not recognize or remember their contact with the parent.

Interview Themes

This section discusses the four parent motivation theoretical constructs as they emerged during the interviews.

Role Construction. All parents interviewed regarded involvement in their child's education as something that they should do and that all parents should do. Several parents said that the child needs to see evidence of parent involvement to believe that the parent cares about school achievement. The majority of parents had participated in some form of at-school parent involvement. Three-fourths reported talking to a teacher in the past year by phone or in person, and three-fourths reported attendance at some at-school event in the past year. The majority of parents described some form of at-home parent involvement. Two-thirds reported working with their child on homework in the past year. One-third included (as education at home) advising their child on attitude and behavior toward teachers and other students; one-third reported encouraging education by providing rewards for doing well in school; two said that participation in church and church-sponsored activities were educational

experiences; and one told her child to put school before games and took her child to "free stuff" in the community such as the library or the park. Two parents mentioned the adolescent need for increased autonomy as a reason why their at-home involvement was less than when the children were younger.

One parent volunteered that as part of her educational involvement she told her son that "For him to be a Black man he has to be ten steps ahead of everyone else." This is an example of a parent involvement role construction described by Sanders (1997) who interviewed 28 African American 8th graders and found:

> …many African Americans possess an achievement ethos that demands commitment to excellence for both individual and collective mobility… which allows African American students to respond to racial discrimination in ways that are conducive rather than detrimental to academic success. (p. 85)

Self-Efficacy. In terms of parental self-efficacy for homework, eight parents reported that they had difficulty with some subjects, including one who had another adult in the home help with math. Six reported other problems related to homework, such as a child with poor grades never bringing home any homework or the child's inability to bring reference books home. In terms of self-efficacy for at-school parent involvement, a majority said that they were comfortable asking teachers and staff questions. Parents with limited or no involvement at school cited factors such as not being able to drive, lack of proximity to the school, difficulty in attending events between 4 p.m. and 8 p.m., having two jobs, notices about events that arrive after the event has occurred, and involvement at a sibling's school. Eleven parents said that they were pressed for time to be involved, although they still made the effort to be involved. Eight parents emphasized that more parent–teacher communication was needed and that it should be as early as possible if there are problems with the student's work or behavior.

Invitations. Approximately half the parents reported receiving invitations for involvement or attendance at an event from the school, from a teacher, or from the child. There did not seem to be a consistent pattern of invitations from the children or from the teachers. Parents stated that some teachers issue written or verbal invitations, and other teachers do not. A few parents indicated that they were only contacted by a teacher when the child had a behavior problem. Although all parents should receive invitations to events from the school, a number of parents said that they did not recall receiving school invitations. Either these invitations were not received by the parents, or the parents did not remember them.

Care, Respect, Trust. More than half the parents interviewed indicated that school staff were adequate or better in caring for children, being trustworthy in terms of providing a safe and effective educational environment, and in respecting parents and listening to parents. Some parents spoke of appreciating a teacher who had an understanding of their child as an individual. One-third said that some teachers and staff just go through the motions to collect the paycheck. "Some care, and some don't" was a common refrain. Several said that some teachers and staff were lacking in respect for parents and in a willingness to listen to parents and to students. Several stated that in their personal experience, they had received respect and a willingness to listen, but indicated that this may not be true of all parents. One-third of the parents were very critical. The critical parents often said that school staff did not promptly identify and respond to children's problems. Three parents said that parent involvement is necessary because the school cannot be relied upon to do things right. Two parents said that school staff are consistently negative about their child.

Phase 1 Preliminary Conclusions

Certain conclusions were drawn for the purpose of guiding the implementation of the intervention used in Phase 2. The teachers were informed that the two main hypotheses of Phase 1 were confirmed so that they would conduct the intervention with enthusiasm and confidence. Parents wanted the opportunity to assist with homework, particularly if the assignments could be given out with sufficient completion time so that the parents could fit in the homework help session at their convenience. The intervention asked that teachers move out of their comfort zone—they were asked to be active rather than passive in engaging parents in bidirectional communication. The finding that all parents wanted this contact was reported to the teachers to help overcome any reluctance. The teachers were told that parents appreciated a teacher who could discuss their child as an individual. The teachers were also told that some parents stated that some teachers were unwilling to listen to parents, so two-way conversations were encouraged. Hoover-Dempsey and colleagues (2002) hypothesized that teachers would be more effective at increasing parent involvement if they had positive beliefs about the efficacy of specific parent involvement strategies. TIPS was presented as an effective strategy for increasing the at-home parent involvement of helping with homework. Although Hoover-Dempsey and colleagues do not discuss a concept of "parent invitation to the teacher" (as opposed to child, teacher, or school invitation to the parent), the Phase 1 study was used to create a sense that parents were inviting outreach from teachers for bidirectional communication.

Phase 2 Data Analysis and Findings

The main hypothesis tested was that (a) the teacher would have a bidirectional conversation of at least five minutes duration with a greater proportion of intervention class parents than with control class parents. Additional hypotheses tested were that (b) intervention class students would submit a greater proportion of their homework assignments, and (c) intervention class students would have higher grades on the homework assignments. Table 4 presents the data for the main hypothesis that the teacher would have a bidirectional conversation of at least five minutes with a greater proportion of intervention class parents than with control class parents.

Table 4. Parent–Teacher Bidirectional Communication

Group	Teacher 5-Minute Conversation with Parent (%)	No Teacher 5-Minute Conversation with Parent (%)	Total
Intervention	55 (90.2%)	6 (9.8%)	61
Control	33 (25.2%)	98 (74.8%)	131
Total	88 (45.8%)	104 (54.2%)	192

The main hypothesis was confirmed: The difference between the proportions of intervention class parents and control class parents (90.2% vs. 25.2%) who had bidirectional conversations with the teacher was significant (Mantel-Haenszel chi-square result = 70.40 (df = 1), $p < .001$, phi coefficient = .607). Table 5 presents the data for the second hypothesis: Intervention class students would submit a greater proportion of their homework assignments.

Table 5. Homework Assignment Submissions

Group	HW Assignment Submitted (%)	HW Assignment Not Submitted (%)	Total
Intervention	272 (63.7%)	155 (36.3%)	427
Control	410 (44.7%)	507 (55.3%)	917
Total	682 (50.7%)	662 (49.3%)	1,344

The second hypothesis was confirmed: The difference between the proportions of homework assignments submitted by intervention class students and by control class students (63.7% vs. 44.7%) was significant (Mantel-Haenszel chi-square result = 42.0 (df = 1), $p < .001$, phi coefficient = .177). Table 6 presents the data for the third hypothesis: Intervention class students would have higher grades on their homework assignments.

Table 6. Homework Assignment Grades

Group	Not Submitted (%)	Partial Credit (%)	Full Credit (%)	Total
All Intervention	155 (36.3%)	88 (20.6%)	184 (43.1%)	427
All Control	507 (55.3%)	93 (10.1%)	317 (34.6%)	917
Male Intervention	99 (45.6%)	53 (24.4%)	65 (30.0%)	217
Male Control	165 (62.3%)	39 (14.7%)	61 (23.0%)	265
Female Intervention	56 (26.7%)	35 (16.7%)	119 (56.7%)	210
Female Control	342 (52.5%)	53 (8.1%)	257 (39.4%)	652

The third hypothesis was confirmed: Intervention class students had higher homework grades than control class students (chi-square test for linear trend in proportions = 62.96 (df = 2), $p < .001$). The chi-square test for linear trend in proportions was also conducted for both male students and female students. Male intervention students had higher grades than male control students (chi-square = 9.10 (df = 2), $p = .003$), and female intervention students had higher grades than female control students (chi-square = 32.75 (df = 2), $p < .001$).

Discussion

Phase 1 Findings

Many students at this middle school are perceived by school staff as having uninvolved parents, as evidenced by the staff-generated list of 300 parents perceived as uninvolved in a school with 349 8th grade students. Phase 1 of the study suggested that the parents of many of these students are involved both at home and at school. Although it is possible that some or all of the 18 parents who did not respond to the request for interviews are truly uninvolved, the parents who were interviewed all take active steps to assist their children's educational progress. All parents interviewed had a positive role construction for parent involvement. Although Hoover-Dempsey and colleagues (2005) suggest that some parents may need education on parent involvement role construction, the experience of this study suggested that role construction education may be desirable for school staff. One of the three teachers initially needed to be encouraged to initiate bidirectional communication with parents. Existing role construction for many school staff members includes the belief, "Our role is to send letters inviting parents to events. If the parents respond, we will provide bidirectional communication." This is a role construction that leads to a low level of perceived at-school parent involvement. Of the parents interviewed in Phase 1 who reported positive bidirectional communication with their children's teachers, the communication was nearly always initiated by the

parent. The interviews indicated that parents welcomed teacher-initiated conversations concerning students' academics.

Parents in Phase 1 often described their parent involvement self-efficacy as being constrained by a range of inhibiting factors: difficulty with subject matter in assisting with homework, children not bringing homework to the home, lack of reference materials, transportation or scheduling conflicts for attendance at school events, poor information about school–parent events, poorly organized school–parent events, lack of time and energy due to other responsibilities, and lack of timely information about student problems at school that need a parental response. The Phase 2 intervention showed that, for many parents, these barriers to parent involvement may be overcome by interactive assignments which do not require reference materials or a high level of subject matter knowledge and by teacher initiated phone calls that take place when a parent has available time. School personnel can be more effective at responding to parental needs for parent involvement self-efficacy.

The study was conducted in a school district with a history of distrust by many parents and community members. One-third of Phase 1 parents were highly critical of the school, and a number of the other parents volunteered that they knew parents who had had "bad experiences." A purpose of the Mapp study (2003) was to identify best parent involvement practices in a high functioning elementary school that served a minority, low-income population. Her conclusion was that despite the school's many parent involvement activities, the strongest factor promoting parent involvement was the parents' perceptions of the school staff as caring, respectful, and trustworthy. Although the limited size and scope of this study prevented pre- and post-measurement of parent and school staff attitudes, a goal was to design an intervention that would promote more positive attitudes between parents and school staff. The TIPS assignments and the teacher–parent dialogues were intended to provide the parent with a constructive experience with the school and to provide teachers with positive experiences with the parents.

Phase 2 Findings

The intervention had a positive effect on promoting parent–teacher bidirectional communication, student homework submissions, and student homework grades. Phase 2 confirmed the Phase 1 statement by parents that they would welcome greater communication with their child's teacher.

Homework submission rates were 63.7% for all TIPS assignments among intervention class students and 44.7% for all TIPS assignments among control class students. (Nearly 85% of all students submitted at least one of the seven TIPS assignments.) These rates are much less than what one would hope, although they are not unusual for homework assignments at this grade level in

this district. This study was about the evaluation of an intervention to promote parent–teacher bidirectional communication and used TIPS as a means to achieve this goal. However, if the intervention were to be used as a regular practice, it would be desirable to identify ways to increase homework submissions. A possible factor for the low overall rates is that some students apparently do little or no homework for any classes. Altering this ingrained behavior may require a special intervention. The initiation of the intervention was delayed so that the independent measure of at-school parent involvement of parent attendance at parent nights could be obtained. Teachers stated that they would have liked to have started TIPS at the beginning of the school term, and perhaps that change would improve the homework submission rate.

Teachers were not able to engage 10% of intervention group parents in conversations. Some of these cases involved recent changes in phone numbers or parents not having access to a phone on the job. In the district in which the study presented in this paper was conducted, there is a small but significant percentage of parents, typically immigrants, and often the single parent in the family, who may work 60, 80, or more hours a week at one, two, or three low-wage jobs. Some parents are home health aides who may work five continuous days as live-in attendants at their employers' homes and then return to their own homes. Teachers reported that parents who work long hours were among the more difficult to engage in this study's Phase 2 intervention. They may also be more difficult for the student to engage in homework help.

Parents with multiple or extended hour low-wage jobs are largely missing from the parent involvement literature. For example, a widely cited study by Muller (1995) used data concerning 8th grade students from the 1988 National Educational Longitudinal Study to find that mothers employed part-time, as compared to mothers not employed or employed full-time, tended to be in families with higher family incomes, greater parental education, greater percentage of two-parent families, greater maternal involvement in their children's education, and children with higher 8th grade mathematics test scores. The survey had three categories for maternal employment status: 35 or more hours per week, part-time, or not employed outside the home. It did not have a separate category to capture parents who work very long hours. A qualitative study by Ji and Koblinsky (2009) interviewed 29 Chinese American recent immigrant parents in Washington, DC, who primarily worked in restaurants and hotels. The majority of study participants worked six days a week for more than eight hours a day, and had low family income even though both parents worked in 25 of the 29 families. Forty-one percent reported spending less than one hour per day with their children, and 69% stated that demanding work schedules were barriers to greater involvement in their children's education.

Phase 2 had a number of unanticipated results according to teacher comments after the study was completed. Many intervention group parents had multiple or lengthy conversations with the teacher and continued to have conversations after the seven-week study period ended. The teachers continued to use TIPS assignments after the study period ended. Teachers reported that "parents we had never seen before" attended parent night events at the beginning of the spring term in early 2011, and the parents and teachers were able to match faces with voices. Some parents in the control group or parents of students in other grades heard about the phone calls and asked school administrators why they had not received the calls. A response that might be anticipated, but was nonetheless gratifying, was that at the beginning of the intervention all teachers remarked, "I'm talking to parents I never talked to before." An additional unanticipated finding of the teachers' conversations is that a number of parents described arranging for someone else to work with their child on the TIPS assignment because of their own limited reading abilities. Some parents interviewed in Phase 1 mentioned lack of subject matter knowledge as a barrier to helping with homework, but the barrier of parent literacy level did not emerge until the Phase 2 parent–teacher conversations.

Limitations of the Study

Phase 1 Study Limitations

School staff were asked to provide a list of parents who were not known to have had at-school involvement in the previous year. However, nearly all parents interviewed reported some form of at-school involvement and in most cases discussed their involvement in some detail. The inaccurate identification of uninvolved parents affected the study's ability to identify and interview truly uninvolved parents. It is possible that the sample of 21 was not representative and that the remaining 18 parents included parents who were truly uninvolved.

Of 17 parents with recorded interviews, 11 had male children who were 8th graders and 6 had female 8th graders, which raises the possibility that the interviews are more reflective of parent involvement with male children than with female children. However, interview data showed that parents of children of both genders raised similar concerns. None of the families interviewed reported more than three children in the home. It is possible that parents with a greater number of children had greater difficulty participating in the interviews. The mean length of parent residency in the community was 19.4 years among parents who were interviewed, with the four newest families having three, five, six, and nine years residence in the community. The study intended to capture a representative range of parents, but did not interview parents

who were new to the community. It is possible that longer-term community residents are more comfortable with at-school parent involvement, such as participation in Phase 1 of the study.

The interviews were conducted by the researcher, who is a well-known senior administrator in the district office. This may have affected the interviewees' responses, although estimating the effect is not straightforward. Some possible biases are toward positive interview content. Some parents may have given positive answers in the attempt to please the interviewer or to avoid conflict. Other factors may have biased the interview toward negative content. Some parents used the interview as an opportunity to express specific grievances or make requests for assistance with specific problems. The opportunity to do so may have had an effect on encouraging parents with these concerns to participate in the study.

Phase 2 Study Limitations

Teachers entered data on their own performance in terms of conversing with the parent for at least five minutes on the TIPS assignments and student academic progress. Self-reports are subject to bias. It would have been a stronger study to have recorded the conversations and had an independent rater measure the length and assess the content. Attendance at parent–teacher nights is a limited measure of prior parent at-school involvement, as it does not include activities such as attendance at a sports event. An additional limitation is that although the English teachers were instructed to record any in-person or phone contact with students' parents, the study did not seek to measure parent contacts during the study period with teachers of other subjects.

A Phase 2 limitation is that the intervention was conducted for a seven-week period. Other studies of TIPS administered the assignments over a longer period of time and found modest improvements in student achievement as measured by student grades or raters' assessments of writing samples (Van Voorhis, 2003; Epstein, Simon, & Salinas, 1997). This was not attempted in the present study because the intervention to achieve bidirectional communication was short in duration and would be unlikely to produce a measurable improvement in marking period grades or test scores. An evaluation of this intervention over a longer period of time could measure changes in student achievement and also measure student behavior to see if increased parent involvement is associated with improved student behavior. Researchers may also wish to evaluate variations on the grade level and subject matter and whether this type of intervention on a larger scale would improve school organizational climate in terms of teacher–parent perceptions of each other.

Conclusion

A low-cost intervention in a low-income, high-minority school district to increase middle school parent involvement at home and at school is feasible, acceptable, and effective. Most parents have a parent involvement role construction, but schools can assist in overcoming limitations related to self-efficacy, invitations, and perceived lack of respect, care, and trustworthiness. School staff often underestimate the willingness of parents to be involved and are likely to find a much greater response than they might anticipate by initiating outreach for parent–teacher bidirectional communication.

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Through a Limiting Lens: Comparing Student, Parent, and Teacher Perspectives of African American Boys' Support for School

Amy E. Hilgendorf

Abstract

Three qualitative case studies of elementary school African American boys demonstrate differing perspectives of the school-related support that students experience. Three boys, their teachers, and their parents/guardians identified various individuals as supportive in the boys' schooling. These individuals included co-residential family members, other family, and unrelated significant adults. Interviewees reported various forms of support, including encouraging talk, instrumental help, and non-school activities that serve to develop positive personal qualities. However, the cases suggest that individuals can frequently differ in their recognition of school-related support, dependent upon the lenses through which they view it. In particular, limited notions of "family" and involvement can constrain the support that school staff identifies. These findings have significant implications for schools' promotion of school-related support and for home–school relations.

Key Words: African American boys, Black male students, elementary schools, parents, teachers, perspectives, supports, relatives, family, case study, education, involvement, engagement, home–school relationships, youth development

Introduction

> "All perceiving is also thinking, all reasoning is also intuition, all observation is also invention." —Rudolf Arnheim

Research in recent years has demonstrated that the involvement of parents and family in the educational process holds some promise in closing persistent achievement gaps (Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Jeynes, 2003, 2007; Muller, 1995). However, there is still much to learn about the nature and diversity of school-related support that students experience from their families. Studies have generally defined and operationalized "involvement" from the perspective of the schools and have focused involvement efforts on meeting the needs of school staff (e.g., insuring homework completion; Graue & Oen, 2009). To date, research still explains little about how families, and low-income and racial-ethnic minority families in particular, view the support they provide for their children's education and how this compares to institutionalized notions of parent involvement. Even less attention has been paid to how children perceive and experience school-related support that is provided outside of the school.

Without a broader understanding of the school-related support that children experience and that families provide, schools may be limited in their ability to encourage and enhance positive involvement. In this paper, I compare student, teacher, and parent perspectives of the school-related support three African American boys experience. Through these case studies I seek to provide insight into the variety of forms and sources of support that students experience and into how such support can be differently perceived by students, parents/guardians, and school staff. I draw implications from the data on the importance of the schools' perceptions to their capacity to promote positive involvement and to general family–school relations.

Parent Involvement

Widespread attention to research in parent involvement in schooling began over three decades ago, and studies have examined involvement in settings from early childhood (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1974; Castro, Bryan, Peisner-Feinberg, & Skinner, 2004) to higher education (e.g., Perna & Titus, 2005). Researchers have examined differences in parent involvement and its influence by socioeconomic status (Clark, 1983; Lareau, 1989) and race and ethnicity (e.g., Cooper, 2003; Jeynes, 2003, 2007; Lopez & Rodriguez, 1995) and have described various ways in which parents' involvement takes shape, both in home and school settings (e.g., Shumow & Miller, 2001). In a model frequently referenced in current research as well as in school policies and programs, Epstein (1995; Epstein et al., 2008) identified six forms of school-related involvement: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with the community. Some research has also noted how factors such as parents' perceptions of the school climate (McKay, Atkins, Hawkins, Brown,

& Lynn, 2003) and the practices of teachers and schools (Grolnick, Benjet, Kurowski, & Apostoleris, 1997; Kim, 2009) influence the nature and extent of parents' involvement.

An emphasis on parent involvement as students' foremost experience of school-related support, however, inherently limits our thinking of support, in regards to who provides it and the forms it takes. Extant studies of parent involvement have not fully addressed the increasing diversity of family composition in the United States. While some schools and researchers have acknowledged that grandparents raise many children (e.g., Balli, Demo, & Wedman, 1998), there remains a tendency to focus on individual households and heads of households (i.e., parents or guardians). Typically, schools have not engaged well with families who did not fit visions of the nuclear, "Standard North American Family" (Smith, 1993), and many children today are members of families that involve extended and social families or may be transgenerational and transresidential, especially among lower income and racial-ethnic minority groups (Scanzoni, 2001). Families that do not fit the structural models presumed by schools may not be effectively reached and engaged by schools in ways that could support their involvement with children.

Several have also argued that the institutional culture and practices of schools often reflect middle-class patterns of family life, particularly in their definitions of and expectations for parent involvement (Davies, 1993; Graue & Oen, 2009). Recent studies suggest that parents' views of involvement may differ in significant ways from that of school staff, especially among families that are non-white and/or not middle class. In a community-based research effort, Fogle and Jones (2006) found that low-income African American parents were concerned that school staff would misconstrue their lack of attendance in formal school activities as disinterest. By contrast, they felt they were very involved with their students at home, assisting with homework and setting and reinforcing high expectations. Reflecting alternative notions of parent involvement, Cooper (2003, 2007) found that African American mothers sometimes viewed school choice and direct opposition to the school in advocacy of their children as important aspects of support. Considering that schools are less likely to encourage the involvement of families they view as less supportive or cooperative (Graue, 2005; Grolnick et al., 1997), these studies suggest schools can miss important opportunities to tap into and enhance existing support.

Examining the various ways families support students is also valuable for the simple fact that educational researchers still are not certain of the forms of support that are most influential to student success. Meta-analyses by Jeynes (2003, 2007) and Fan and Chen (2001) have found a generally positive effect of parents' involvement in their children's schooling, but effect sizes varied

greatly when specific forms of involvement were considered (e.g., parental expectations) or with different measures of academic achievement (e.g., grades or standardized test scores). Jeynes (2005) even found negative associations between some forms of parent involvement and academic outcomes, such as frequent school contact or high levels of homework oversight. With increased understanding of the variety of ways students feel supported by their families and why, scholars may sort out these questions. Researchers and practitioners may learn of the importance of context, including student characteristics, family factors, and school and community influences. The field may also develop an increased understanding of the value students and families attach to particular supportive actions and of the complex motivations that drive involvement. With enhanced understanding of these forms of support and the value and motivations behind them, practitioners may better capitalize on the resources families offer to support students' success.

Theoretical Orientation

This study builds from a growing body of critical studies of parent involvement that examine processes implicit to home–school relations that advantage some families and disadvantage others (e.g., Brantlinger, 2003; de Carvalho, 2001; Delpit, 1995; Graue & Oen, 2009; Horvat, Weininger, & Lareau, 2003; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Trainor, 2008). Several of these scholars draw upon the theoretical works of Bourdieu (1986) to assert that the involvement of family members in school is influenced by much more than one's interest and motivation to be involved. The economic, social, and cultural capital that families variably have access to enables some families to engage with the school more often or more effectively than others (Brantlinger, 2003; Lareau & Horvat, 1999). Perhaps more importantly, the involvement that some families demonstrate may match more closely the involvement that schools expect than do others. Trainor (2008) argued that family involvement constitutes social and cultural capital of value dependent upon the determinations of the dominant group (i.e., school staff). As such, school staff mediates the power of families' capital in schools, accepting some forms of capital and rejecting others, and encouraging some behaviors and inhibiting others. From a critical standpoint, the perceptions of school staff of families and how they support their children can be an important mediating factor between families' efforts and their actual results. This theoretical perspective guided this investigation and influenced how I analyzed and interpreted the case studies.

Research Questions and Method

Qualitative case studies involve the use of multiple qualitative research tools to explore in-depth a case or cases of interest (Stake, 2005). While various qualitative methods and theoretical frameworks may be applied by the researcher, qualitative case studies typically involve triangulation of data, focus on experiential knowledge as well as contextual influences, and give attention to the activities within the case. A multiple or collective case study, like this one, examines a set of related cases to investigate a phenomenon, population, or condition of interest. Individual cases may be similar or dissimilar, and redundant or variable, but are chosen intentionally for the valuable insight the case is believed to offer to the set and to a yet larger collection of cases or theorizing. Nevertheless, the researcher paying close attention to the particularity of individual cases is essential to be able to understand how cases relate to the greater phenomenon; as such, the researcher gathers data on various aspects of the case, including data of the context and data from multiple informants.

The three cases discussed here are drawn from an ongoing effort to understand and connect the educational support networks of African American students to their schools in a small, urban school district in the Midwest. Within these efforts, our research team (myself and the lead investigator in the larger project) examined the content and structure of African American boys' social support networks to understand from whom, in what forms, and in which contexts they received school-related support. We have also examined associations between support network characteristics and academic and other school-related outcomes.

Like other critical qualitative researchers (Foley & Valenzuela, 2005), we sought to prioritize the voices of those who have been historically marginalized and "spoken for" to gain new insights from their personal sense-making of their experiences. As such, we interviewed the boys directly to develop ego-centered social support maps of the school-related support they recognized. In this protocol, we asked them to identify the actual support they experienced through response to an open-ended question, "Who helps you be a good student?" For each person identified, we followed up with the question, "What does this person do that helps you be a good student?" To gain more descriptive details, we then probed the student to recount in a narrative an experience when this individual helped him be a successful student (e.g., "Tell me about a time when this person helped you with school."). In analyzing these data, we found that the boys recognized various individuals and forms of school-related support (Lewis & Hilgendorf, 2009). They reported receiving support from adults and peers in their family and kinship networks, often spanning multiple

households and sometimes even cities. They reported receiving instrumental, informational, and emotional forms of support from these individuals, some that reflect traditional notions of parent involvement, but they also identified many other forms of support, such as being assigned chores to develop responsibility or "playing school" with a cousin to practice school-like scenarios.

The present case studies contribute to our knowledge of school-related support and parent involvement by examining how low-income African American boys, their parents/guardians, and teachers commonly and differently perceive support for school success. In these case studies, my purpose is to answer the research question: "How do African American boys, their families, and their teachers share and differ in their understanding of the school-related support the boys experience?"

To answer this question, the parents/guardians of African American boys in one elementary school were contacted to gain additional information regarding the families' perceptions of the boys' school-related support. By the time these case studies were initiated, I had spent a full school year at the school, conducting interviews with students and their teachers, observing school activities, and serving as a volunteer in the boys' classrooms as part of the larger research effort described above. Because we had previously secured consent for their children's participation in our research, many parents/guardians were already familiar with our work, and when attending school events I had additional opportunities to build rapport with families. With the assistance of the school principal, I contacted parents/guardians and invited them to participate in an interview. I invited them to include in the interview anyone else who would be knowledgeable of each boy's school experiences and his support. In one case discussed here, this led to a joint interview with a mother and great-grandmother who shared guardianship of the boy. For the other two cases, the parent for whom the school had provided contact information chose to complete the interview individually.

For this analysis, three cases were selected for their capacity to reflect the variety of sources and forms of school-related support the boys experienced and to reflect the patterns in which different people (students, parents/guardians, teachers) typically perceived that support.[1] The cases are representative of the range of family compositions boys experienced and of the range of supports identified. The three cases are also demonstrative of the varying degrees of agreement between students, parents/guardians, and teachers of a boy's support, from little to high agreement. Like the majority of the African American boys in the study, the three boys all lived in a low-income urban area, recounted both positive and negative experiences of school, and participated in various activities in and out of school.

Interviews with the boys, parents/guardians, and teachers were all semi-structured and allowed for participants to introduce views of school-related support not reflected in current research (Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999). The boys and the teachers were interviewed in a private location at the school, such as an empty classroom, during a time in the school day when it would not be disruptive to their learning or teaching. Parents/guardians were given the opportunity to choose the time and location of interviews to accommodate their preferences. Two parents chose to be interviewed in their own homes, and the mother and great-grandmother pair chose to be interviewed at the school. Interviews lasted from 40 minutes (for one of the boys) to 160 minutes (for one of the parents). To easily draw comparisons, parents/guardians and teachers were asked to respond to two central questions similar to those asked of the boys: "Who helps him be a good student?" and "What does this person do?" Likewise, they were probed to recount in a narrative style particular situations in which mentioned individuals offered the boy support. All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed, and detailed notes and descriptive memos provided opportunities for data triangulation and supported the analysis (Stake, 2005).

In these case studies, I analyzed the interview data with open coding in the NVIVO qualitative data analysis program (Bazeley & Richards, 2000), beginning with broad attention to *who* provided support and in *what* forms. These basic areas of attention soon led to codes of relational roles (e.g., immediate family, extended family, mentor/teacher) and locations (e.g., shared household, household nearby city, community institution), and general types of support (e.g., instrumental support with homework, emotional care). Such coding was useful as I examined general patterns in the identification of support across all respondents and between particular groups of respondents (e.g., parents/guardians vs. teachers) in role-ordered matrices (Miles & Huberman, 1994). To better compare perspectives within cases, I then used the coded data to craft ego-centered social support maps for each boy. By adding on information of the identified support of each respondent like a layer onto these maps, I could identify where identifications of support aligned and where they differed. As a White female of a middle-class background, I sought to redress possible biases and cultural misunderstandings in a number of careful ways (Merriam, 1998; Schensul et al., 1999). Throughout the research process I engaged in debriefing and analysis sessions with members of the multicultural research team and a peer group of qualitative researchers. I also reserved portions of the field journal for reflective questioning and exploration.

Data and Findings

The boys, parents/guardians, and teachers identified a number of individuals who provided the boys with various forms of school-related support. These individuals included the parents/guardians themselves, but also grandparents, siblings, staff of youth programs, and other adults, such as church members or family friends. They also identified a variety of forms of support, including encouraging talk, homework help, efforts to promote positive dispositions and habits (e.g., assigning chores), providing for basic needs, and serving as role models. Sometimes the boys, parents/guardians, and teachers agreed in their identification of school-related support, but often they did not. In general, teachers identified individuals with whom they had personal contact (e.g., the parent/guardian), and they discussed activities directly related to school objectives, like reviewing students' homework and report cards and responding to school communication. While the parents/guardians and boys also identified these forms of support, they equally identified activities that were not school-specific but were still seen as supportive, such as participating in sports in order to develop responsibility and teamwork.

While no participant group (boy–parent/guardian–teacher) entirely shared a perspective of the boy's support, in some cases the divergences were greater and with potentially greater implications. In one case, the participants generally shared a perspective of the support offered to the student, even though it may not have been a traditional perspective. The boy, his parent, and his teacher seemed to share a broader view of support, like a *wide-angle lens,* that could capture support within the immediate household and also beyond. In the other two cases, a narrower view of support, like a *normal lens,* seemed to exclude from view the support offered by individuals outside a traditional sense of "family," especially for the teachers. Data from these cases suggest such limited conceptions of support can have significant implications for students and for families' relations with the school. (Note: All personal names used are pseudonyms.)

Through a Wide-Angle Lens: James

James was in the fourth grade and lived with his mother and father and two older siblings. His family had lived in the community for multiple generations, and James often spent time with extended family members. James was a high achiever in class and often appeared to compete with other students to finish tasks the most quickly and correctly. He had many friends, and though he had not had disciplinary issues, he was known by school staff to occasionally "act up." James's mother, Catrina, participated in an interview for the study. James's

teacher, Ms. Jackson, participated in the research. Ms. Jackson was a middle-aged African American woman with children and a grandchild in other district schools. She grew up in a working-class family in a large urban area in the region. At the time of this study, she had taught at the school for 14 years.

James identified his mother, father, and two grandmothers as sources of support and spoke of how these individuals talked with him about school, providing encouragement and conveying their expectations, and helped him with homework when he needed it. About his mother, he said, "She go on the internet, like go on a webpage to help me….Stuff that was gonna be on the test."

His mother, Catrina, similarly recognized support provided by herself and her husband. She said,

> …my number one priority is his education. That's the first thing I ask him from the time he goes to school to the time he comes home. You know, homework, homework….And what he don't know, I'll help him sit down, if he say he don't understand it or may have problems, we sit down, and we figure it out.

She also spoke of many other forms of support they provided, such as building responsibility by assigning responsibilities in the home; discipline, rewards, and punishments; monitoring James's social life; and responding to his requests for support, as in when he asked her to "quiz" his math knowledge. Catrina also recognized support provided by adults in a local youth program, especially men who she believed served as good role models for James.

Ms. Jackson similarly identified support from various individuals within James's immediate family and beyond it. She seemed to partially base her perspective of support on personal contacts with the family. The teacher said she knew they supported him "because they ask me about how he's doing or what's going on at school, if I see them…inside school sometimes, maybe at the grocery store….I was just talking to his grandpa yesterday…at a basketball function." Ms. Jackson stated that her own son participated in this basketball program, so such interactions with James's family, including members of his extended family, happened on a fairly regular basis. She indicated that these encounters were primarily casual and friendly, but the topic of school and James's progress often was discussed as well.

Limits of a Normal Lens: Isaiah and Tyreese

As compared to James, the perspectives of the support of Isaiah and Tyreese diverged more significantly, sometimes to an extent that effectively omitted or even discredited the support identified by others. In both of their cases, information from the interviews indicated that these divergences had, or had the potential for, negative consequences.

Isaiah

Isaiah was in the fifth grade and lived with his father, his (step)mother[2] (whom he and Isaiah's father refer to as simply "mom"), two sisters, and a brother. Isaiah was known among the school staff for being well-behaved and a hard worker, but quiet. In small groups working with friends, he could be more vocal and would step up as a leader. Isaiah's father, Clarence, participated in the study. Isaiah's teacher, Ms. Warren, a young White woman in her first professional year of teaching, also participated in the research. She grew up in a middle-class family in a town less than 30 miles away, but she said she felt she was still getting to know the city and school community.

Isaiah identified his father, his (step)mother, the mother of two friends, and his brother as sources of school-related support. He spoke most of receiving support in the forms of conversations about school, advice and academic help, and monitoring of his school progress. He also identified as supportive the general care and concern his (step)mother and his friends' mother demonstrated for him and ways in which they taught him to be "caring, fair, and trustworthy." Isaiah also spoke at length of the life lessons his (step)mother offered him. He recounted how she shared with him a work experience and told of the lessons she hoped he would take from it:

> …like what did she do wrong, and she admitted that she did it. And she got a week off of work 'cause she told…her boss…the truth.…It told me to tell the truth and not blame other people.

Clarence also identified ways in which he supported Isaiah's school success. Clarence said he gave Isaiah frequent messages of encouragement—to persist and to work hard—insisting that Isaiah "can't fail" if he tried. Clarence said, "You know he's trying for APs [advanced proficient] every time he takes a test…and I'm going like, 'Yes! Yes! Keep that attitude, that's what I'd be happy for.'" He also said he made efforts to "push him to be independent," for example, by requiring that he wash the dishes he used. Clarence also reported supporting him by involving him in activities that he believed could promote positive personal qualities, like sports, and by securing academic assistance that he could not provide himself, like tutoring through the community center.

Although Clarence identified many ways he supported his son, he singled out his wife/Isaiah's (step)mother, Kendra, as the origin of much of the support Isaiah received. He described her as "very involved" at school and with the children at home. Further, he credited her for much of his own involvement:

> I do not call up there and say, "Hey, [you] need somebody for something?" But she do.…The only thing I do is show up. "You know you got to be at the parent conference tomorrow." "Okay, I'll be there."

Clarence also believed Kendra's school and community involvement made her "a big role model" for Isaiah and that the discipline she maintained promoted other positive qualities, like dealing with disappointment. He believed Isaiah's brother in high school also served as a role model to Isaiah by setting a standard for achievement and creating a positive sense of sibling rivalry.

Ms. Warren continuously identified Isaiah's father, Clarence, as his most significant source of support. While she felt that the family, including Isaiah's (step)mother and his older siblings, stressed the importance of education and made a point to come to school events together, she credited Clarence most for Isaiah's support. She said he maintained communication with the school, secured additional academic help for Isaiah, and was generally reliable and present at the school. She said that amongst the school staff "everyone knows dad." However, she felt Clarence could still do more to support Isaiah's schooling and expressed concern of an overemphasis on sports that she perceived, remarking that "I would rather have dad support education right now, rather than athletics."

Ms. Warren also spoke of two older siblings, a brother and a sister, who she believed helped Isaiah with homework and served as positive role models. However, of Isaiah's (step)mother, she said, "I have never met (her)," and in contrast to the breadth and significance of support that Isaiah and Clarence ascribed to Kendra, Ms. Warren could not specify how she might support Isaiah. Suggesting a particular notion of "the family" and family members' roles, Ms. Warren frequently qualified her references to Kendra as "not biological mom" and related this to a lack of support she saw. For example, Ms. Warren said, "All our after school events dad will be here, not mom. That's why I'm not sure if [she]'s biological mom." To Ms. Warren, it seemed, the role of stepparent would presume a lesser degree of interest and involvement in a student and his education.

These perceptions appeared to have consequences for how the school and the family interacted. Because of the strong support Ms. Warren recognized in Isaiah's father, she said she usually pursued contact with the family through him. The portrayal from Isaiah and Clarence of his (step)mother's support, however, suggested that the more efficient and effective way to communicate may have been through contact with Kendra.

Tyreese

Tyreese was also in Ms. Jackson's fourth-grade class and was good friends with James. Tyreese said he lived sometimes with his great-grandmother and grandparents in one house and at other times with his mother and younger sister in a house nearby. His father and his father's other family lived in another

state, and Tyreese said he saw him primarily in the summers. His family regularly attended a local church, and Tyreese said he saw school friends, family friends, and other acquaintances there. He was known to be energetic and well-liked by classmates and teachers. His mother, Tanya, and great-grandmother, Betty (who also raised Tanya), were interviewed together for the study.

Tyreese identified a broad network of people who provided him with school-related support, including his great-grandmother, his mother, staff members from the local Boys & Girls Club and from other youth programs, and his father, even though he lived several hours away. He also spoke of a variety of forms of support, like taking care of his basic needs, expressing high expectations for school, and establishing rewards and punishments. Tyreese spoke excitedly about a male staff member at a youth program and how he helped him with his homework, taught him sports skills, and offered encouragement and advice:

> He told me about tips, do not be scared or nothing…to "reach your dreams," and…"never, never give up what you're doing."…I never give up what I'm doing,…and "do what the teacher tell you," and he said that to me, too.

As one reason for identifying this staff member, Tyreese spoke of emotional closeness with him, saying, "I think he like my, my third dad, 'cause I like him very much." With his own father, even though he lived far away, Tyreese recalled receiving homework help over the phone, especially in math: "'Cause I call him, to see what is the problem, and he'll wait for five seconds, then bam! He got the answer. I don't know how he do that."

While Tanya, Betty, and Ms. Jackson all recognized the support provided by his mother and great-grandmother, they did not identify the support of the male staff member or of Tyreese's father. For Ms. Jackson, identification of support for any boy, for these three cases and others in the larger study, was limited to immediate or extended family, and thus excluded individuals such as this male staff member. Additionally, the physical location of individuals seemed to be an important criterion to Ms. Jackson in determining support, and more specifically, whether they shared the household or lived nearby and were readily accessible. Although she was not accurate in her knowledge of the particulars of Tyreese's living situation, her justification for the support she identified for him appeared to hinge on family members' locations and accessibility:

> Probably, his mom and his [great-]grandmother. He lives with his [great-]grandmother, he doesn't live with his mom, so, but his mom would help him if he needed help….I think he sees his mother on the weekend or at night, I don't know. But I know he sees her on a regular basis.

For a boy like James, whose immediate family shared his home and extended family lived nearby, such consideration of physical location adequately captured the support available to him. For a boy like Tyreese, however, this kind of lens would exclude the support of his father because he lived far away.

Tanya and Betty also identified other individuals as sources of support to Tyreese, such as friends of the family and church members, yet they seemed constrained by their personal observations and interactions. They spoke generally of youth programs as positive environments for Tyreese, yet seemed unaware of the specific relationships he had developed and the support he experienced from staff members. In fact, a lack of awareness of Tyreese's relationship with the male staff member may have contributed to a severance from his support. When I interviewed Tanya and Betty a few months after Tyreese's interview, they spoke about the youth program and their decision to withdraw Tyreese from it:

> But this program out here, that was how he got so far behind in lessons, they was just letting him get away with anything, so we had to pull him out of it…supposed to make sure that they get their lessons, and they wasn't doing it.

Removed from the program for academic concerns, Tyreese no longer had any contact with the male staff member he identified as "like my third dad." If Tanya and Betty—both of whom had expressed concern for the lack of male role models in Tyreese's life—had known of this significant relationship to Tyreese, another decision may have been made that could have maintained his contact with the man. In this case, the limiting aspect of the lens could be the singularity of it; the addition of another lens, obtained through direct conversation with the boy about his experiences, could broaden the scope of support identified and subsequently maintained.

Ms. Jackson, Tanya, and Betty did not mention Tyreese's father or the support he provided. In addition to his physical distance, the fact that he was away and not involved in Tyreese's daily care may have led Ms. Jackson to presume his limited involvement and/or interest in his son's schooling. Like Ms. Warren's apparent uncertainty around Isaiah's (step)mother and her biological or "not biological" status, Ms. Jackson's consideration of Tyreese's father may have centered around normalized notions of family and family members' roles.

Discussion

These case studies collectively suggest that when perspectives of a student's school-related support are shared, certain advantages may be leveraged, and when they are not, potentially negative consequences may result. When school

staff or family members recognize school-related support, they may be more likely to tap those sources to support a student in ongoing but perhaps also novel ways. For example, Ms. Warren, knowing already that Clarence took Isaiah to the a community center to get extra tutoring in math, later recommended that Clarence enroll him in the school's math support program.

Another advantage of shared perspectives of a student's support may relate to simple acknowledgement of those supporters' efforts. Acknowledging supporters may reinforce and strengthen their support by promoting feelings of appreciation and accomplishment (Patrikakou & Weissberg, 2000). Supportive individuals may also come to view the school more favorably, and mutual acknowledgement and appreciation may spur desires to work better across home and school to support students. In fact, Clarence spoke of a feeling of reciprocity with the school, saying, "They helped me, I'll help you. And as a matter of fact, I'll go a little bit farther, if I know you're willing to help me." Aligned and reciprocal support may strengthen the support provided from both home and school, with enhanced impacts for students.

Just as there may be certain advantages when perspectives of school-related support are shared, however, there may be particular disadvantages when they differ. Schools are less likely to tap into sources of support that they do not know exist. For example, Ms. Warren did not reach out to Kendra to support Isaiah's schooling, because she did not believe Kendra was supportive and/or interested as his "not biological mom." Furthermore, individuals who do not know of sources of support may inadvertently create hurdles to important support for students. In the example of Tyreese, this risk was clear, as he reported receiving significant amounts of encouragement and emotional care from the male staff member at his youth program, yet unaware of this relationship and the support the man provided, his mother and great-grandmother removed him from the program. For a boy with purportedly little positive male interaction, this decision may have had unfortunate consequences.

Another consequence of differing perspectives of school-related support may be an underappreciation or lack of recognition for support. In contrast to the positive reinforcement and positive home–school relations that may result from recognition of supporters, frustration, discouragement, and strained home–school relations may result from its absence. While Isaiah's (step)mother was reported by both Clarence and Isaiah to provide various and extensive forms of support—and Clarence asserted that her efforts far outweighed his own—Ms. Warren did not believe she was much involved and heralded Clarence's support instead. Though beyond the scope of this study, it is interesting to consider how Isaiah's (step)mother may have reacted to Ms. Warren's statements. For many parents/guardians, such a misperception would likely result in

frustration, disappointment, or a strained relationship (Baker, 1997). Existing research demonstrates that parents, and parents of color and lower socioeconomic status in particular, often worry that schools misconstrue their lack of presence in the school as an indicator of disinterest and noninvolvement (Delpit, 1995; Fogle & Jones, 2006; Lareau, 1989). These studies further suggest that parents/guardians may then seek to further limit their level of interaction with school staff. Such a dynamic may weaken individuals' efforts to provide support due to feelings of frustration or incompetence and threaten any motivation to cooperate with schools to provide support.

In the cases of Isaiah and Tyreese, the support provided by individuals outside of more traditional notions of the "family" seemed often to be viewed differently. Like a lens calibrated on a particular sense of "normal," teachers appeared to have blind spots to the school-related support of individuals outside a conventional family structure. For Isaiah, perspectives of the support of Kendra, a stepparent, diverged most; for Tyreese, the support of his father, a nonresidential parent, diverged significantly as well. Together, this suggests that status as a parent with less conventional relationships with children may considerably influence others' perceptions of that person's school involvement. Smith (1993) argues that how a family is judged to fit an ideology of the "Standard North American Family" can positively and negatively influence that family's interactions with societal institutions, including schools. Within this ideology, families who deviate from the paradigmatic composition of the family and the set of roles ascribed to family members are assumed to be less functional. As indicators of deviance from this normative family paradigm, stepparents, nonresidential parents, and other nonconventional relations may be assumed to engage with children's schooling in deviant, absent, or otherwise less functional ways. Past research has found that preservice educators do have lower expectations of the quality and quantity of the school involvement of such groups (Graue & Brown, 2003), and these cases suggest in-service teachers may carry over such thinking to their practice. Ms. Jackson's emphasis on the location of individuals, and thus their presumed accessibility or inaccessibility to the child, may suggest another indicator of a family's fit to this paradigm. Individuals further beyond a conventional notion of family but who still provided important forms of support, such as the male staff member for Tyreese, were even less often recognized and appreciated.

Clear differences were also apparent in the forms of support participants identified. Such differences suggest that students, families, and schools may have distinct conceptualizations of support, and so even when these individuals talk together about support, miscommunication is possible. Additionally, students, families, and schools may vary in their valuations of different forms

of support. For example, the teachers generally emphasized the roles of parents/ guardians in assisting students with homework and maintaining communication with the school, yet to the parents/guardians, these activities often took a backseat in their discussions to non-school-specific activities that they deemed important to the boys' school success, such as enacting rules and responsibilities in the home or involving the boys in extracurricular opportunities. Extant research of parent involvement has still to conclude the forms of involvement that have greater significance for students' school experiences, some stressing parents' volunteering and participation in at-school activities (e.g., Comer & Emmons, 2006), while others stress home-based behaviors, such as family talk about the school day, parental expectations about achievement, or even non-specific parental support and caring (e.g., Jeynes, 2003, 2007, 2010, 2011). Even if teachers are right to emphasize homework help and communication with the school for goals of academic achievement, focusing on such behaviors may have little impact on students and families if they do not see them as supportive or as important as their other supportive efforts (López, 2001).

While no participant in this study spoke explicitly of "race" or the families' African American background as a factor in school-related support or their determination of it, lenses of race-ethnicity and class may be highly influential in thinking about school-related support. This may especially be the case for school staff like Ms. Warren, whose racial-ethnic and class backgrounds differ from many of their students. Beliefs about race-ethnicity, along with socio-economic class, gender, and other social identities, can associate with teachers' beliefs about families and parent involvement and influence teachers' interpretations, valuation, or even justification of families' behaviors (Graue & Brown, 2003; Horvat et al., 2003). Indeed, in several studies, school staff have conveyed beliefs in the limited capacity and efficacy of racial-ethnic minority parents to contribute to their children's education (Davies, 1993; Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Jones, & Reed, 2002; Hughes, Gleason, & Zhang, 2005). Further, educators may assume that families of color, and especially those of lower incomes, do not have the time, money, interest, energy, or skills to contribute to the school's efforts, and thus believe they are doing these families favors by not seeking their involvement (Grolnick et al., 1997; Kim, 2009). School staff members' beliefs about families of different racial-ethnic and class backgrounds can have a powerful influence on the school-related support they recognize, assume, and promote.

Conclusion

From this in-depth examination of perspectives of African American boys' school-related support, there is reason to believe that support is not uniformly perceived by students, families, and schools alike. With research and practice that addresses the constraining effects of particular lenses of "family" and "parent involvement," researchers may come to better understand and utilize the variety of sources and forms of school-related support that students experience. With increased understanding of support as students and families define, experience, and value it, educators may marshal and further strengthen support to pursue goals that both schools and families highly value. Indeed, if educators and families can identify opportunities to collectively discuss support with students (e.g., through conferences, back to school nights, in-class writing activities), they may make relatively easy but significant steps towards better understanding and utilization of existing support. Additionally, increased understanding of the influences of notions of "family," the roles of family, and subtle associations between race-ethnicity and socioeconomic class in thinking about families may have significant implications for the preparation of teachers, such as concerted coursework around family variation and home–school relations. With increased understanding among teachers and researchers of the fruitful engagements of diverse families with their students, we may better enact home–school relationships that foster success for all families and students.

Endnotes

[1]While various members of the family could have provided valuable and interesting perspectives of the school-related support the boys experienced, I chose to target parents/guardians for two reasons: (1) As the primary and legal contacts of the school, parents/guardians could typically speak best of their students' and families' experiences with the school; and (2) as primary caregivers, parents/guardians were also positioned well to know of the boys' interactions with various individuals outside the school, to include family, friends, and community members.
[2]"(Step)mother" here is being used intentionally to convey the maternal relationship that Isaiah and Clarence perceive between she and Isaiah. Although she is not his biological mother, Isaiah and Clarence do not emphasize a different relationship.

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Constraints and Subsequent Limitations to Parental Involvement in Primary Schools in Abu Dhabi: Stakeholders' Perspectives

Rida Blaik Hourani, Patricia Stringer, and Fiona Baker

Abstract

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is developing its public schools by initiating reform agendas for school improvement. High on the list of reforms is the call to increase parental involvement in schools. For this reform to work successfully, it is important to identify and examine the constraints and subsequent limitations that exist. Seven primary Public Private Partnership schools (PPP) in Abu Dhabi were the focus of this qualitative case study. Participants were school stakeholders: school administrators, social workers, teachers, and parents. The findings will assist in developing continuing policies and practices which take these limitations into account and work to mitigate them. Recommendations are made based within the context of the findings.

Keywords: parental involvement, support structures, communication, social context, school reforms, parents, teachers, administrators, social workers, roles, education, stakeholders, gender, United Arab Emirates, Abu Dhabi

Introduction

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is a federation of seven emirates situated in the southeast of the Arabian Peninsula. Islam is the official religion, and Arabic is the official language. It has an infrastructure that is moderating its dependence on oil, so education reforms and systemic reorganization have

become a priority for desirable, sustainable development. According to His Highness Sheikh Mohammed Bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and the Chairman of the Abu Dhabi Educational Council, "the UAE has begun a journey of growth and modernization, as far as reforming the educational system" (ADEC, 2008, p. 1). This is recorded in law, for example, "Law No 8 (2008) reorganized the Abu Dhabi Education Council, so that it incorporates the three education zones including the city of Abu Dhabi, Al-Ain and the Western Region, and thus expanding the autonomy of the education system in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi" (ADEC, 2008, p. 1).

The Abu Dhabi Education Council (ADEC) is a nonfederal government authority charged with the task of developing education through curricular, pedagogical, and school leadership reforms (Kannan, 2008). As part of the reforms, the Public Private Partnership (PPP) initiative was piloted in 2006. The PPP program was launched by ADEC to improve standards in public (government) schools with the aid of private education providers.

According to ADEC statistics for the academic year 2009–2010, there are 116 PPP schools in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi; this includes the city of Abu Dhabi, the Western region, and Al-Ain. Among these 116 schools, 48 are in the city of Abu Dhabi. These 48 schools include 10 secondary schools (3 common schools, i.e., schools that are both primary and secondary existing as one school, see http://www.dubaifaqs.com/schools-ppp-abu-dhabi.php), 30 primary schools (3 common schools), and the remainder are kindergartens. The PPP schools in the UAE are segregated by gender. PPP primary schools for girls are managed by females; the majority of PPP male primary schools are managed by males, with some exceptions. Mixed male–female staffing and administration only occurs in a few male primary schools which have western females as PPP managers.

This study explores the constraints and subsequent limitations to parental involvement within primary PPP schools in Abu Dhabi during the early phase of implementation of the New School Model (NSM) in accordance with ADEC's Ten-Year Strategic Plan (ADEC, 2010). It is carried out by three expatriate education studies faculty members at an educational institution in Abu Dhabi. The researchers are from Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom, respectively. One member is bilingual and speaks fluent Arabic. All have worked in the field of education in Abu Dhabi for more than three years.

Literature Review

To meet the demands of government authorities, educators, parents, community groups, and students to improve schools, change is sought. In the UAE,

the reform agenda for improving schools is strongly voiced by researchers (Davies, 1999; Riel, 1999; Safran, 1997) and government officials alike. Dr. Al Khaili, the Director General of ADEC, notes, "we don't just want to improve our education system, our schools, and the performance of our students…we want to be ranked as one of the best education systems in the world" (ADEC, 2008, p. 1). In Abu Dhabi, this drive for school improvement resulted in the initiation of the "New School Model" by ADEC in 2010. This new model is proclaimed as "a new approach to teaching and learning…to improve student learning experiences and to raise academic outcomes of Abu Dhabi students to the internationally competitive level necessary to achieve the Abu Dhabi economic vision 2030" (ADEC, 2010). Among the many accompanying policies in support of the model, parent involvement in children's education is high on the agenda. Specific guidelines for building productive home–school relationships claim: "Parents play an essential role in their children's education. School staff and parents share responsibility for ensuring that parents are actively involved in their children's education" (ADEC, 2010, p. 35).

The literature review that follows draws from both western and nonwestern sources. It discusses the nature of parental involvement and identifies inherent constraints and subsequent limitations facing parental involvement in schools in a balance of both western and nonwestern studies. There is notably a paucity of literature which examines this notion of parental involvement in Abu Dhabi within this period of reform.

Overview

A study conducted by Obeidat and Al-Hassan (2009) in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan explored how 28 teachers who received the Queen Rania Award for Excellence in Education created school–parent–community partnerships. Five categories emerged from the data: (1) communicating with parents, (2) involving parents in the learning process, (3) involving the community in the school, (4) pursuing volunteer projects, and (5) involving students in the community.

Khasawneh and Alsagheer (2007) conducted a survey on family involvement in Al-Ain, United Arab Emirates. The findings showed that there is a need for increased parent involvement among parents in Al-Ain schools to improve academic achievement and enhance student learning. Where this already was happening, positive effects were found on learning. As an outcome of the study, the researchers proposed a model of school- and home-based involvement to introduce the following units: organizational structure, communication, programs and planning, family–school forum, and continuous assessment and monitoring.

Epstein's model (2001) of family involvement identifies six types: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community. Grolnick and Slowiaczek (1994) present a three-level involvement tier. At the behavioral tier, communication between home and school equates to volunteering and assisting with homework. At the cognitive collaboration level, parents adopt an educational role, exposing their children to educationally stimulating activities and experiences. At the personal level, attitudes and expectations about school and education combine to convey an enjoyment of learning.

Although both western and nonwestern models and studies coincide in identifying the nature and type of home and school links, there are sociocultural contexts that differ and alter subsequent features in the enactment of parental involvement. These contexts may produce perceived constraints and limitations to the process.

Constraints and Limitations

A number of studies suggest that a lack of mutual understanding of what parental involvement means is the greatest limitation to effective parent involvement. As Scribner, Young, and Pedroza (1999) state, people from different sociocultural contexts have different views of what parent involvement is, and these views are culturally variable (Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, Greenfield, & Quiroz, 2001). Further, administrators, teachers, and parents may have different goals for parent involvement, and for this reason, a shared definition may not exist (Harris & Goodall, 2008). This may, in itself, create a perceived barrier to parental involvement. For example, research conducted in Latino cultures sees the parents' role as providing nurturance, instilling morals, and promoting good behavior. This does not concur fully with a western model which views parents as having a hand-in-hand relationship with the school to promote academic achievement (Carger, 1997; Chavkin & Gonzalez, 1995; Espinosa, 1995; Trumbull et al., 2001).

According to Moosa, Karabenick, and Adams (2001), who examined Arab parent involvement in elementary schools in an urban Midwestern district in the U.S., sociocultural contexts are important determinants of Arab parental involvement. Though the context of their study is not that of Abu Dhabi, the findings shed light on constraints that limit parental involvement in Abu Dhabi schools. These constraints revolve around cross-cultural communication barriers (inclusive of language, body language, etc.) between the teachers and parents, gender segregation, and sociocultural contexts of behavior.

It has been suggested by Van Der Linde (1997) that in Canada, the U.S., Malaysia, and South Africa, where multiethnic and pluralistic communities

exist, cross-cultural communication between teachers and parents is significant in determining parental involvement. Though the local Emirati population in Abu Dhabi is monoethnic, the new school reforms have enlisted the presence of licensed teachers from Canada, the U.S., South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand. The situation has created tensions in the area of language and communication across cultures. It can be argued that such factors impact the process of learning because, as Vygotsky (1986) notes, language is essential for knowledge construction and cognitive development. The Tomas Rivera Policy Institute (2007) found that a mismatch between language in the home and at school is an insurmountable barrier facing parents when helping their children with homework at home.

An area of much concern is that English, as a global language, has become part of educational reform resulting in the import of native English speakers into classrooms in various parts of the world, including Abu Dhabi. For example, in 1985, the Japanese government introduced the Japan Exchange and Teaching program which employs native English teachers to introduce a communication-focused approach to English learning (Littlewood, 1981; Nunan, 1988). This has not been without its challenges, as teachers do not share the Japanese language with their counterparts. In addition, as Guest (2002) and Littlewood (2000) state, sociocultural contexts such as membership and identity should be considered during the reform process. It is argued that as methodologies are exported across contexts, careful monitoring is needed to prevent failure due to the mismatch between teachers' methodology and expectations and those of parents (Hu, 2002; Nunan, 2003). This is because these reforms do not conform to the culture and social environment; such conforming is critical to the process of learning when knowledge is co-constructed between two or more people, with language as the most critical tool for cultural transmission (Vygotsky, 1986).

Further, for cognitive change to occur, Vygotsky (1986) theorized the need for dialectical (cognitive) constructivism, which emphasizes interaction between persons and their environment. In instances where English is the predominant medium of instruction and communication for curricular and pedagogical change, social interactions and cognitive change processes create tensions in home–school communications as cultural and language tools are compromised or even abstracted from interactions. Wertsch's (1991) approach to mediated interaction stresses the importance inherent in the cultural, historical, and institutional context that affects mental functioning. A critical aspect of the approach he proposes are the cultural tools or "mediational means" that shape both social and individual processes. For parental involvement to happen comfortably and effectively, dialoguing is essential, as parents and teachers

must work together to build common expectations and support student learning. It follows, therefore, that the teacher must establish good relations, open communication, and dialogue with parents (Epstein, 2001).

Building strong, trusting, and mutually respectful relationships between parents and teachers who share similar cultural backgrounds is difficult enough. Doing so between parents and teachers from different backgrounds is even more difficult (Berger, 1996; Epstein, 1990), as teachers need insight into the values, beliefs, and practices of those cultures (Bensman, 2000; Lee, Spencer, & Harpalani, 2003; Trumbull et al., 2001). Bensman (2000) argues that cultural interchange, the process by which teachers learn about cultures that their students bring to class and parents learn about the school and the classroom culture, is the way to facilitate dialogue and, consequently, student success. Lee et al. (2003) and Trumbull et al. (2001) argue that this knowledge can then be translated into classroom activities that honor and incorporate culturally based knowledge. Unfortunately, in a school cultural interchange context, teachers and parents carry many preconceived notions about each other that make communication and dialogue even more challenging. Moreover, the dynamics of the parent–teacher relationship create communication problems that, under the best of circumstances, can be problematic (Bensman, 2000; Lee et al., 2003; Trumbull et al., 2001).

To compound this issue, there are a range of factors that inhibit open communication and dialogue between parents and teachers regardless of their cultural backgrounds (Dodd & Konzal, 2001). These include a lack of time for informal opportunities to get to know each other in nonstressful, nonbureaucratic encounters and different understandings of the "proper" roles for teachers and parents (Joshi, 2002). Dialogue is also hampered because of the lack of understanding of the very different beliefs that parents and educators may hold in relation to the purposes, goals, and outcomes of schooling: "it is rare that schools (or those in charge of them) get below the surface to understand how those differences can lead not only to different goals but also completely different views of schooling and, hence, parent involvement" (Trumbull et al., 2001, p. 31). Findings from The Tomas Rivera Policy Institute (2007) suggest that limited communication channels and school-based activities that are impersonal, infrequent, and occur without adequate notice may negate parental involvement. Harris and Goodall (2008) concur with this, suggesting that schools, rather than parents, are often hard to reach. Moles (1999) found that most parents and staff receive little training on how to work with one another and that without proper information and skills, staff and families view each other with suspicion. A difference in the perceived roles and responsibilities of teachers and parents leads to role separation, which is also considered a

constraint limiting parental involvement (Chavkin & Gonzalez, 1995). When parents in Latino communities were asked to take on responsibilities that they traditionally saw as being the domain of the school, they expressed uncertainty as to what their roles entailed. They felt that their input was encroaching on the school's territory (Sosa, 1997).

Research studies have highlighted other variables contributing to limited parental involvement. For instance, Khan (1996) claims that divorce, growing numbers of single parent families, working parents, and high levels of stress due to the complexity of modern life limit parental involvement. Khan (1996) states that parent perceptions of constraints can be attributed to their feelings of failure and inadequacy which leads to poor self-worth. He adds that parents' inability to help with school work, ingrained apathy of longtime teachers, subsequent lack of responsiveness to parent needs, absence of activities to draw parents into the school, and teacher resentment or suspicion of parents form a potpourri of constraints limiting parental involvement. Moles (1999) concurs that such constraints are equally felt by schools and families in a quest to establish effective partnerships. The Tomas Rivera Policy Institute's (2007) study found that work commitments and inflexible school policies discourage parental participation. From a school perspective, high teacher workloads prevent parents from talking with teachers during the school day. A paucity of innovative parental involvement programs that seek to address such issues also contribute to the growing number of constraints facing parental involvement.

According to Safran (1997), psychological and political factors may make family–school relationships difficult to achieve. Psychological factors refer to emotional issues impacting on communication. Political factors refer to questions of power and authority. Both contribute to the complexity inherent in family–school communications. Although both the family and school place the child's well being at the heart of all communication, different interpretations of "well being" are contentious and cause misconceptions of the roles and responsibilities expected of school community members. Stakeholders may hold divergent views about the purpose of engaging parents, and researchers such as Harris and Goodall (2008) recommend schools examine their practices aligned with purpose.

Family–school partnerships are difficult to nurture without the support of the state, policymakers, community organizations, and employers (Moore, 2011). Moore states that in the absence of clearly defined and articulated policies and a lack of resources to support professional development related to family involvement, constraints surface that detract from parents becoming involved. Administrators may perceive parental involvement as weakening their ability to manage and initiate change. Further, parental interference is said to

reduce the professional autonomy of teachers. A repercussion of this may lead parents to feel unwelcomed at school and to interpret the school culture as being noninclusive (Mitchell, 2008).

Lee and Bowen's study (2006) showed that there was a mismatch of social and cultural capital between schools and families. Mitchell (2008) refers to cultural capital as "predispositions, attitudes, and knowledge gained from experience, particularly education-related experiences" (p. 3) and to social capital as relationships which provide access to information and resources (Mitchell, 2008). Both forms of capital assist parents' entry into schools to support their children's learning. However, as Harris and Goodall (2008) note, parental engagement initiatives presuppose that schools, parents, and pupils are relatively homogeneous and equally willing to develop programs that enhance and sustain parental involvement. A one size fits all approach to parental involvement masks the complexity of needs and roles that parents play and the constraints they face that impede their involvement in schools.

What, then, are the implications of this body of research on parental involvement in the context of Abu Dhabi, UAE? What sociocultural barriers inhibit parental engagement in schools? How can schools construct relationships with parents that build personal efficacy so that productive relationships enhance students' learning?

Methodology

This is a small scale, exploratory study that follows a case study approach situated within a sociocultural paradigm. It focuses on understanding how people make sense of their experiences within a framework of socially constructed, negotiated, and shared meanings (Merriam, 1998). Merriam says that case study research which focuses on "discovery, insight, and understanding from the perspectives of those being studied offers the greatest promise of making significant contributions to the knowledge base and practice of education" (p. 1).

This study took place during the academic year 2010–2011. It was conducted in seven primary PPP schools (4 female schools and 3 male schools) in the city of Abu Dhabi. Six of the selected PPP schools were managed by female staff, and one male school had male staff with a female PPP supervisor. Participants were seven administrators, seven social workers, one teacher per year level from each school (in total, 5 grade levels and 35 teacher participants), and one parent per year level from each school (as per above, a total of 35 parents). Seven focus group interviews were held with parents, and 49 individual interviews were conducted with teachers, administrators, and social workers. The interviews took place at the schools. The semi-structured individual interviews

were 40 minutes in duration, and the semi-structured focus group interviews each lasted one hour.

Semi-structured interviews allowed the researchers to enter the inner world of another person to gain understanding from their perspective (Patton, 1990). Interviews afforded depth of data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003) because participants were encouraged to reflect, discuss, and share their thoughts, beliefs, and experiences. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with administrators, social workers, and teachers. Arabic was the language used with Arabic speaking participants, while English was used to conduct the interviews with native English speakers (licensed teachers or LTs). A combination of Arabic and English was also an option.

Focus groups were considered the most realistic method of data collection for parents given the time constraints and were set up similar to the interviews. Focus groups triggered interaction and dialogue among the participants (Morgan, 1997). They allowed similarities and differences in terms of opinions and experiences to surface, and this gave the data its richness and multidimensional quality. In the findings, excerpts recalling parents' voice are collectively acknowledged as "parents" from the respective schools.

The participants were selected by purposive sampling. As Patton (1990) elaborates, "the logic and power of purposive sampling lies in selecting *information-rich* cases for study" (p. 169, emphasis in the original). Parent participants were selected for their involvement in the school for at least a year and for their involvement in a mothers' council or other school-based activities. Parent participants in one male school were fathers, while in all other PPP primary schools, participants were mothers. Parents were native Arabic speakers, predominantly Emiratis, with a few exceptions from Sudan, Somalia, Tunisia, Syria, Jordan, and Palestine. The criteria for teacher selection were employment in the school for at least a year and a command of English adequate to express their thoughts and perspectives. Emirati, expatriate teachers (Arabs and non-Arabs), licensed teachers (LTs), and Native English Speaking Teachers (NESTs) who were involved with parents in a range of school-based activities participated in this study. LTs teaching English, math, and science were expatriate teachers from Australia, New Zealand, Canada, South Africa, and the United States. Teachers of Arabic, Islamic studies, and social studies were native Arabic speakers: Emiratis, Syrians, Egyptians, Palestinians, and Jordanians. Students have the same contact hours with LTs and Arabic-speaking teachers. Administrators and social workers were Emiratis and were automatically invited to participate in the study.

The criteria for selection of teachers and parents were communicated to the administrators and social workers from the respective schools. Decisions

regarding the selection of teachers and parents were made in consultation with school administrators. Participants were informed of the study via a letter with consent forms attached. These were signed by willing participants and returned to designated school authorities. All communication occurred in both English and Arabic. At the beginning of each interview, researchers reestablished the purpose of the study, outlined the desired research outputs, and highlighted confidentiality measures to safeguard participants and institutions.

In a quest for coverage and uniformity, an interview guide was designed and used to steer the conversation around aspects related to home–school relationships. Interview guidelines were reiterated at the beginning of each interview session in both languages. The guidelines probed perceptions and significance of parental involvement as expressed by various stakeholders. In addition, communication, involvement types, constraints and limitations, and future improvements were also covered. The following examples of questions were used to facilitate dialogue at both semi-structured interviews and focus groups (see Appendix for the full guide):

- Are there any factors that may limit you from being involved at your child's school?
- What areas would you like to be involved in at the school in the future? Please explain some of these opportunities for parental involvement.
- How does the school communicate with you to inform you about opportunities for involvement in school? What are the means of communication that the school uses in order to involve you as a parent? Please explain.
- Do you have any suggestions on how the school can improve parental involvement? Please explain.
- Are there policies that encourage or enhance parents' involvement at the school? What are these guidelines and policies?

Two researchers were present at each interview to ensure accuracy, accountability, and trustworthiness of the data collected. The interviews were recorded manually with meaning clarified during the process. To ensure high quality data collection and authentic voice, present at all interviews was a fluent Arabic speaker, either a member of the research team or a translator. Data was secured in password protected file folders with access available only to the researchers.

The data was coded as part of the iterative process of data collection and interpretation (Creswell, 2002; Miles & Huberman, 1994). The emerging themes were analyzed, removed, added, or strengthened as the data analysis process proceeded. During this process of closely analyzing the data, subcodes emerged which substantiated the emergent themes, presenting relationships and/or contradictory evidence (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Intercoder reliability occurred as all three researchers worked simultaneously with the data at all times.

Limitations of the Study

A limitation of the study was a lack of dedicated time and human resources. This impacted the number and type of schools selected. The Western and Al-Ain regions were excluded from the study, as were kindergartens and secondary schools. While criteria for the selection of participants were clearly communicated to teachers, parents, social workers, and administrators, the final participant selection was authorized by school authorities. This potential for bias was, therefore, unavoidable within the context. Mothers were the majority of parents interviewed as they had (apart from one male school) the greatest presence. Fathers were either underrepresented, did not meet the criteria for selection, or were unavailable. An imbalance in parent voice in relation to gender is, therefore, acknowledged.

Research Findings

The research findings show that stakeholders hold positive views attesting to the importance of parental involvement. Four themes were identified across stakeholders as constraints to parental involvement: expectations of roles and responsibilities for parental involvement; communication; sociocultural contexts; and provisions. As schools are nested communities, so constraints experienced at one level create a ripple effect across all levels. These ripple effects are conceived, received, and interpreted among stakeholders in different ways. The findings are anecdotal comments which describe the themes and emergent subthemes as voiced by stakeholders.

Expectations of Roles and Responsibilities for Parental Involvement

Data indicates that school stakeholders and parents hold positive views attesting to the expectations of parental involvement. A sample of representative views regarding parental involvement follows:

Administrator 7: Building a strong bond between the teacher and the student.

Social Worker 2: Parental involvement is an inseparable part of the education system. Parents help in education and behavior.

Social Worker 5: Parental involvement creates two-channel communication; parents know the gaps at school and the school knows what the gap is at home.

Teacher 1: It is very important for us to contact parents to see if there is any problem with the students and propose solutions to check the curriculum, so they can help the students at home. It is also going to model to the

students the importance of homework. It's going to help their skills and reinforce anything that we do in school.

Parents 3: Having a clear idea about the curriculum and the teaching methods and having a clear idea about how to support my children at home.

Parents 2: Understand the context so we can focus on the child.

Such comments show agreement to engage in parental involvement and in dialogue that benefits all parties in doing what is best for students. The dissonance that arises relates to the way school personnel and parents perceive each others' roles and responsibilities and what equates to expectations set by the "other" in terms of fulfillment of perceived roles and responsibilities. In this section, two subthemes entitled "The Blame Game," and "Deflection to Higher Authorities" capture the constraints felt.

The Blame Game

The failure of one party to meet expectations of the "other" is a source of tension between schools and parents. The situation is aptly described as:

Administrator 4: We are living in two separate worlds, the school on one side and the parents on the other side. There is a gap between the school and home.

From this position of "two separate worlds," the dialogue that takes place is one of talking at cross purposes with an inherent tendency to blame the other for failing to act and respond appropriately. The following comments are illustrative of the school blaming parents for failure to get involved and to support their children's academic and behavioral needs:

Administrator 4: The student is living in two contradictory worlds of discipline…this leads to more problems at school…we want parents to follow up at home academically and behaviorally.

Social Worker 4: I wish they would monitor the disciplinary problems. Parents need to follow up.

Social Worker 1: They [parents] should contact the school and know about the daily things all the time. The parents should have a connection. Like a close relation, they should know everything.

Teacher 2: They think it is the school's job, and the school has to do everything for their students. About 30% think like this. They think it is unimportant to talk to the teacher.

Teacher 4: Parents misunderstand parental involvement, and they start criticizing, especially when it comes to grading and assessment.

From the parents' perspective there is an acknowledgement that:

Parent 2: Some parents are helpful and like to share. Others do nothing. They think it is the school that has to do everything.

Having said this, parents blame schools for not being able to communicate meaningfully on matters related to curriculum reforms and student academic and behavioral issues. The onus to begin and sustain communication with parents is seen as the school's role and responsibility. This blame game has caused confusion and frustration among parents:

Parent 4: The school can't tell us what is going on. They send us the school policies, but we are not informed about the bad behavior. We want to be informed regularly.

Parent 7: We don't know what is happening in the class. The process of learning is becoming secretive.

Deflection to Higher Authorities

Both schools and parents draw attention to higher educational authorities. Support is needed to minimize tensions by providing clearer delineation of roles and responsibilities allocated to schools and parents:

Administrator 3: We need a policy that dictates his involvement as a parent, and this policy should be empowered by ADEC and issued by ADEC.

Social Worker 3: ADEC needs to make an awareness campaign [project] about parental involvement; they can look at the culture of the Emirati society—their customs and their traditions—and send more messages about how parents can become involved.

Teacher 5: We hope ADEC can have a website for parents so parents can be updated.

Parent 2: The email has not been functional yet. We would like them (ADEC) to functionalize the email communications especially for progress reports… and follow up on the academic achievement and the curriculum.

Communication

Stakeholders note that while home–school communication channels exist and some are effective—namely phone calls, transmission of SMS (text) messages, and written letters—these and other modes of communication are hindered by broader constraints. For example, ADEC has introduced electronic communication and expects schools to use it. Our data revealed that this was not necessarily successful, since parents who are nonversant with electronic modes of communication were unable to use the system. Constraints noted in this section include: language barrier; lack of knowledge to receive, process, and transmit information; and modes of communication which were either absent, nonfunctional, *ad hoc,* or ineffective.

Language Barrier

With regard to informing parents about the reforms, stakeholders concurred that the medium of transmission—English—served as a barrier to communication on all matters related to and stemming from the reform. The challenge that emerged most strongly was an inability to receive information on changes in curriculum and pedagogy:

Administrator 5: Mums don't know English, so they can't communicate with the LTs. Especially, they can't communicate with English, math, and science teachers.

Social Worker 1: ADEC has changed everything and made everything in English. Math is in English. Science is in English. Before it used to be in Arabic. Now, in English, it is very difficult. Especially now [that] we have foreign teachers…parents need to start working with the child in English. Now we have a translator for this.

Social Worker 2: Some Arab mothers are illiterate in English.

Teacher 1: The problem is with English, and we have communication difficulties.

Teacher 2: Sometimes when mothers are approached, they say, "We don't speak English, so how do you expect us to teach our children at home?"

Parent 2: The language barrier sometimes creates a problem in communication and understanding the curriculum and pedagogy. [We] can't communicate because the teachers don't speak Arabic, and the parents don't speak English. Sometimes we can't follow up at home because the worksheets are in English. It is too rapid [a] change.

Lack of Knowledge to Receive, Process, and Transmit Information

Stakeholders were compromised in their ability to receive, process, and transmit information owing to a lack of background knowledge to comprehend it. For some parents, this meant not having the educational background and level of literacy required to communicate on parental involvement:

Administrator 3: Sometimes uneducated parents with low levels of education can't help their kids, especially with the introduction of the new curriculum and English being the medium of instruction.

Administrator 4: Sometimes we have illiterate parents, so the mum can't help him at home. She can't read our communication letters.

Social Worker 1: There are a percentage of mothers who have not been schooled.

Teacher 3: In a remote area, parents are not educated, and they are older, and they can't realize the importance of sharing in the school activities, so they leave this to the teachers.

Parent 2: Some mums are illiterate, so they can't take part, or they come from lower education standards.

For parents, the lack of transparency related to communication is also concerned with the giving and sharing of student academic and behavioral records and observations by the school:

Parent 4: We would like to attend science and English classes…but we were never invited.

Parent 4: We aren't informed about behavioral problems. All the problems that happen to our kids, like bullying, we know about it through our kids.

Parent 3: We would like to get a weekly report on the child's performance, not only grades [academic] but also psychological—how is their relationship with the teacher?

Communication About Curriculum and Pedagogy

Numerous issues were raised by parents regarding their lack of knowledge of curriculum and pedagogy as hindering their involvement in schools. These related to communication about curricular changes and assessments, lack of resources, instructional material provided to parents in English, and English as a medium of instruction. Parents voiced their interest in being informed about the curriculum and pedagogy to support their children's learning at home.

Parent 4: I want to help but am afraid to help, because I do not want to confuse him. Here they teach phonics differently from what they were taught at school in our time. We are not aware how we teach the science experiments.…We need workshops on the new curriculum.

Parent 7: We need to be informed more about the curriculum. The new curriculum restricts us. The new curriculum is hard and also the English as a medium of instruction, where science is difficult because of the English.… There are no books to help us, and it's a problem to follow up, and we want teachers to explain in class. We need more details on what is taught in class.

Views expressed by parents and reiterated by teachers include:

Teacher 2: Parents are shocked at the different learning techniques, not using text books, they feel they have to have a source [book] not worksheets. It is important to improve parents' skills…we don't know how to teach them at home.…The modern curriculum is in English, and it is not enough for just the teacher to help. We need the parents' support…we try to involve the parents to come in the class and work with us.

Teacher 6: Because they [parents] don't know how to help their children, they do not want to come to school and be involved.

In relation to bringing parents on board through shared knowledge of the reforms, teachers and parents confirmed that there is a lack of reporting from the school on changes in curriculum and pedagogy:

Teacher 1: Limited communication channels failed to adequately facilitate pedagogical and curricular transference of information to parents; we are lost in translation…they (parents) don't understand English very well; therefore, it is difficult to communicate.

Parent 4: We want to discuss problems such as students' achievement, misbehavior, bullying, and curriculum involvement. We want to attend classes… we need the handouts, syllabus, and weekly plan on the internet so we can follow up with our kids and help them.

Administrators and social workers commented that ADEC is not transparent in its communication to parents regarding curricular changes.

Administrator 4: There are new trends in education going on in the school, and the parents at home are unaware of these changes.

Social Worker 5: No parent representatives are at ADEC, especially when it comes to the new curriculum [and] English being the medium of instruction. Parents need to voice their opinion about the curriculum to ADEC.

Modes of Communication: Problems with Transmittal and Reception

To add to the communication barrier, transmittal of electronic communication was disrupted during the reforms. This involved the transfer of authority from the Abu Dhabi Education Zone (ADEZ) to the Abu Dhabi Education Council (ADEC). Stakeholders perceived this mode as an ineffective method of communication for the following reasons:

Administrator 3: We used to communicate with parents through the "future electronic," a means organized by ADEZ. It is closed now because of the integration between ADEC and ADEZ. We don't use emails because parents can't use it or access it.

Administrator 6: We have put up a school website, and we sent a letter informing the parents about this service, but the response was very limited. We don't know whether they didn't respond because they don't know how to use the internet or because they don't care.

Administrator 6: Parents are ignorant of electronic communication….Fathers give us their emails so we can communicate with them, but electronic communication is a novelty among mothers, and this needs addressing.

Social Worker 6: The electronic system hasn't been functionalized yet due to the takeover of ADEZ by ADEC, but we were told that emails/electronic communications would be functional soon; however, they weren't.

Social Worker 5: Email is not very popular. It is not functional. That's why we give the information to the girls to give to the parents.

Teacher 3: The quality of the translation happens to be left to whom is close by. With miscommunication there is more tension. There is only one official classroom interpreter; parents say, "we don't know English," what can we do?

Parent 4: We need to receive SMS to inform us about exams, schedules, and progress reports.

Another source of concern was a lack of expenditure to invest in developing communication systems and channels for parental involvement. Budget limitation is said to lead to understaffing, which negates the promotion of effective communication either through hiring someone to be responsible for parent communication or hiring more translators:

Administrator 4: We are understaffed, so we need to allocate a person who is in charge of the parents' communication channel. We need a special budget to spend on encouraging parents to take part and to organize more activities, paying for specialized people to conduct workshops on issues needed, such as communication and management. We need money to open continuing education classes for illiterate mums.

Administrator 6: We don't have translators at school.

Social Worker 6: Mothers who don't speak English find it hard to deal and communicate with LTs, since we don't have translators at the school.

Social Worker 1: The school needs to communicate to parents, however, the school doesn't have a communication mechanism.

Parent 2: Sometimes we can't follow at home because the worksheets are in English. It is too rapid [a] change. Some say that we can use translators, but, in fact, we have to call friends to know what is going on. Moreover, workshops are conducted and delivered in English…parents are unable to understand what is going on.

Content, Tone, and Style of Communication

Administrators recognized the need for training teachers on how to communicate face-to-face with parents.

Administrator 4: We need some training for teachers to train them how to communicate with parents. Some teachers are negative and lack interpersonal communications with parents. Teachers and administrative staff need to be trained in how to communicate with parents.

Parents raised the issue of trust in communicating with the school personnel, especially with teachers. They commented that negative attitudes and remarks of teachers marred relationships and acted as a deterrent to starting

and continuing communication. Parents were concerned about the lack of up-dates received from the school.

Parent 4: The problem is that we are not welcomed, and the administration doesn't want to involve us.

Parent 6: Teachers give us negative feedback about our girls, so we stop coming to see the teachers.

Sociocultural Context

In the sociocultural context of Abu Dhabi, there are constraints that act on the school. Some arise from the sociocultural norms and mores, others pertain to limited yet significant cross-cultural marriages and to changes in some of the society's practices. These need acknowledgement and appropriate mediation to allow for comfortable and effective access to parental involvement. Four broad themes emerged from the findings: male and female segregation in schools; social inhibitions concerning the roles of mothers and fathers; cross-cultural marriages, and divorce and separation.

Male and Female Segregation in Schools

Segregation of women and men and subsequent role delineation still prevails in the public schools in Abu Dhabi. In male schools, the opinion expressed was that mothers were uncomfortable to meet with male teachers and avoided the schools if these schools were administered by males. By the same token, fathers shied away from visiting the female schools administered by females and were in deference of female teachers who were covered.

Teachers, parents, and administrators expressed the reality of the social constraints related to male–female segregation in schools:

Administrator 2: Fathers are shy to come, because it is a female community.

Teacher 1: Dads are not allowed, because it's a girls' school. It is difficult socially and religiously speaking to meet with the fathers. I cover my face; it is hard to allow fathers to attend my class, because I have to cover my face in his presence.

Teacher 3: Mothers sometimes come to the school [boys' school run by males], but not always. We have to underline the point that tradition may not allow the mother to come. They may not like to communicate with male teachers.

Teacher 5: It is more comfortable to talk to mothers. I met the father; I was shy, and he was, too, and not at ease. The meeting lasted for five minutes. With the mother, our meeting would have lasted 50 minutes.

Parent 3: Parents coming to school to check on their children is not available for [just] anyone…to enter the girls' school—the administration does not allow fathers to enter the school. More flexible regulations are required. The

school gate should be open—why do they close the doors? Over the past 20 years there is change. Now, we can talk together….Being in a boys' school will restrict mothers from coming, and they cannot come.

A few mothers and social workers expressed a change in attitudes in the following of traditions.

Parent 3: I [female parent in a male school] have no problems with traditions. I go to the boys' school…not many mothers would think the way I do, because of the customs and traditions. It is not acceptable for wives to come to boys' schools to talk with male teachers. Their husbands will prevent them from doing that…this will make a great gap between home and school. It is a big problem for mothers, and there is more involvement in girls' schools because of traditions.

Social Worker 3: The custom here [Abu Dhabi] makes it hard for mothers to communicate with male teachers; now society is changing…this year we started a mothers' council in a school run by males.

Social Inhibitions Relating to the Roles of Mothers and Fathers

The cultural expectations of male and female roles determine the extent to which fathers are involved in their children's schooling. As mothers are expected to take charge of their children's schooling, mothers are held accountable for parental involvement, and fathers have less involvement. While parental involvement is considered a female responsibility, at the same time, some mothers face social inhibitions that create barriers preventing them from being involved. For instance, some husbands or male guardians limit their wives' involvement in male schools and, in the same way, they limit the women's use of taxi transportation.

Social Worker 4: Some mothers can't communicate with us because she doesn't have transportation. Her husband doesn't allow her to catch a taxi.

Teacher 2: If a mother doesn't have a car or she doesn't drive, it is hard for her to come to school….There is no one to drop her off.

Cross-Cultural Marriages

Abu Dhabi is a monoethnic society, so cross-cultural marriages are not common practice. Yet, administrators and teachers drew attention to this phenomenon as being a constraint to parental involvement because of the cultural or ethnic identity of the mother:

Administrator 1: Some mothers are non-Arabs…so the student is embarrassed to allow mother's involvement at the school, because students don't want the school to meet with their mums because the mum is a foreigner and doesn't speak Arabic; this is only 10% who are Indians or Filipinos.

Teacher 5: Sometimes if the mother is non-Emirati, she is shy to come to school.

Divorce and Separation

Another social issue voiced by administrators, social workers, and parents alike referred to the high percentage of divorce and marital separation (especially as compared to other Arab countries, see ECSSR, 2007) hindering parental involvement.

Administrator 1: Some mothers refuse to come to school to meet the teachers, administrators, or social worker because she is separated or divorced, and she wants to detach herself from her kids to annoy the husband.

Social Worker 4: Thirty percent of our student population suffers from divorce and separation. It makes parental involvement less, and also parents become detached from their children, because each parent blames it on the other, and they punish each other by neglecting the boys.

Parent 5: If I am divorced and my husband has gone away, how can I support my kids? We need one team for support. Team teachers, counselors, specialists—to help the family.

Provisions

Stakeholders recognized the knowledge gap created by the reform process, in terms of parents lack of understanding of the new curriculum and pedagogy. Stakeholders acknowledged the limited nature of current provisions to mediate this gap. These provisions were limited by structures, methods, and processes which were either absent or unworkable and, hence, hindered effective communication. The following themes emerged from the findings: lack of organization and support system; continuing parent education and workshops; and decision making and policies.

Lack of Organization and Support System

The lack of organization and support system for parental involvement was considered a constraint by administrators, social workers, and parents. Parents concurred with administrators on the issue of budget and staffing as a factor hindering parental involvement:

Administrator 4: These logistics are beyond our control as administrators. We need more administrative staff. We communicate through our secretaries. We need to allocate a person in charge of the parents' communication channel. We need some training for teachers on how to communicate with parents. We need to be allocated a budget to organize more activities on communication, management, and continuing education for parents.

Administrator 1: We need ADEC's decision and approval for early dismissal so teachers can plan for these conferences.

PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN ABU DHABI

Social Worker 2: There are seven periods in a day, and because the teachers are busy in their classroom during all those periods, maybe they are only free during the break time…parents need to have an appointment with that particular teacher.

Parents 3: The school needs to develop a reception area and allocate a receptionist so we can talk to her.

Inadequate organization and support systems to accommodate the needs of working mothers was expressed by stakeholders. For example, working mothers stated the need to have appointments scheduled in advance to request release from work to meet with teachers.

Parent 2: Because I am a working mum, it hinders me, and teachers don't give their numbers to anyone, so working mothers can't communicate.

School personnel also recognized this need and made suggestions in response:

Social Worker 2: The school needs to give working mothers three days' notice [allocate time] before the meeting so they can get permission from work.

Social Worker 5: Working mothers face a restriction. I suggest organizing the function in the afternoons to involve more working mothers.

Teacher 7: Working mothers can't leave work to take part in school meetings or school celebrations, and sometimes fathers are outside the country, so they can't come to school.

Most schools allocated a specific day or time for parents to visit the school to follow up on their children's work. However, a lack of support systems have failed to effectively develop an organizational process. These limitations arise from the schools' structural organization characterized by heavy teacher workloads and overburdened administrative staff hindering the facilitation of effective parent–teacher communication and advance scheduling of parent–teacher meetings. The following constraints were expressed by social workers and teachers:

Social Worker 7: We need to allocate two hours after school or during the weekend where the parents can come and check on kids, because working mums usually can't come, and sometimes parents come when teachers are teaching so teachers can't leave their class to meet the parents.

Teacher 1: Parents can come anytime to meet the social worker. They don't take an appointment. We wait for them upstairs in the meeting room. This year I don't have enough time. I teach five lessons every day, and I need to correct students' work on break time. I don't have enough time, so I call them at the end of the day.…We finish at 2 o'clock. I leave the school at 2:40 every day. I am doing my work day by day; some of them [parents] come in during my lunch.

Teacher 3: The school allows the knocking at the door. There is no assigned allocation for parents to come. I am not sure if parents even know if they should check into an office to book an appointment with the teacher. I teach 30 sessions a week, and it leaves me with five free periods. I cannot provide them with five or ten minutes when the students are running wild.

In addition, parents stated that time allocated for parent–teacher meetings did not meet their personal schedule or needs in terms of length and allocation:

Parent 2: There is no policy for appointments; it is left to the teacher's initiative to do this.

Parent 6: The time is usually not suitable for us [mothers]. We need more frequent parent–teacher meetings.

Parent 6: We need the administration to schedule parent–teacher meetings. The time allocated—one hour a day for the whole school—is not enough. They need to send us reminders about the dates for parent–teacher meetings for each subject.

From the teachers' perspective, an advisory system as part of a new school structural organization to meet the needs of parents is required:

Teacher 7: [The] advisory program needs improvement and to be developed. The project of advisory [with reference to] teacher–parent–student meetings—we started now for one and a half months; individual interviews—this is a very good idea. We get to know the [student's] weaknesses and strengths. Sharing this information with teachers is good.

Continuing Education and Workshops

Continuing education and workshops for parents were in evidence in some schools, but they were inadequately funded and delivered in English. Furthermore, they did not adequately address aspects of curriculum and pedagogy to assist parents in understanding the reform:

Administrator 4: We need a special budget to allocate for continuing education.

Teacher 1: Most of the workshops for math and science are delivered in English. This is a problem for parents who speak little or no English.

Teacher 4: Parents need to be involved in curriculum workshops so they know what is going on in the classroom.

Teacher 5: One of the most important workshops for parents is about educating the parents on the curriculum—what are the teaching approaches adopted by the teachers in the school. Walk them through the teaching philosophy. Parents are very angry about their child's marks when I explain the breakdown and how are they assessing.

Parent 4: We need workshops on the new curriculum.

Decision Making and Policies

Clear policies to support decision making within the school on parental involvement were absent despite recognition by stakeholders of this need. Administrators and teachers stated that there were no official policies to support parents and the school in enlisting and sustaining parental involvement.

Administrator 3: We [school administrators] need to be in an agreement with the parents at the beginning of the year that dictates that the parent needs to come to school whenever he is needed as an obligatory agreement and part of the policy.…We need a policy that dictates his involvement as a parent, and this should be empowered by ADEC.

Teacher 4: The school doesn't have a policy to encourage or motivate parent involvement.

School personnel recognized the need for a policy to support joint decision making with parents in partnering on academic and disciplinary matters:

Social Worker 3: It is important to take their ideas and their opinions about the learning process in general. We have to focus on activities that may give an opportunity for the parents to take part in the education.

Teacher 3: No real policies and procedures surrounding the communication… in light of the reforms, we have to give parents an opportunity to come to the classroom to have an overview about ways of teaching and to express their opinions/ideas about these approaches, so they can share their ideas with the teacher; this should happen once a month.

Equally, parents recognized the need to be involved in decision making concerning curriculum, assessment, and discipline.

Parent 4: We want to take a role in enhancing changes on the discipline and order at the school.

Parent 6: We need to be encouraged to solve some of the problems at the school such as bullying.

Discussion

The following discussion captures the constraints and subsequent limitations to parental involvement that are present in the sociocultural context of Abu Dhabi as identified by the stakeholders through a series of interviews and focus groups. Stakeholders recognized the benefits of school-based and home-based parental involvement, yet, within the sociocultural context and context of rapid educational change, challenges are posed for parental involvement to sit comfortably and occur effectively. Parents and school personnel are currently recipients of change with few realistic opportunities for parents to play an

active role and few effective means in place to mitigate the constraints that exist. These constraints are either inherent within the sociocultural context itself or have been created in the reform process and are shared among stakeholders, namely, expectations of roles and responsibilities for parental involvement, communication, sociocultural contexts, and provisions. As the constraints have often become attributable to failing to fulfill roles and responsibilities, a blame game has ensued between school and home. This blame game, which centers on who is accountable for making parental involvement work, involves ADEC, schools, and parents.

For parental involvement to sit comfortably, stakeholders need reassurance from ADEC that through collaboration, there will be a shared vision and understanding of parental involvement as a living, enduring entity. As this entity emerges through mutual understanding, constraints and limitations in its implementation should be resolved and so make the rhetoric of parental involvement a reality. For this to happen, Scribner, Young, and Pedroza (1999) point out that a uniform, harmonized perception of parental involvement must prevail for better implementation. To achieve this, there needs to be open communication among the stakeholders and with ADEC through a consistent, multichanneled, and dual language approach. In turn, open and effective dialoguing should inform planning that respects and incorporates all perspectives. As Lee et al. (2003) emphasize, planning and practice involve shared meaning making. This necessitates a structured mechanism, reorganization of communication channels, and the introduction of a support system for parental involvement (Trumbull et al., 2001). This study shows that an effective support system should be a priority within Abu Dhabi as the constraints tend to separate school and home.

Within the sociocultural context itself, there are constraints which arise from the cultural norms and mores of Emirati society. As Bensman (2000) and Trumbull et al. (2001) point out, it is important that parents are consulted on how to minimize sociocultural constraints that impact parental involvement. For example, as the norms of this society can restrict the movement of women, there should be consideration by schools as to how efforts should be channeled for a more comfortable fit. The changing social realities that surround children, such as divorce and an increase in the number of working mothers, should also affect culturally sensitive policies and provisions. Parental involvement should accommodate for the needs of a range of home circumstances by adjusting provisions and processes in order to facilitate parental involvement rather than limit it from happening.

There has been a fundamental shift in paradigm from a traditional approach to a constructivist approach to teaching and learning. This, combined with

parent knowledge, experience, and background to understand and adopt new initiatives, should be given due consideration as parents may be illiterate, have limited knowledge of English, and have experience of schooling in a traditional model. These western-based epistemologies and pedagogies have resulted in a fundamental knowledge and language gap which does not sit comfortably with stakeholders and necessitates a sociocultural approach to mediation (Wertsch, 1991). Stakeholders have acknowledged this gap and concur that parents should question and provide input into the new curriculum and pedagogy. Similarly, gaps have occurred on all dimensions of parental involvement (Epstein, 1995). As a result, parents have been compromised, whether through knowledge and language, or through a lack of transparency, provisions, and communication. Further, there have been few effective efforts or positive results of mediation.

A few innovative attempts have been made by school administrators to bridge the gaps identified for parents. An example is schools which are offering workshops to parents on information technology and English language. Such innovations, though reportedly having had some positive effects, do not directly tackle the immediate needs identified by parents. In reality, education, training, and support to build collaborative capacities both in the short and long term should be provided for stakeholders, including networking with others and seeking professional assistance at all levels.

Recommendations

Drawing from the perspectives of the stakeholder groups as to the constraints and subsequent limitations of parental involvement, recommendations can be made that should work well within the sociocultural context of Abu Dhabi. Many concerns can be alleviated by involving stakeholders in the education reform process. Stakeholder voices on the dimension of parental involvement should be noted through meaningful and constructive dialogues conducted bilingually and with respect for the first language. Processes and provisions which have been identified as limitations should be modified. Stakeholders, inclusive of parents, need to be empowered to be important constructive change agents. This cannot be achieved without adequate budgeting, staffing, provisions, support structures, and accessible and effective communication channels. Clear roles and responsibilities need to be worked through with the stakeholders, and continuing education for both parents and school staff should support both short and long term goals.

Greater transparency is needed during this continuing paradigm shift as change is inevitable. School administrators need to be informed in advance

about school reforms, plans, and changes to be proactive and actively engaged in decision making. Parental involvement efforts should be evaluated and ongoing modifications made as stakeholders become constructive agents of change participating in meaningful dialogue during the change process.

Findings from our study suggest that schools, with ADEC's support and guidance, need to become active decision-making entities by being ready and prepared to accommodate such rapid and fundamentally disorienting transitions through organizational structures and policies (at both the macro and micro level), implemented through appropriate and functioning communication systems, and providing support structures to facilitate parents' involvement in their children's education. These schools currently tend to offer limited support as challenges presented are handled reactively and/or in an *ad hoc* manner. Budgeting, restructuring, and staffing are needed to strengthen and expand on existing systems designed to support parental involvement. Systematic improvement (and, in some cases, restructuring) is needed to strengthen and expand existing systems of communication. This should happen with increased involvement of professional Arabic-speaking translators to work as effective sociocultural and language mediators, because language is the most critical tool for cultural transmission (Vygotsky, 1986).

Conclusion

This study has explored the issues and portrayed a picture of the status quo of parental involvement in the context of Abu Dhabi. It has provided some in-depth understanding of the current state of the situation, identifying constraints and subsequent limitations in the sociocultural context and context of rapid change. The findings are valuable to inform the process of parental involvement in this milieu, and may be helpful to others in the process of educational reforms and rapid change, as well. As this is a small scale study, the researchers recommend that further research be carried out on all aspects of parental involvement in Abu Dhabi.

In summary, the researchers conclude that a gap has been created between the rhetoric of ADEC's need for parental involvement (NSM Policy Manual, 2010, p. 35) and the reality of its implementation. Overall, the findings call for reciprocation between home and school through effective dialoguing to develop a framework which accommodates stakeholders comfortably and occurs effectively in context. It is envisaged that a homegrown model of parental involvement will evolve with careful monitoring and evaluative processes occurring at all levels and on all dimensions through ongoing stakeholder participation. The gap will close between the school and home in ways that empower stakeholders in the process and support children's school success.

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Appendix: Interview Guidelines

Interview Guidelines for Parents:

1. What does parental involvement mean to you? Please explain.
2. In what ways do you consider parental involvement significant? Please explain.
3. How does the school communicate with you to inform you about opportunities for involvement in school? What are the ways of communicating that the school follows in order to involve you as a parent? Please explain.
4. Do you have any suggestions on how the school can improve parental involvement? Please explain.
5. In what aspects or ways does the school involve parents?
6. Are there any factors that may limit parents' involvement at your school? If so, what are these limitations?
7. What do you think are the effects (for parents and for children) of limited or no parental involvement in school/at home?
8. What areas would you like to be involved in at the school in the future? Please explain some of these opportunities for parental involvement.
9. Are there any factors that may limit you from being involved at your child's school?
10. As a parent, have you personally been involved at your child's school? How? In what ways?
11. Are there policies that encourage or enhance parents' involvement at the school? What are these guidelines and policies?

Interview Guidelines for Teachers, Social Workers, and Administrators:

1. What does parental involvement mean to you? Please explain.
2. In what ways do you consider parental involvement significant? Please explain.
3. How does the school communicate with parents to inform them about opportunities for involvement in school? What are the ways of communicating that the school uses in order to involve parents? Please explain.
4. Do you have any suggestions on how the school can improve parental involvement in the school? Please explain.
5. In what aspects or ways does the school involve parents?
6. Are there any factors that may limit parents' involvement at your school? If so, what are these limitations?
7. What do you think are the effects (for parents and for children) of limited or no parental involvement in school/at home?
8. What areas would you like parents to be involved at the school in the future? What are the opportunities of involvement for parents? Please explain.
9. Are there any factors that may limit parents from being involved at your school?
10. Does the school have any policies that encourage or enhance parental involvement? What are these guidelines and policies?

Parents' Involvement Among the Arab Ethnic Minority in the State of Israel

Raed F. Zedan

Abstract

This study examined parent involvement in children's education among the Israeli Arab population and the degree of influence of various background factors on their involvement. The correlations between parent involvement and pupil achievement were examined in relation to the characteristics of the pupils (i.e., age, gender). About 400 parents participated in this research, and a parent involvement questionnaire was used to measure the degree of involvement. It was found that parents of girls participated and were involved in their daughters' studies more than parents of boys. It was also found that the more parents supported and believed in the importance of learning, the higher their children's achievement was. Regarding age level, it was found that parents of children in elementary schools participated and were more involved in the education of their child than parents of children in secondary schools.

Key words: parental involvement, Israel, Arab, ethnic minority, student achievement, age, gender, parents, expectations, aspirations, elementary, secondary

Introduction

Since the 1970s, social changes in Israel and throughout the world have increased the desire of parents to take an active role in the educational system (Friedman & Fisher, 2003). Beginning in the 1990s, attempts were made to understand the reasons that led to parental involvement (Friedman & Fisher,

2002), and there was an increased demand for expanding the involvement of parents and for creating models for the relations between the parents and the school (Toran-Kaplan, 2004).

Parents can have a strong influence over the education of their children. They have the ability to shape, nurture, and develop them as pupils who are active, interested, diligent, creative, and tolerant by showing positive involvement in their children's studies and in their educational activities in general. On the other hand, parents can destroy motivation and learning capabilities by negligence and indifference towards their children's achievements.

Henderson and Mapp (2002) reviewed 51 studies and concluded that there is "…a positive and convincing relationship between family involvement and benefits for students, including improved academic achievement." This relationship holds across families of all economic, racial/ethnic, and educational backgrounds and for students of all ages.

In view of the importance of this issue, and considering the paucity of data and findings that could clarify and describe the situation regarding this issue in the Arab sector in Israel, it is important to investigate the matter empirically from various aspects with reference to cultural and gender-related characteristics. The aims of this study are to measure the level of parent involvement among the Arab population in the State of Israel and to examine the relationship between the various background factors and the involvement of parents in the education of their children.

Parent Involvement

The definition of parent involvement includes a variety of activities by parents: (a) conversations at home; (b) attention and supervision at home; (c) contact between parents and school; and (d) participation in parent–teacher meetings. Henderson and Mapp (2002) defined parent involvement as:

- Engaging in learning activities at home, including helping with reading skills and checking homework
- Supervising children and monitoring how they spend their time out of school
- Talking about school and what children are learning
- Attending school events, going to parent–teacher conferences, meeting with teachers, and volunteering in the classroom or school

Similarly, Ho and Willms (1996) identified four basic types of involvement. Two are based at home and two at school:

- Discussing school activities
- Monitoring out-of-school activities

- Contacts with school staff
- Volunteering and attending parent–teacher conferences and other school events

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) conducted a literature review to learn why parents become involved in their children's learning. From their analysis, they developed a theoretical model to explain why parents are involved. Their model suggests that parents' involvement decisions and choices are based on several constructs. The first is parents' "personal construction of the parent role" (p. 8)—what parents believe they are supposed to do regarding their children's education. This construct suggests that different cultural and class contexts shape how parents define their role and how they engage in their children's education. The second construct focuses on parents' "personal sense of efficacy for helping children succeed in school" (p. 8). This has to do with whether parents believe and are confident about their ability to be helpful to their child. The third construct influencing parents' decisions about their involvement comes from "general invitations, demands, and opportunities for family involvement" (p. 9). In this construct, the child's age and developmental level, overall level of performance, personality qualities, and general enthusiasm about parents' involvement at the school all influence parents' decisions about participation. Thus, school staff and children signal their expectations about involvement to parents, and these signals ultimately influence parents' decisions.

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) suggest that schools and communities can better engage families by working actively to invite and welcome parent involvement and by developing programs that support and enhance parents' efficacy for involvement in their children's schooling. Shaped in part by Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (1986) and based upon the results of psychological and sociological studies, the model of Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995, 1997) adds to our understanding by focusing on parental sense of efficacy and parental role construction. Parents decide to participate when they understand that collaboration is part of their role as parents, when they believe they can positively influence their child's education, and when they perceive that the child and the school wish them to be involved. The model of Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler demonstrates that to increase parental involvement, the school and the teachers must focus, at least in part, upon parents' perspectives on the issue.

Friedman and Fisher (2003) note that parents' involvement is expressed in a wide range of activities that mainly concern the organization of parents in schools and the nature of their contacts with the school staff. Trusty (1999) points to two focal points of parent involvement: in the home, and in the school. This finding is further reinforced by Seginer (2002). Today it

has become a commonly accepted practice to indicate these two main bases for parent involvement. The involvement of parents in the home consists of educational activities of the parents with the aim of promoting the learning (academic) achievements of the child in three fields: cognitive, motivational, and behavioral (emotional support, help in preparing homework, counseling, and guidance). Parents' involvement in the school consists of engagement in extracurricular activities such as assistance within the school framework in the various social, organizational, or maintenance aspects (formation of school policy and informal activities) of the school (Seginer, 2006).

Parent involvement is multidimensional, composed of various kinds of behaviors, attitudes, and parental expectations (Toran-Kaplan, 2004). Involvement implies the dedication of resources by parents for the benefit of the child in a certain sphere and the total number of activities in which the parents can participate and that can contribute either directly or indirectly towards the education of their children (Slowiaczek, 1999, as cited in Ginsburg, 2008). Epstein (1996) emphasized the term partnership as an expression for parent involvement, which means to identify parents' and educators' interests in responsibility for the children to work together to create better programs. The participation of parents in the educational and social process in the schools is intended as the realization of their democratic right to do so (OECD, 1997). The decision of the parents to be involved is influenced in the wider sense by the social environment of the parents' lives (Jessor, 1995).

In an age in which the school is part of the community and in the competitive market in which schools compete over parent support, the involvement of parents is of the greatest importance (Wherry, 2002). Without the participation of parents, the educational system today is not only unable to succeed but finds it difficult to function (Glick, 2007). The integration of parents in educational activities constitutes one of the important conditions for contribution of the parents (knowing the world of the child, improving the self-image of the child) as well as of the teachers (practical assistance and emotional support that reduce burnout; Peled, 1999). Successful schools are those that promote positive and comprehensive communication with parents (Toran-Kaplan, 2007).

Minorities and Education

Various minorities in the world that have found themselves without a basis for their traditional form of existence have turned to new horizons in order to establish their future. In the modern period, when many states developed educational systems open to all, minorities regarded education as an alternative route for collective advancement. For example, the Jews in many countries around the world made use of education as a most successful strategy for

mobility. In the United States, where the Jews are one of the smallest minorities, they can be found today in the highest social and economic ranks, thanks to the adoption of this strategy (Rinawi, 1996).

The Palestinians in Jordan can serve as another example of a collective entity that adopted education as a strategy for group mobility. Jordanian residents of Palestinian origin have succeeded in surviving as a collective body and in attaining high positions in the state, whether in the government or in the Jordanian economy, by virtue of education and their awareness of its importance as the main means to achieve personal and group mobility, especially in a non-democratic regime such as the Jordanian Kingdom (Hallaj, 1980).

Other researchers have attempted to claim that the Palestinian minority in Israel has moved in this direction as well. For example, Mari' (1978), the first Palestinian researcher to examine Palestinian education in Israel, claims that the Palestinian citizens of Israel regarded education as an alternative to the land they lost after the establishment of the state and turned it into a means for mobility and for social and economic prestige. Al-Haj (1991) agrees with this view. He claims that:

> The deprivation of Arabs from their economic base (land) and their limited access to the opportunity structure have eventually increased the importance of education for the competition over local and national resources….In the new system, education has replaced land as a major element of the individual's socioeconomic status. (p. 150)

However, the data on the low achievement of the Palestinian citizens of Israel in high schools and universities does not indicate that state education has become a means for mobility for most of the members of this group. The level of education of the Arab minority is very low in comparison with the Jewish majority. It is worth mentioning that more than 75% of the Arab population in Israel are Muslims. The guidelines and religious commandments of the Islamic religion obligate Muslim parents to take an interest in their sons and daughters, to educate them and raise them in the best possible way, beginning with the choice of an accepted name and going on to ensure food, clothing, and studies. Moreover, Islam considers that the highest form of charity is that which is offered to children and the family of a believing Muslim. There is an explicit command in Islam that every parent will be held in account for his or her sons and daughters and is required to care for their safety, their lives, and their future. There are very few studies in this field in the Arab sector in Israel and an insufficient picture of this phenomenon.

Cummins (1986) proposed a framework for changing the relationship between families and schools so that all children would have a better chance to

succeed. Citing research by John Ogbu, he points out that minority groups with low status tend to perform below standard. This is because they have taken to heart the inferiority that others assign to them. The central principle of Cummins's framework is that students from "dominated" groups can do well in school if they are empowered, rather than disabled, by their relationships with educators. Willis (1981) and Ogbu (1978, 1981) explain resistance and academic disengagement as a reaction or adaptation to an oppressive, stigmatizing sociocultural system (Foley, 2004). Ogbu (2003) agrees up to a point, but ends up stressing that Black students must be more pragmatic and less concerned about whether teachers and the system "care for" them.

Parent Involvement: Gender, Age, and Academic Achievements

Ginsburg (2008) found that parents are more involved with their sons than with their daughters, that mothers were more involved than fathers, and that the younger the child, the more the parents were involved. Parents were found to be interested in developing contacts with the school, especially when the children were in the lower grades (Power, 1985). Shulman (1995) also found that parent involvement decreases as the child's age rises, either because of the higher level of study demands, which makes it difficult for the parent to cope, or because of maturity (physical growth and sexual development) and the fact that as they grow up, children want to be independent of their parents.

Parent involvement constitutes an important component in successful learning achievements (Toran-Kaplan, 2004). There is a positive and direct correlation between various aspects of parent involvement and the behavior of parents in supporting the academic achievements of their children (Wentzel, 1998). Williams (1994) found that this correlation is consistent across ethnic lines. Wanat (1997) stressed that parents believe their involvement contributes positively to improvement in the achievements of their children, and Dayan (1999) also found this to be true. This connection can significantly be found among various age groups, at different school levels, and in different social sectors. Jesse (2001) likewise found that parent involvement contributes to the higher academic achievement of pupils and assisted in their advancement.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1. Is there a difference in the level of parent involvement and its factors between parents of boys and parents of girls?
2. Is there a positive correlation between parent involvement and learning (academic) achievements among boys and girls?
3. Is there a difference in the level of parent involvement according to the age level of their children?

Research Method

The design of this research is of the *ex post facto* type (examination after action). It is field research that is quantitative, correlative, and descriptive. Since the variables in this research occurred retroactively, the researcher had no control over the involvement of parents, even on other variables, and was an outside observer on the process after it had taken place. In this research, the description and measurement of the phenomenon of parent involvement in schools in the Arab sector of Israel was conducted, as well as an examination of the differences between the varying personal and learning categories with regard to the dependent variable. In order to describe the involvement of parents according to the perception of the parents themselves, a factor analysis was carried out by the method of Principal Axis Factoring in accordance with direct oblimin rotation. An internal consistency of reliability analysis was carried out to measure the reliability for the factors that were produced. The research questions were examined by one-way MANOVA.

Population and Sample

This study targeted a population of Arab parents and their children studying within the Arab education system in the State of Israel. This population suffers from enormous difficulties and serious educational problems as a result of a policy of continued negligence and discrimination, a dearth of resources, and the general implications this has for the process of teaching and education. Non-Jewish schools are underprivileged in the allocation of resources (Golan-Agnon, 2005; Jabareen, 2005). The Arab-Palestinian minority living in the State of Israel is considered to be lacking the resources that would provide their children with socioeconomic mobility, such as means of production, education, and professional skills (Jiryis, 1976).

The current research tries to shed light on this problem from a different perspective. A random sample was selected with 408 boys and girls of different ages, from Grades 3 to 11, in eight schools located in five Arab towns in the north of the country. Their parents were invited to participate in the research and completed a parent involvement questionnaire.

Research Tools

Surveys were used in this study as they are designed to obtain information about the performance, attitudes, habits, and interests of a particular group of people—in this case, parents of school-age children (Gay & Airasian, 2003). Surveys are also a quick and easy method of obtaining data. Researchers argue that the quantitative approach is more objective, structured with high

reliability and validity (Coolican, 1999). However, when using self-reporting questionnaires, there is no way to verify that the answers are correct; it is unclear whether some respondents exaggerate in describing their actions, or vice versa. The kind of people who agree to answer these questionnaires can be fundamentally different from those who refuse to answer.

For this study, a multiple-choice questionnaire was used (Seginer, 2002). The questionnaire was structured, anonymous, and was meant to be a personal account for measuring the level of parental involvement and its aspects according to the perceptions of the parents themselves. The answers were constructed according to a Likert scale of five levels (1 = very seldom to 5 = always); there were 35 statements describing parent involvement. The items on this questionnaire were composed on the basis of the distinction between the two focal points of parent involvement: the home, and the school. Toran-Kaplan (2004) made use of this questionnaire for a population of Jewish pupils and parents and carried out an analysis that produced five factors: (1) "continuous" home-focused involvement; (2) position of parents towards the school and studies; (3) "continuous" school-focused involvement; (4) involvement focused on the school when a problem arises; (5) involvement focused on the school during "special activities."

A factor analysis was carried out for this research; using the Principal Axis Factoring method according to direct oblimin rotation, six significant factors were constructed. The criterion for the number of factors was on the value basis of Eigenvalue above 1. For each factor, the items that were chosen were those which had a loading higher than 0.4 (see Appendix A).

It should be noted that in the first factor analysis, item 22 in the original questionnaire did not satisfy the criterion of the loading and was therefore omitted. Beside this, items 6, 15, 19, 20, and 21 were omitted from the composition of the first factor because they did not fully correspond to the factor content, and the influence of the latter was very minimal on the reliability of the factor. Item 8 was omitted from the second factor because it did not fully correspond to the factor content, which raised the level of its reliability. Item 16 was omitted from the third factor because it did not fully correspond to the factor content, and there was no significant influence on reliability.

Thus, a repeat factor analysis was carried out after the deletion of items that did not measure up to the criterion of the loading and the criterion of content and meaning correspondence in the first analysis (6, 8, 15, 16, 19, 20, 21, 22). The analysis yielded the following factors: (1) monitoring (participation of the parent in the initiative of their child); (2) support and belief in the importance of studies; (3) participation in group activities in the school and contact with the teachers; (4) involvement when a problem arises concerning the child; (5) participation in personal activities; (6) indifference to the child's achievements.

(1) Monitoring (participation of the parent in the initiative of the child) included items like: My child tells me what he learned at school; My child involves me in his homework. (2) Support and belief in the importance of studies included items like: I think that education is a very important part of life; I think that education is very important to advancing in life. (3) Participation in group activities in the school and contact with the teachers included items like: When there are programs for parents in the school I attend them; I initiate talks with teachers. (4) Involvement when a problem arises concerning the child included items like: When my child returns from school unhappy because the teacher was angry with him, I immediately call the school; When the teacher gives my child a grade that he does not deserve, I immediately call or go to the school to speak to the teacher. (5) Participation in personal activities included items like: I accompany trips that the school organizes; I volunteer at the school. (6) Indifference to the achievements of the son or daughter included items like: I hardly ever see the school tests and assignments of my child; I don't really care about the grades that my child receives. The 3rd and 5th factors involved, respectively, activities that required participation of a group of parents working collectively or tasks that one parent could participate in by themselves; in some tasks, parents participated or refrained from participating depending on its nature, time, or interest.

Table 1. Factors of Parent Involvement

	Factor	Items	Cronbach Alpha Coefficient	M*	S.D.
1	Monitoring	14, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35	α = 0.884	4.054	0.854
2	Support and belief in the importance of studies	11, 17, 18, 23, 24, 25	α = 0.840	4.570	0.675
3	Participation in group activities and contact with the teachers	1, 2, 3, 4, 5	α = 0.762	3.906	0.884
4	Involvement when a problem arises	7, 9, 10	α = 0.674	3.639	1.061
5	Participation in personal activities	26, 27, 28	α = 0.603	2.113	1.077
6	Indifference to the achievements of the son or daughter	12, 13	r = 0.435**	2.319	1.381
7	**General Parent Involvement**	1 – 35	α = 0.881	3.867	0.580

*The scale of answers range between 1 and 5, with 1 being low and 5 being high.

**The factor of "indifference to achievements" is composed of only two items, therefore the Pearson-coefficient is considered as the measure of reliability.

First question: Is there a difference in the level of parent involvement and its factors between parents of boys and parents of girls?

In order to examine whether there is a difference in the level of parent involvement between parents of boys and parents of girls, a one-way MANOVA was carried out. Table 2 presents the sum of squares and the mean square for the source of the variance.

Table 2. Summary of the MANOVA for Comparison by Pupil Gender

Source of Variance	Dependent Variable	SS	D.F.	MS	F
Gender	Monitoring	9.31	1	9.31	13.14***
	Support and belief in the importance of studies	4.91	1	4.91	10.66**
	Participation in group activities and contact with the teachers	1.36	1	1.36	1.74
	Involvement when a problem arises	0.01	1	0.01	0.01
	Participation in personal activities	5.46	1	5.46	4.73*
	Indifference to the achievements of the son or daughter	9.66	1	9.66	5.22*
	General Parent Involvement	2.68	1	2.68	8.04**
Error	Monitoring	260.03	367	0.71	
	Support and belief in the importance of studies	169.09	367	0.46	
	Participation in group activities and contact with the teachers	286.81	367	0.78	
	Involvement when a problem arises	426.36	367	1.16	
	Participation in personal activities	423.55	367	1.15	
	Indifference to the achievements of the son or daughter	679.81	367	1.85	
	General Parent Involvement	122.33	367	0.33	
Total	Monitoring	6321.74	369		
	Support and belief in the importance of studies	7844.81	369		
	Participation in group activities and contact with the teachers	5910.03	369		
	Involvement when a problem arises	5342.25	369		
	Participation in personal activities	2087.67	369		
	Indifference to the achievements of the son or daughter	2624.50	369		
	General Parent Involvement	5628.24	369		

*$p < 0.05$ **$p < 0.01$ ***$p < 0.001$

The analysis showed that there exists an outstanding difference in the factor of parent participation in the initiative of the child (monitoring) between parents of boys and parents of girls ($F(1, 369) = 13.14$, $p < 0.001$). This factor is much higher among parents of girls than among parents of boys. A significant difference was found in the support and belief in the importance of learning between parents of boys and parents of girls ($F(1, 369) = 10.66$, $p < 0.01$). This factor is also higher among parents of girls than among parents of boys. Another difference was found in the factor of participation in personal activities between parents of boys and parents of girls ($F(1, 369) = 4.73$, $p < 0.05$). This factor is higher among parents of boys than among parents of girls. A further difference appears in the factor of indifference to achievements between parents of boys and parents of girls ($F(1, 369) = 5.22$, $p < 0.05$). This factor is higher among parents of boys than among parents of girls. Additionally, a significant difference exists in the general involvement of parents between the parents of boys and the parents of girls ($F(1, 369) = 8.04$, $p < 0.01$). This factor was higher among parents of girls than among parents of boys (see the averages and the standard deviations of involvement by parents of boys and parents of girls in Appendix B, available from the author upon request).

Second question: Is there a correlation between parent involvement and learning achievements among boys and among girls?

In order to examine the correlation between the factors of parent involvement and learning achievements, Pearson coefficients were calculated for the variables among boys and girls separately (seeTable 3).

A significant and positive correlation was found between the factor of monitoring and the academic achievement of girls, as well as between the factor of support and encouragement and the achievement of boys and girls. The Pearson coefficient of correlation between the factor of support and encouragement and the achievement of girls is higher than the parallel Pearson coefficient among boys. A significant and positive correlation was also found between the factor of involvement when a problem arose and the achievement of boys and girls. The Pearson coefficient between the factor of involvement when a problem arose and the achievement of girls was higher than the parallel Pearson coefficient among boys. A significant and positive correlation was found between the general involvement of parents and the achievement of boys and girls. The Pearson coefficient between the general involvement of parents and the achievement of girls was again higher than the parallel Pearson coefficient among boys (see Appendix C, available from the author upon request).

Table 3. Correlation Between Factors of Parent Involvement and Achievement by Gender

Factor	Learning Achievements of Girls r_p	Learning Achievements of Boys r_p
Monitoring	0.281**	0.157
Support and belief in the importance of studies	0.263**	0.212*
Participation in group activities and contact with the teachers	0.000	0.054
Involvement when a problem arises	0.237*	0.208*
Participation in personal activities	0.008-	0.100
Indifference to the achievements of the son or daughter	-0.107	-0.004
General Parent Involvement	0.264**	0.188*

*$p < 0.05$ **$p < 0.01$ ***$p < 0.001$

Third question: Is there a difference in the level of parent involvement according to the age level of their children?

In order to examine whether there exists a difference in the level of parent involvement between parents of children in elementary schools and parents of children in secondary schools, a one-way MANOVA was conducted. Table 4 presents the sum and mean square for the source of the variance.

The analysis showed that there is a significant difference in the factor of parent participation in the initiative of the child (monitoring) between parents of children in elementary schools and parents of children in secondary schools ($F(1, 369) = 17.48$, $p < 0.001$). This factor was higher among the former. A similar difference exists in the factor of support and belief in the importance of learning between parents of children in elementary schools (higher) and parents of children in secondary schools ($F(1, 369) = 10.83$, $p < 0.01$). There is a noticeable difference in the factor of participation in group activities in school and the contact between teachers and parents of children in elementary schools and parents of children in secondary schools ($F(1, 369) = 3.88$, $p < 0.05$). This factor was again higher among the first. A marked difference occurs as well in the factor of indifference to achievements between parents of children in elementary schools and parents of children in secondary schools ($F(1, 369) = 8.21$, $p < 0.01$). This factor was higher among the second. A significant

difference was found in the general parent involvement between parents of children in elementary schools and parents of children in secondary schools (F(1, 369) = 10.71, $p < 0.01$), with higher involvement in elementary schools (see Appendix D, available from the author upon request).

Table 4. Summary of MANOVA for Comparison of Involvement Factors According to Age

Source of Variance	Dependent Variable	SS	D.F.	MS	F
Age	Monitoring	12.36	1	12.37	17.48***
	Support and belief in the importance of studies	4.96	1	4.96	10.83**
	Participation in group activities and contact with the teachers	3.08	1	3.08	3.88*
	Involvement when a problem arises	2.28	1	2.28	1.99
	Participation in personal activities	1.74	1	1.74	1.50
	Indifference to the achievements of the son or daughter	15.05	1	15.05	8.21**
	General Parent Involvement	3.57	1	3.57	10.71**
Error	Monitoring	266.73	377	0.71	
	Support and belief in the importance of studies	172.66	377	0.46	
	Participation in group activities and contact with the teachers	298.57	377	0.79	
	Involvement when a problem arises	431.32	377	1.14	
	Participation in personal activities	435.90	377	1.16	
	Indifference to the achievements of the son or daughter	690.95	377	1.83	
	General Parent Involvement	125.81	377	0.43	
Total	Monitoring	6459.85	379		
	Support and belief in the importance of studies	8046.33	379		
	Participation in group activities and contact with the teachers	6043.64	379		
	Involvement when a problem arises	5464.47	379		
	Participation in personal activities	2129.11	379		
	Indifference to the achievements of the son or daughter	2721.50	379		
	General Parent Involvement	5755.84	379		

*$p < 0.05$ **$p < 0.01$ ***$p < 0.001$

Discussion

After analysis of the factors that led to parent involvement in the educational process of their sons and daughters, six relevant factors were discovered in this research: (1) monitoring (participation of the parent in the initiative of the son or daughter); (2) support and belief in the importance of learning; (3) participation in group activities in the school and contact with the teachers; (4) involvement when a problem arises with the son or daughter; (5) participation in personal activities; (6) indifference to the achievements of the son or daughter. It must be noted that the analysis of the factors in the present research produced a new factor, "indifference to achievements," as well as the difference between participation with group activities in which the parent participates with other parents, and participation in individual activities, in which the parent is not dependent upon the participation of a parent group.

There is a certain overlap between these factors and the factors found in other studies. Seginer (2002) spoke about three central points: home-focused parental involvement, school-focused parental involvement, and monitoring—participation of the parent in the initiative of the child. Toran-Kaplan (2004) made use of the same questionnaire and carried out an analysis of the factors that yielded five factors: "continuous" home-focused involvement, position of the parents towards the school and learning, school-focused involvement, involvement focused on the school when problems arise, and involvement focused on the school for "special activities."

First Question: Parent Involvement and Gender

The findings showed that parents of girls were more involved in the initiative of their daughters and took greater part in the activities than parents of boys. In other words, the girls apparently involved their parents more than the boys did. The girls told their parents what they had learned at school, what occurred in class, and kept their parents informed of activities in the class. They mentioned their future plans, involving their parents in problems in the class and at school, and turned to them when they found difficulties with their homework. They did all this more than the boys. Parents of girls reported believing in the importance of learning more than parents of boys. Parents of girls also thought that scholarship was an important part of the lives of their daughters and that homework was a very important part of their studies. When their daughter received a grade that was not good, the parents encouraged her to make a greater effort. They thought education was important to advance in life and assisted their daughters when they asked for help in their homework.

A significant difference existed as well in the factor of indifference to achievements between parents of boys and parents of girls. Parents of boys were more indifferent than the parents of girls; they hardly ever looked at the tests and work done by their sons, and they do not seem to care as much about the grades their sons receive. Parents of girls were found to be generally more involved than parents of boys. The only positive difference in favor of the boys was the factor of participation in personal activities. Parents of boys participated in personal activities more than parents of girls, participating in parent programs, Parents Day, initiating talks with teachers, and were familiar with the educator of their children.

The findings of the present study contradicts those of Ginsburg (2008) who found that parents were more involved in relation to their sons than to their daughters. I think the greater interest and involvement of Arab parents in their daughters' studies than those of their sons has various reasons, and might be explained on three levels:

1. The level of study and scholarship: The rise in the percentage of girls who continue their secondary and higher education studies and the impressive achievements of many girls have caused parents to treat their daughters in a way that is different from that of previous decades. An additional report (OECD, 2007) emphasized that the self-image of girls is higher in relation to their professional future. More girls see themselves as belonging in the future to the "white-collar" sector.

2. The phenomenon of feminism: Al-Hajj (1996) pointed to the significant rise in the percentage of Arab female teachers. Eilyan, Zedan, and Toran (2007) note that the percentage of women in the Arab sector who are studying in kindergarten- and teacher-training institutions today is 92.4% of all the students. Women teachers are capable of developing positive attitudes towards their girl pupils rather than towards boy pupils. They are liable to encourage girls and to support them both educationally and morally, and their support has implications on the level of parental involvement.

3. The religious level: The religion of Islam encourages the education of girls. One of the Hadiths of the Prophet Muhammad was: "Studies are the duty of every Muslim man and Muslim woman." The Prophet did not differentiate between the sexes and even recommended that girls should study in the same way as boys.

The rise of the Islamic movement at the end of the 20th century led to a return to religion and a change in values among Muslims throughout the world, and this did not exclude Israeli Arabs. Many of the supporters of the new Islamic movement are educated people, graduates of secular schools, products

of modernization (Ali, 2004). Arjomand (1984) claimed that the power of Islamic fundamentalism has strengthened as a result of the increase in the rate of educated people among the population, which has raised the level of involvement of urbanites and intellectuals, in general, and of students, in particular. This new spirit has brought about, among other things, a strengthening of the status of the Muslim woman and given emphasis to her education.

The increasing involvement of parents in the studies of their daughters is reflected in the equal treatment they receive in the school (Zedan, 2006). Zedan also found that teachers devoted equal attention to boys and girls in science subjects and mathematics (Zedan, 2010). Jesse (2001) found that parent involvement not only contributes to higher academic achievement of the pupils and assists in their advancement, but even improves the self-image of the teachers. Parental involvement assists teachers and supports them emotionally. Moreover, it was found that the involvement of parents contributes to the morale of the teachers and leads to an improvement of class climate and increased efforts by the teachers in educational processes (Fan & Chen, 2001). Zedan (2010) found that the teacher–pupil relationship and gender equality are two of the most important components in class atmosphere.

Second Question: Parent Involvement and Learning Achievements

It was found that the more parents supported and believed in the importance of learning, the higher were the achievements of both girls and boys. This correlation was stronger among the girls. The more parents were involved when a problem arose, the higher the achievement of both girls and boys. Here, too, the correlation was stronger among the girls. Achievement of boys and girls also increased the more that general parental involvement increased. The findings of the present research support those of Todd and Higgins (1998) and Henderson and Mapp (2002), showing that parents were the most influential factor on the achievements of their children. This relationship holds across families of all economic, racial/ethnic, and educational backgrounds for students of all ages.

Also influential were the educators, including educational advisors who worked together with the pupils and their families to solve pupils' problems and to promote their achievements (Amatea, Daniels, Bringman, & Vandiver, 2004). Toran-Kaplan (2004) found a positive relation between home-focused parent involvement and self-esteem and learning achievements. Generally speaking, a direct relation can be found between success in learning and pupils whose parents were "involved parents," as compared with those whose parents were not involved (Edwards & Young, 1992). Parents become more involved in their children's education at home and at school when they perceive

that their collaboration is actively encouraged by the teachers and the school (Deslandes, 2001). Perhaps teachers encouraging the parents of both boys and girls to be more involved in their child's education could result in higher academic achievement among the Arab population in Israel, as well.

Third Question: Parent Involvement and Age Level

With regard to age level, it was found that parents of children in elementary schools participated and were more involved in the initiative of their child than parents of children in secondary schools. Parents of children in elementary schools were also found to be more supportive and encouraging and believed in the importance of learning more than parents with children in secondary schools. On the other hand, parents of children in secondary schools were more indifferent to the achievements of their children than parents of children in elementary schools. Furthermore, parents of children in elementary schools were generally more involved in what was happening with their children than parents of children in secondary schools.

These findings support those of other researchers (Power, 1985; Shulman, 1995) who discovered that the younger the child, the more the parents were involved, and that as age increased involvement decreased. Parental involvement is highest at the primary level, declines significantly around the fourth grade, and reaches its lowest peak at the secondary level (Deslandes, 2001). Reasons for this decline are the child's developmental stage (e.g., adolescents who want more independence), parents' sense of efficacy for helping their child solve problems, and the greater complexity of school work at the secondary level.

However, the findings contradict studies that showed parents as being interested in developing contacts with the school mainly when their children are in lower grades. The present research shows that Arab parents of children in secondary schools in Israel participate in group activities in school and create contacts with teachers more than parents of children in elementary schools. It may be that the reason for this is the branching out of subjects in secondary schools and the multiplicity of problems in connection with the pupil. In elementary schools the number of teachers with whom the pupil comes into contact is relatively smaller than the number of teachers he/she comes into contact with in secondary schools.

Summary

This study has examined parent involvement among the Arab population in Israel and the degree of influence of various background factors on their involvement. The correlations between parent involvement and pupil achieve-

ment were examined in relation to the characteristics of the pupils (age, gender). With regard to the correlation between parent involvement and gender, it was found that parents of girls were involved in their daughters' studies more than parents of boys. An examination of the correlation between parent involvement and learning/academic achievement showed that parent involvement was very important for the success of the pupils. The relationship between parent involvement and age level showed that the younger the child was, the more the parents were involved. The task of those taking part in parent involvement in education is to avoid confrontations as much as possible, since the successful cooperation of parents in the educational process contributes greatly to its success. On this matter there is full agreement among the experts who think that the process of parental cooperation will continue to increase and broaden into many more spheres, and parents will become much more empowered.

Recommendations

The school–family relationship is currently a topic of interest among parents, teachers, policymakers, and all those involved in childhood education. Parents are one of the most influential factors on the lives of their children. They have the ability to shape, sustain, and develop pupils who will be active, interested, diligent, creative, and tolerant, through the parents' positive involvement in the learning process and educational activities. On the other hand, parents are also capable of repressing and destroying the motivation and ability of their children through neglect and indifference to their achievements (Zedan, 2011).

Based on the belief that parental involvement has a significant impact across various populations, schools should adopt strategies to enhance parental engagement in their children's schooling. Teachers, principals, and school counselors should familiarize themselves with the facets of parental involvement that can help the most so that they can guide parents on what steps they can take to become more involved. Educators should consistently encourage parents to become more involved in their children's schooling. It is recommended that this issue be studied more intensively, quantitatively as well as qualitatively. It might also be useful to perform confirmatory factor analysis and to apply more sophisticated statistical techniques in researching this topic, such as structural equation modeling.

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Appendix A: Factor Analysis by Direct Oblimin Rotation

Factor/ Item		Loading
	A. Mentoring - Participation of the parent in the initiative of the son/ daughter (Variance = 31.232%, eigenvalue = 10.931)	
1(14)	My child tells me what he learned at school	0.625
2(29)	My child tells me what happens in class	0.761
3(30)	My child informs me about activities in the classroom	0.779
4(31)	My child tells me about his plans for the future in school	0.654
5(32)	My child tells me whenever he has a problem in class	0.722
6(33)	My child involves me in his homework	0.529
7(34)	My child informs me about activities in the school	0.796
8(35)	My child tells me whenever he needs help in preparing his homework	0.720
	B. Support and belief in the importance of studies (Variance = 7.844%, eigenvalue = 2.746)	
1(11)	I think that education is a very important part of life	0.701
2(17)	I think that homework is an important part of studies	0.650
3(18)	When my child receives a bad mark I try to encourage him to make a greater effort	0.675
4(23)	I think that it is very important to advance in life	0.696
5(24)	When my child asks for help in homework I usually help him	0.672
6(25)	When my child receives bad marks I help him	0.601
	C. Participation in group activities in school and contact with teachers (Variance = 6.074%, eigenvalue = 2.126)	
1(1)	When there are programs for parents in the school I attend them	0.794
2(2)	When it is parents day at school I arrive	0.786
3(3)	I attend activities in school in which my child participates	0.662
4(4)	I initiate talks with teachers	0.463
5(5)	I know the educational supervisor of my child	0.439
	D. Involvement when a problem arises with the son/daughter (Variance = 4.168%, eigenvalue = 1.459)	
1(7)	When a problem arises in studies I talk with the teachers about it	0.390
2(9)	When my child returns from school unhappy because the teacher was angry with him, I immediately call the school	0.810
3(10)	When the teacher gives my child a mark that he does not deserve, I immediately call or go to the school to speak to the teacher	0.661
	E. Participation in personal activities (Variance = 4.023%, eigenvalue = 1.408)	
1(26)	I volunteer at the school	0.775
2(27)	I accompany trips that the school organizes	0.650
3(28)	I am a member of the school's parents	0.553
	F. Indifference to the achievements of the son/daughter (Variance = 3.357%, eigenvalue = 1.175)	
1(12)	I hardly ever see the school tests and assignments of my child	0.752
2(13)	I don't really care about the marks that my child receives	0.802

Exploring the Educational Involvement of Parents of English Learners

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Abstract

The purpose of the current investigation was to examine the relationships among a range of specific barriers and facilitators of parent involvement and a variety of types of school involvement within a diverse group of immigrant parents of English Learners (ELs) in four elementary school districts. In-home types of educational involvement such as monitoring homework and asking children about their school day were the most commonly reported behaviors, and utilizing community resources was found to be the least common type of parental involvement. Involvement type was predicted by parental demographic factors such as comfort with English language, educational background, and ethnicity, as well as perceptions of barriers and overall school climate. The findings of this study have implications for the design and implementation of interventions (e.g., parent programs, school policy changes) aimed at increasing the parental involvement of EL children.

Key Words: parental involvement, ethnic minorities, immigrants, English learners, second language, ELs, ELLs, ESL, family, parents, elementary schools, homework, communication, community resources, ethnicity, climate, barriers, policy, programs

Introduction

The population of children from immigrant families is growing faster than any other group of children in the United States (Hernandez, Denton, & Macartney, 2008). U.S. Department of Education statistics reveal that over 5 million school-age children are categorized as English Learners (ELs; NCELA, 2006). EL students have traditionally been defined as children whose English has not yet developed to the point where they can take full advantage of instruction in English (Coleman & Goldenberg, 2009). While not all EL children are from immigrant families (i.e., their parents were born outside the U.S.), there tends to be high overlap between these populations. ELs are more likely to have parents with lower formal education levels than their non-EL counterparts (Capps et al., 2005) and to come from low-income families (Garcia & Cuellar, 2006). These factors, in combination, often lead to lower levels of academic achievement in ELs (Jensen, 2008).

Parental educational involvement has been widely studied as one of the most important predictors of school success, not just in the United States, but in other countries as well (Davies, 1993; Smit & Driessen, 2007), suggesting that this is not a phenomenon restricted to the U.S. While some research suggests that parental involvement has the greatest impact on the academic success of younger children, the majority of the literature supports the contention that children of all ages with involved parents tend to have higher attendance, achievement levels, and more positive attitudes toward school (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Hill & Tyson, 2009) than those whose parents are less involved. However, several recent meta-analytic studies have found that different types of parent involvement (e.g., homework involvement) have different relationships to achievement (Patall, Cooper, & Robinson, 2008) and, furthermore, that parents' involvement changes as their children move through the school system. Thus, it is important to study specific types of parental involvement, since its impact on achievement tends to be variable (Hill & Tyson, 2009).

With regard to EL students specifically, Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2005) noted that programs which engage the family in the educational process, among other interventions, will effectively improve academic achievement. However, this population of parents often faces unique barriers to being more actively involved in their children's academic lives and, therefore, to being a more active part of the school community. There are school-based barriers, which may include a negative climate toward immigrant parents, individual barriers, such as a lack of dominant language proficiency (Quezada, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2003), and logistical barriers, such as work responsibilities and lack of childcare, which often make it difficult for parents to attend school functions (Valdes, 1996).

Despite the existence of such barriers, there are a multitude of ways that parents can be involved in and supportive of the educational experiences of their children (Ingram, Wolfe, & Lieberman, 2007). Epstein (1995; Epstein, Coates, Salinas, Sanders, & Simon, 1997) is one of the most influential scholars in this arena; her conceptualization of parental involvement has had an impact on the majority of research in this area. Epstein's multidimensional framework of parental involvement includes the following types: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community. Parenting refers to providing a home environment that is conducive with learning (e.g., having a reasonable bedtime, monitoring media consumption). Communicating refers to establishing regular, two-way avenues of dialogue with teachers and other relevant school staff. Volunteering refers to helping out at and supporting school functions or classroom activities. Learning at home refers to providing opportunities to enhance learning outside of school (e.g., monitoring homework, providing books or computers, talking to one's child about school). Decision making and collaborating with the community refer to participating in the development of school policy (e.g., joining the Parent Teacher Association) or community support for schools (e.g., running for school boards).

Based on this framework, it is possible to argue that despite one's level of formal education or linguistic proficiency, a parent can be significantly involved in supporting a child's educational success in a variety of ways. For example, parents can monitor their children's bedtimes, access to television and video games, or structure their child's homework schedule. They can also provide opportunities for visiting the library or accessing homework assistance in the community.

For other types of involvement, however, participating in one's child's educational success can be quite limited by a parent's linguistic proficiency or formal education. For example, being available to attend school functions, volunteering for school trips, or initiating communication with a teacher may be a challenge for the EL child's parent who does not have adequate English language skills or who works multiple jobs. Thus, rather than attempting to make generalizations about the quantity of parental involvement of EL children, it is important to define parental involvement as a multifaceted endeavor which may or may not be related to parental demographic characteristics (Borrero & Yeh, 2010; Dorner, Orellana, & Li-Grining, 2007).

While the aforementioned framework of parental involvement generally assumes that parents can initiate a variety of types of involvement, it is important to note that there are school barriers that may bias the type of involvement observed in particular groups of parents. Parents' experiences with the teachers,

counselors, and administrators at their children's school can set the stage for whether home–school communication and volunteering will be initiated or continued (Ariza, 2010). For example, if a parent of an EL child feels that his or her presence at the school is unwelcome or isolating (e.g., no bilingual staff or translators are available at the school), it may decrease the likelihood of a parent continuing to attend school events.

Similarly, parents' cultural values or beliefs about their role in the education of their children can also be a factor in limiting their involvement. For example, in some cultures, asking a teacher questions about his or her methods or assessment of a child would be considered disrespectful (De Gaetano, 2007). In many other countries, teachers are highly respected, and parents aim to not interfere with the way teachers do their jobs (Sosa, 1997). Thus, the mainstream cultural expectation in the United States—that parents are highly active advocates for their children within the school—can be a cultural incongruity for many parents of ELs.

What appears to be a consistent finding in the literature on immigrant parents, however, is that, as a group, there is a great importance placed on education. Among studies that have examined parental values toward education, there is growing consensus that immigrant parents often have even greater aspirations for their children's educational success than do U.S.-born parents (Kao & Tienda, 1995; Ramirez, 2008). In fact, Schaller, Rocha, and Barshinger (2006) found that regardless of parents' own level of formal education, 100% of immigrant parents in their sample expressed expectations that their children would graduate from high school and endorsed statements about the value of education in the lives of their children. Thus, the myth that parents of EL children simply do not value education (i.e., as much as U.S.-born parents) seems to be without merit.

While there has been some research that has examined factors that both facilitate and limit the educational involvement of parents of ELs, fewer studies have examined the relationships among a range of specific barriers or facilitators of parent involvement and a variety of types of involvement in a diverse group of EL parents. Without such specific information, it is challenging for schools to identify effective strategies for decreasing barriers and increasing the involvement of these parents. The purpose of the current investigation was to examine these variables collectively for an ethnically and socioeconomically diverse group of immigrant parents of EL students in elementary school districts. The findings of this study have implications for the design and implementation of interventions (e.g., parent programs, school policy changes) aimed at increasing the involvement of EL children's parents.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the current investigation:

1. What types of school involvement are the most and least commonly reported by parents of EL children?
2. What are the most common barriers to involvement in schools as reported by parents of EL children?
3. Are there significant relationships between educational aspirations, reported barriers, and specific types of involvement, as reported by parents of EL children?
4. Do demographic factors such as gender, ethnic background, highest level of formal education, or occupational status significantly impact aspirations, barriers, and specific types of involvement in schools as reported by parents of EL children?
5. What are the most significant predictors of specific types of parental involvement in schools as reported by parents of EL children?

Methods

Participants

Participants included 239 parents of EL children representing four elementary school districts in a large Midwestern metropolitan area. The districts volunteered for participation in the research based on their involvement in a large-scale project aimed at understanding and enhancing the academic experiences of EL children. All parents of EL-designated children were contacted for participation in this study. The response rates varied by district, ranging from 9% to 20%. Table 1 contains a summary of the response rates, sample sizes, and demographic characteristics of each school district's sample.

The parents who participated in the research represented 28 different cultural backgrounds, and 74% were mothers (26% fathers). In terms of cultural background, 53% were born in Mexico, 10% were born in the United States, 6% were Ukrainian, 4% were Japanese, 3% were Russian, and 3% were Korean. The remaining 20% represented 22 other countries (approximately 1-3 participants per country). In terms of the languages used in responding to the survey, 56% responded in Spanish, 34% responded in English, 4% responded in Korean, 4% in Japanese, and 2% in Russian. On average, participants reported living in the United States for 12.6 years with a range of 1 to 28 years.

Eighty-three percent of the participants were married and living with their spouses; 6% percent were single, 6% separated, 2% married and living away from their spouses, and 2% were divorced. On average, participants reported

having a mean of 2 children, with a range of 1 to 7. In terms of education, 32% indicated that they had finished elementary school or its equivalent in their countries of origin. Seventeen percent indicated that they had finished high school or its equivalent in their countries of origin. Twenty-eight percent indicated that they attended some college or received a college degree. The remaining 22% had post-graduate education experience or degrees. In terms of occupational status, 50% of the sample indicated that they worked full-time, 20% worked part-time jobs, 25% were unemployed, and 5% worked temporary jobs.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants

District	Surveys	% Returned	Ethnicity	M time in U.S.
A	99	17%	88% Mexican	11.08 years
			12% Other	
B	59	14%	68% Mexican	11.89 years
			32% Other	
C	51	20%	11% Korean	12.04 years
			17% Ukrainian	
			13% Japanese	
			11% Russian	
			48% Other	
D	26	9%	42% U.S.	18.64 years
			10% Ukrainian	
			10% Philippines	
			38% Other	

Procedure

School administrators from the four districts participating in this project contacted their respective individual schools to identify all students who were categorized as ELs. The parents of each eligible child were sent a survey along with a self-addressed stamped envelope which was addressed to the researchers, not the school administration. A cover letter explained the purpose of the survey, the anonymity of the process, and other pertinent consent information. The surveys and accompanying letters were all translated into the primary languages of the parents and had English translations on the back pages so that parents could choose the language in which they would respond. The survey was described as a needs assessment created to understand the opinions, experiences, and interests of parents of EL students. Participants were informed that the data would be used both for exploratory research purposes and to identify topics on which parent workshops would be created and delivered by the university partners.

Instrument

A survey was created by adapting relevant items from the Family Involvement Questionnaire (Fantuzzo, Tighe, & Childs, 2000) while adding new items designed to measure potential barriers affecting parental involvement in schools and to tap into parents' attitudes and aspirations about the education of their children. Each of the 31 items was accompanied by a 5-point Likert scale in which parents indicated their level of agreement with the items. Higher scores indicated stronger agreement with an item. The subscales included: educational aspirations, school climate toward parental participation, six barriers (language barriers, not wanting to interfere with how teachers do their job, lack of knowledge about the educational system, stress from other responsibilities, logistical barriers, and negative experiences with school personnel), and six types of involvement (reading at home with child, having routines, monitoring child's homework, utilizing community resources, communicating with teachers/school staff, and communicating with child about school experiences). The types of involvement included within the survey follow the typology of Epstein (1995) with the exception of *decision making involvement* and *collaboration with the community,* since each of these types of involvement is very atypical for the EL population sampled for this study.

Results

Research Question 1

With regard to the first research question, descriptive statistics were calculated on each of the subscales assessing type of parent involvement, and the means were analyzed to determine which types were most likely and least likely to be endorsed by sample participants. Table 2 contains a summary of these data. The most common types of parent involvement were monitoring children's homework activities and talking with children about their experiences at school. The least common type of parental involvement was utilizing community resources (e.g., going to the library with children).

Research Question 2

With regard to the second research question, means of the responses to questions measuring potential barriers were analyzed. An examination of these means revealed that the most highly reported barriers to parental involvement were language barriers, lack of knowledge about the U.S. educational system, not wanting to interfere with how teachers do their jobs, and stress from other responsibilities. Table 2 also contains a summary of these findings.

Table 2. Mean, Standard Deviation, and Observed Range of Scores on Aspirations, Barriers, and Parent Involvement

Variable	Mean	SD	Range
Aspirations	14.84	.90	3-15
School climate around involvement	31.08	5.14	9-35
Barriers:			
Language barrier	2.78	1.45	1-5
Don't want to interfere with teachers	2.47	1.48	1-5
Negative school experiences	1.42	.82	1-5
Overwhelmed by other responsibilities	2.41	1.21	1-5
Logistics	1.99	.91	1-5
Lack of familiarity with U.S. schools	2.39	1.12	1-5
Involvement:			
Read with my child	8.18	1.84	2-10
Utilize community resources	6.97	1.87	2-10
Communicate with teachers	8.08	1.54	3-10
Communicate with child about school	9.18	1.19	6-10
Monitoring	9.41	1.04	4-10
Routines	8.05	1.54	2-10

Research Question 3

With regard to the third research question, whether aspirations, barriers, and types of parent involvement were significantly related to one another, correlation coefficients were calculated between the main predictors and the dependent variables, types of parental involvement. These data, summarized in Table 3, reveal an interesting pattern. Perceptions of school climate toward parental involvement were significantly related to utilization of community resources ($r = -.169$, $p < .05$), communication with teachers ($r = .267$, $p < .01$), communicating with their children about school ($r = .209$, $p < .01$), and negative experiences with the school ($r = -.196$, $p < .05$). In other words, perceiving the school climate to be more inviting of parental involvement was related to greater communication with both teachers and children about school, less use of community resources, and having fewer negative experiences in school. Aspirations were not significantly related to any of the types of parental involvement.

In terms of how perceived barriers to participation related to types of parental involvement, only the following relationships were significant. Parental language barriers were significantly related to use of community resources ($r = -.216$, $p < .01$), use of routines at home ($r = -.17$, $p < .01$), reading with one's child ($r = -.191$, $p < .01$), and talking with one's child about school ($r = -.22$, $p < .01$). In other words, parents who felt more uncomfortable or less proficient with their English language skills were less likely to utilize community

resources, provide routines for their children in the home, read with their children, and talk with their children about their school experiences. Not understanding the U.S. school system significantly correlated with less reading with one's children (r = -.193, $p < .01$). No other barriers emerged as being significantly related to any type of parental involvement (e.g., being stressed from other responsibilities, desire to not interfere with how teachers did their job, logistical problems, negative experiences at the school).

Table 3. Correlations of Parent Involvement Types, School Climate Toward Parental Involvement, and Barriers to Involvement

	Read	Resources	Teacher	Talk	Monitor	Routines
Climate	.09	-.17*	.27**	.21**	.10	.00
Aspirations	.09	.03	.08	.06	.06	.02
Language	-.19**	-.22**	-.11	-.22**	-.09	-.17**
Interfere	-.07	-.10	-.10	-.03	.05	.04
Familiar	-.19**	-.12	.06	-.08	.00	-.04
Stress	-.05	-.01	-.06	-.04	-.10	-.04
Neg. Exp.	-.11	.00	.07	-.06	.00	.04
Logistics	-.01	-.06	-.07	-.08	-.06	.05

Note: *indicates a significance of $p < .05$ and **indicates a significance of $p < .01$

Research Question 4

In order to determine whether demographic variables would be related to scores on the measures of aspirations, school climate regarding parental involvement, barriers, and types of school involvement, a series of analyses of variance were conducted. Because these data were not equally distributed across all levels of certain demographic variables, data were regrouped using dummy coding into the following categories: ethnicity was grouped by Latino or non-Latino; work status was grouped by full-time vs. less than full-time (or not employed). With regard to gender, no differences emerged between parental gender and types of involvement with the exception of reading with one's child. Mothers were found to read significantly more than fathers (F(1, 231) = 4.6, $p < .01$). Educational status was significantly related to reading with one's child (F(6, 221) = 3.23, $p < .05$), utilizing community resources (F(6, 216) = 7.38, $p < .001$), and talking with children about school experiences (F(6, 216) = 2.08, $p < .05$). An examination of the means revealed that parents with more education were more involved with their children in these particular areas. With regard to work status, significant differences were found only on talking with one's child about school (F(1, 205) = 4.18, $p < .01$), with parents who worked full-time talking more with their children than those who were not working

or working less. Finally, with regard to ethnicity, we examined whether Latino vs. non-Latino parents exhibited different types of involvement. Non-Latino parents were more likely than Latino parents to utilize community resources (F(1,222) = 14.3, p < .01) and to have routines such as bedtimes and limits on television (F(1, 227) = 11.88, p < .01).

With regard to aspirations, no demographic differences were found based on gender, educational status, work status, or ethnicity of participant. However, with regard to school climate, differences emerged based on educational status (F(6, 201) = 5.60, p < .01), with less educated parents perceiving the climate more positively than more educated parents. Differences also emerged with regard to ethnicity (F(1, 200) = 55.41, p < .01), with Latino parents having more positive perceptions of school climate than did non-Latino parents.

With regard to barriers, ethnic differences emerged on language barriers (F(1,222) = 33.8, p < .01), stress from other responsibilities (F(1, 215) = 5.17, p < .01), and lack of knowledge about the U.S. school system (F(1, 201) = 21.78, p < .01). Latino parents had higher scores on language barriers and lack of knowledge, while non-Latino parents had higher stress scores. Work status was also significantly related to language barriers (F(1, 212) = 12.4, p < .01), with parents who worked full time having lower scores than those who were unemployed or employed less. Finally, educational status was significantly related to both language barriers (F(1, 226) = 11.8, p < .01) and lack of knowledge of the U.S. school system (F(1, 201) = 7.07, p < .01), with more educated parents having fewer language barriers and greater knowledge of the system.

Research Question 5

In terms of the final research question, what are the most significant predictors of specific types of parental involvement, a series of six multiple regression analyses were run (one analysis per each type of parental involvement). Based on the aforementioned analyses, we controlled for the demographic variables that were found to be significant predictors of each of the types of parental involvement. Thus, in response to the final research question, data concerning aspirations, school climate perceptions, and each of the barriers were regressed onto each of the six dependent variables (i.e., types of parental involvement). We also first controlled for demographic variables such as gender, educational status, work status, and ethnicity where they had been shown to be significantly impacting the types of parental involvement. The statistical results of these analyses are depicted in six tables available from the authors upon request.

The first equation, predicting reading with one's child, utilized hierarchical multiple regression to first control for gender and educational level (entered on the first step). The predictors of aspirations, school climate, and barriers were

entered on the second step. This analysis was statistically significant (F = 2.03, $p < .05$), and the total model accounted for 12% of the variance. The only statistically significant predictor was parental education level.

The second equation, predicting use of routines, utilized hierarchical multiple regression to first control for ethnicity (entered on the first step). The same set of predictors used in the previous analysis was entered on the second step. This analysis was statistically significant (F = 2.3, $p < .05$), and the total model accounted for 12% of the variance. The only two significant predictors were aspirations and ethnicity (not being Latino).

The third equation, predicting use of monitoring, utilized hierarchical multiple regression to first control for ethnicity (entered on the first step). The same set of predictors used in the previous analysis was entered on the second step. This model was not statistically significant (F = 1.2, $p < .05$), and the total model accounted for 6% of the variance. The only two significant predictors were logistics and ethnicity (not being Latino).

The fourth equation, predicting communicating with one's child about school, utilized hierarchical multiple regression to first control for parental education level and work status (entered on the first step). The same set of predictors used in the previous analysis was entered on the second step. This analysis was statistically significant (F = 3.45, $p < .05$), and the total model accounted for 19% of the variance. The only three significant predictors were aspirations, negative experiences with the school, and school climate.

The fifth equation, predicting utilization of community resources, utilized hierarchical multiple regression to first control for parental education and ethnicity (entered on the first step). The same set of predictors used in the previous analysis was entered on the second step. This analysis was statistically significant (F = 4.3, $p < .05$), and the total model accounted for 23% of the variance. The only significant predictors were parental education level, school climate, and not wanting to interfere with how teachers do their job.

The final equation, predicting communicating with teachers, entered the same set of predictors used in the previous analysis simultaneously. This analysis was statistically significant (F = 3.1, $p < .05$), and the total model accounted for 14% of the variance. The only two significant predictors were school climate and language barriers.

While there were several factors that were uniquely related to specific types of parent involvement, parental education, ethnicity, aspirations, and school climate appear to be significant predictors of multiple types of parental involvement. These findings suggest that it may often be both parental characteristics (e.g., parental education, ethnicity, aspirations) and school characteristics (i.e., climate) that are most closely related to the types of involvement that parents of EL students exhibit in efforts to support their children's educational success.

Discussion

This study contributes to the scholarship on understanding patterns of ELs' parents' educational involvement. The findings on what types of involvement exhibited by parents of EL children are most common and least common mirror what has been suggested by other scholars (Ingram, Wolfe, & Lieberman, 2007), in that in-home types of educational involvement such as monitoring homework and asking children about their school day were most common. Utilizing community resources was found to be the least common type of parental involvement of those responding in this study. This could be related to either the availability of such resources or the ease with which such resources could be accessed by families of EL students. Anecdotally, it is unlikely that the resources were not readily available, but rather, it may be more likely that such resources were either viewed as too costly (e.g., museums) or lacking in translators or bilingual materials, making access more difficult for parents with language barriers or financial pressures. Clearly identifying what the reasons are that parents may underutilize resources and whether or not they are problems that can be solved is critical to developing successful programs.

In terms of barriers, the findings from the current study echo what has been discussed by other scholars (Brilliant, 2001; DeGaetano, 2007; Sosa, 1997) in that the most common barriers were linguistic, a lack of familiarity with the U.S. educational system, and a desire to not interfere with how teachers do their jobs. Providing education for parents about how schools work in the U.S. and expectations about the involvement of parents in the U.S. may be useful interventions in response to this information (Brilliant, 2001; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). Conversely, it is critical for teachers to be educated about the reasons that some parents of EL students may be less involved in their children's schools, such as the cultural differences previously discussed, as opposed to the parents not valuing education.

In terms of whether demographic differences existed in how parents responded to scales on the survey, several interesting findings emerged. First, parental educational level and parental ethnicity seemed to be the most relevant demographic differences. Parental education level predicted barriers such as experiencing language barriers and lack of knowledge of the U.S. school system. Ethnicity was significantly related to the same barriers, as well as stress related to other responsibilities. Interestingly, while Latino parents reported higher tendencies to experience language barriers and a lack of knowledge of the U.S. educational system, it was non-Latino parents who reported higher stress levels. These findings are mirrored by those discussed in the literature (Capps et al., 2005; Garcia & Cuellar, 2006; Jensen, 2008; Sosa, 1997) and

suggest that it is less educated, Latino parents who may be at higher risk for not participating in certain types of parental involvement, findings which were supported by the regression equations conducted in this study.

Predicting Parent Involvement

With respect to the prediction of types of parental involvement, some interesting patterns emerged. For reading, none of the predicted barriers were related to the frequency with which parents read with and to their children, but parents' educational level was a significant predictor. This suggests that parents who are more literate, in their native language and/or English, are more likely to engage in family literacy experiences than those who lack literacy skills. This finding supports the efforts of scholars who have designed family literacy activities as an intervention to increase parent involvement (Freeman & Freeman, 2007; Olsen, 1997)

Utilizing routines that support educational achievement—such as enforcing a bedtime, restricting access to media, or other types of time management—was found to be most significantly predicted by parental aspirations and ethnicity, with Latinos in this study being less likely to use such routines. This suggests that parents with the most investment in their child's educational achievement may also be parents who are highly involved in structuring their child's home life and have high expectations in general of their children, a finding that has been supported by a plethora of research on parenting styles (Baumrind, 1967, 1991). From an interventionist standpoint, it also may be important to recommend the use of routines as one way for parents to support the educational successes of their children.

Monitoring homework progress and completion was only predicted by ethnicity (Latino parents were less likely to monitor) and logistical barriers such as work schedules and availability. This is a logical finding, in that if parents are not around the home when their children are most likely to be doing their homework, it would be difficult to monitor their progress. One might expect this to be a function of social class and/or the types of jobs that parents have (e.g., shift work vs. 9-to-5 careers). However, it is possible to work with those parents to find other ways to provide such monitoring (e.g., by enlisting older siblings, relatives, or neighbors to monitor progress). For children who have no such readily available supervision, schools may want to reach out to their parents to inform them of afterschool tutoring opportunities either sponsored by the school or available in the community.

Communication with one's child about school and its importance was best predicted by parental aspirations, negative experiences with school personnel, and perceptions of school climate. Thus, parents who perceived positive

messages from the school about involvement, who had fewer (if any) negative experiences with school personnel, and those who had higher aspirations were more likely to communicate with their child about the importance of school and their child's experiences in school. This suggests that schools can send an important message to parents about the necessity of communicating with one's children by engaging in school–parent relationships that transmit a high value for such a prime type of involvement (Nieto, 2002; Valdes, 1996).

Utilizing community resources were best predicted by parental educational level, school climate, and not wanting to interfere with how teachers do their jobs. Parents who were more educated, had positive perceptions of school climate, and did not have concerns about interfering with how teachers did their jobs were more likely to utilize community resources that support education for their children. These parents were also more likely to participate in events that increased their awareness of such resources or were in more frequent communication with teachers who alerted them to the importance of using such resources. Schools working with community services and partners may lead to better communication with parents about the availability of bilingual resources (e.g., public libraries), because parents are not likely to assume such availability, since an "English only" mentality still pervades many parts of the country.

Finally, communicating with teachers was best predicted by language barriers and perceptions of school climate around parental involvement. The most obvious implication of this finding is for schools to make sure that they have bilingual professionals or translation services readily available to parents who are not comfortable communicating in English and that they advertise the availability of these services to parents who may not know they exist. In addition, the perceived climate of the school environment and, in particular, whether or not parents feel welcome in the school community is another important area for schools to assess in efforts to increase parent participation.

Interestingly, some of the barriers suggested in the literature did not emerge as significant predictors of any of the types of parental involvement. While a lack of familiarity with the U.S. school system was found to vary depending on parental education level and ethnicity, past research would suggest that it should have emerged as a stronger predictor of actual types of involvement (Brilliant, 2001). It could be that there were other factors that trumped this particular barrier in terms of predicting involvement types, but it is also possible that it was not a large problem for participants in this study. This is suggested by the relatively low mean score and the fact that familiarity was only significantly correlated with reading in the correlational analyses. Similarly, for as much as language barriers emerged as significant correlates of a variety of types of involvement, it did not emerge as a significant predictor when factored

in with the other possible predictors in the equation. There is probably a large overlap between language facility and parental educational level, so it is likely that multicolinearity was a factor in interpreting this finding. It is perhaps a positive finding that stress related to other responsibilities was not a significant predictor of any of the types of involvement, suggesting that parents can and do participate in the educational experiences of their children regardless of other responsibilities in their lives.

It is somewhat surprising how often parental aspirations about the education of their children emerged as a significant predictor, given the range restriction observed on this variable. This is not an uncommon finding in past research (Schaller, Rocha, & Barshinger, 2006), and in fact, recent research by Jeynes (2011) suggests that parental expectations and communication about the value of school are more powerful influences than are more overt types of parental involvement (e.g., checking homework). Hence, the finding in the current study is predictable, but having a wider range of variance on this variable would have, in all likelihood, increased the potency of this variable as a predictor.

Implications for Future Research and Practice

The findings from this study have important implications for future research and practice on this topic. First, given the disparate patterns of findings that emerged in predicting types of parental involvement, it seems important to measure different types of parental involvement instead of using additive models of involvement to make generalizations about "being involved." Second, it seems important to tailor interventions aimed at increasing parental involvement to parents based on factors such as educational background and linguistic fluency, as opposed to targeting interventions for parents of EL children in general. Given the extent to which such demographics were predictive of barriers and types of involvement, it is important for schools to understand the life experiences of the parents of their EL children as they make attempts to increase their involvement. Third, given the importance of school climate as a significant predictor of three types of parental involvement (i.e., communicating with one's child, utilizing community resources, and communicating with teachers), efforts should be made to articulate positive messages about the importance of parental involvement as it relates to educational success. While parents who themselves were educated in U.S. schools may be aware of this finding, it may be that parents of EL children, many of whom may have been educated outside the U.S., would benefit from psychoeducational workshops on this topic and from efforts by school administrators and teachers to reinforce this message. There is some international evidence that actual parent involvement, not just the expectation around participation found in U.S.

mainstream culture, is positively related to academic achievement (Davies, 1993; Smit & Driessen, 2007). However, there have not been rigorous studies done in all the countries of origin represented by the participants in this study that would support such a finding as universal in nature.

On a positive note, while these data may be useful in contributing to the conversation about why some parents of EL children less frequently participate in school activities compared to their non-EL counterparts, there are many examples of successful strategies that have been used to increase participation in this population. A unifying thread of such success stories appears to be the philosophy of working *in collaboration* with parents as opposed to a more paternalistic approach where parents are told what to do. Wink (2005) discusses this as the "We-are-going-to-do-this-with-you" model as opposed to the "We-are-going-to-do-this-to-you" model. The goals of a do-it-to-them approach are to *change the parents* by having programs where "teachers talk, families listen, and everyone leaves immediately afterward" (Wink, 2005, p. 154). In contrast, the goals and characteristics of the former, much more optimal model that she discusses include *changing the schools* through programs where teachers listen, families tell stories and interact, and community building is the outcome. Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, and Hernandez (2003) discussed an approach with such a sentiment in the Bridging Cultures Project in which teachers were trained to become actively involved in learning about and integrating the cultural worldview and values of their EL students' parents and approached increasing parental involvement from a more mutual, collaborative direction. Another school's successful effort was characterized by parents working with the schools to select ways that they would like to be involved in their children's education and then signing contracts that reflected their commitment to do so (see http://www.cottay.com/brochure.htm). Thus, schools that struggle with increasing parent involvement may be able to learn from examples such as these.

Limitations

While this study suffers from a number of limitations, it represents one effort to contribute to the literature in this important area. For example, the overall response rate suggests that there were many parents whose perspectives were not captured in these findings. One might speculate that only parents who were already more involved in their children's education would take the time to respond to a survey, which implies that parents who were much less involved were not well represented in this sample. One can only speculate how the findings would change with better representation, but it is possible that additional factors would have been identified that relate to different types of involvement

by increasing the range of variance on the scales. To increase parent participation in studies like this one, researchers may wish to use email, send reminder postcards, or resend the surveys to parents who may have forgotten or lost the original mailing. Additionally, having surveys given to parents at parent–teacher conferences or other events may increase participation. These ideas, of course, are all dependent on the resources available to researchers conducting the study. It is also possible that some parents were illiterate, so future studies may also utilize methods that can accommodate such needs (e.g., reading surveys to parents over the phone or in person, in their preferred language).

Second, while the respondents represented a diverse sample of participants, most of the schools from which parents were sampled were in relatively well-resourced communities, generally speaking, as opposed to communities that are homogenously impoverished, where many parents of EL children may be raising their families. The researchers also know that the majority of families are ethnic minorities as opposed to ethnic majorities, which may also be less common in parts of the country where there is more concentrated ethnic segregation. Future research should examine the extent to which cultural homogeneity, the socioeconomic diversity of the larger community, and other systemic factors may impact the experiences of parents of EL children. Ethnic differences beyond those captured in this study (i.e., Latinos) should be the focus of future research as well, including an examination of the extent to which parent participation is related to academic success in international settings such as those countries of origin represented by participants in this study. Such information is critical to schools around the U.S., given the increasing numbers of EL children in today's schools.

Summary

The current investigation examined relationships among a range of specific barriers and facilitators of parent involvement and a variety of types of educational involvement within a diverse group of immigrant parents of English Learner students (ELs) in four elementary school districts. Given the importance of the growing EL population to schools around the country, gathering information about the experiences of diverse groups of parents of EL children is critical to increasing their participation. In our sample, in-home types of educational involvement such as monitoring homework and asking children about their school day were the most commonly reported behaviors, suggesting that parents of EL children are already involved in their children's educational experiences. However, helping their children to utilize community resources was found to be the least common type of parental involvement. In addition, involvement type was predicted by parental demographic factors such as com-

fort with the English language, educational background, and ethnicity, as well as perceptions of barriers and overall school climate. The findings of this study have implications for the design and implementation of interventions (e.g., parent programs, school policy changes, P–12 faculty professional development on cultural differences) aimed at increasing the involvement of parents of EL children, adding to the ongoing conversation that many school districts around the country are having or will need to have in the very near future.

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A Third Paradigm for School Reform

Katherine Ratliffe

In the era of No Child Left Behind, many complain about the shortcomings of standards-based practices and measuring success through standardized tests. In the 2010 book *Small Schools and Strong Communities: A Third Way of School Reform*, Kenneth Strike presents a new perspective that has its roots in our grandmothers' kitchens and in the one-room schoolhouses where our grandparents were taught. It is difficult *not* to support the idea of small schools and community as being the appropriate direction to reclaim our children's education. But can going back to the past work in our more diverse, more populated, and modern society?

Strike criticizes what he characterizes as the primary two directions school reform has taken since 1983, when *A Nation At Risk* was published: vouchers/school choice, and the standards-based education movement. Neither of these two methods of reform have been successful, he maintains, because they do not address the needs of students for learning in a strong and supportive community. Strike proposes a new reform emphasizing community, which is more attainable in small schools. Community is formed when people come together for a common purpose, and it provides an element of belonging to students who are increasingly alienated in today's institutions.

Strike maintains that our modern world, which emphasizes individuality, separates us and weakens our community. Today's schools are built on individualized values of self-interest, free speech, personal goal setting, tracking, competition, and compliance with government mandates. Achievement is assessed using objective means such as testing and counting graduation rates. Normative values about school include the idea that education is a means of getting a good job with a high income that enables one to buy commodities. Although these values reflect the American Dream where every person can get

ahead, they don't include essential features that create community, and, in fact, Strike maintains they cause many students to be alienated and teachers to feel isolated. These are the problems school reform should address.

Regardless of the changes in demographics in the U.S., where almost 25% of children are born of immigrant parents and multiple languages are spoken at home and at school, Strike believes that it is possible to create a sense of shared purpose with adults and children working together to learn. He defined community as having coherence, cohesion, care, and connection. Coherence reflects a shared vision; cohesion is the sense of community where all belong; care is experienced when there is authentic learning in an atmosphere of trust and shared experience; and connection extends between adults and students as well as among peers. In order to create these conditions, Strike believes a small school is necessary.

Strike found that research supports an ideal size for small schools as 600–900 students. This includes schools within schools, the academy models, and other methods that group students and teachers who stay together throughout their years at that school. He reviewed research on small schools that demonstrates their effectiveness, at least on the surface. For example, a 2006 American Institutes for Research study demonstrated that attendance may have improved, but math scores declined in Gates-funded small schools. Strike concluded that size is only one condition of successful small schools. He identified three other conditions: schools need to be personalized so everyone knows everyone; they should be autonomous and flexible in their administration; and they need distinctive educational programs such as a theme or a cohesive approach differentiating them from standard public schools.

A small school is not enough. Strike says, "As small schools…become less about size and more about such things as authentic teaching, portfolio evaluation, and themed curricula, small schools becomes less about a 'technique' for school improvement and more about a 'paradigm' for school reform" (p. 99). This paradigm must include becoming a community where children have deep personal relationships with adults and peers, feel like they belong, and share the educational purpose.

It is difficult to build a strong small school in today's political climate of accountability and focus on outcomes. Strike points out that simply downsizing is not adequate to transition schools into effective small learning communities. Without adequate social contracts among teachers, parents, students, and community members; time for planning and staff development; and networking with other schools who have successfully transitioned, creating smaller schools would likely establish simply smaller versions of current models. As Strike says, "A good small school is more than just a school with fewer students.

It is a place where teaching is different, school culture is different, and governance is different" (p. 121). An appropriate policy environment is essential for the creation and sustaining of such small schools.

Strike spent some time comparing the three paradigms: school choice, standards-based education, and his small schools/community model. In essence, he found standards and choice to be compatible with the small schools model, but maintained that standards should be generated by the school community itself, rather than imposed from the outside by the government. Outside mandates limit internal motivation. When teachers are told what and how to teach, they lose the motivation to be creative and innovative. Students' motivation to learn also suffers when they have no buy-in to the curriculum. It is difficult to create community when motivation to teach and learn is low.

The choice movement for school reform also resonates with Strike's thoughts about small schools and community. Choice indicates market competition, and consumer power to choose. If schools reflect community values, they will be more attractive to families.

Accountability is the final buzzword concept addressed by Strike. When journalists write about accountability, they usually mean teachers' and schools' accountability to the government for meeting educational benchmarks and standards, as mandated by the No Child Left Behind legislation. However, accountability is also important for community expectations. When schools do not have individual mission statements but become part of the whole of "American public schools," they have no community mission. But, when schools develop missions framed by community intent, they must also be accountable to their own communities to assess their achievement in relation to those missions. Strike believes that there is a role for government to support schools, but it should be to "assist rather than to coerce" (p. 139).

In this book, Strike has presented a fairly clear vision of reform based on strong communities in small schools. He is a bit long-winded and repetitive as he explains and justifies his ideas; however, intuitively, his vision makes sense to this reader. Strike's ideas are not entirely new, but they elaborate and expand some existing ideas regarding small schools. He tends to present his theory philosophically, which is not surprising since he is a philosopher. However, this makes it a bit difficult to test at times. For example, some of the concepts he uses to clarify his vision overlap, such as coherence, cohesion, care, and connection as definitions of community. This overlap may also make it difficult for teacher educators to present the theory clearly to student teachers.

Strike tries valiantly to address potential barriers of both attitudes and practicalities, and in the end, I am convinced that the ideas are good, but that the implementation will be quite difficult. Our grandmother's kitchen no longer

exists in the way that we remember it, and, as he points out, life and school have become more complicated in the present day. Community is not as simple because the family has expanded so much in terms of diversity and number. However, I do believe that we can achieve strong communities in small schools if we can find the support and the energy to try.

Teachers may find some inspiration here, at the very least to create small communities within their own classrooms. Administrators may be moved to consider working toward strong communities in their schools. Teacher educators should present this model as an alternative for their students to consider. I do hope that this reform movement catches on. I think all of us can find inspiration and energy in working together to learn in safe and motivating small schools with strong communities.

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