

Identifying Barriers: Creating Solutions to Improve Family Engagement

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Abstract

Reframing notions of parent involvement (being present in the school building) to parent engagement (viewing multiple constructions of how parents are involved) is the purpose of this paper. The authors highlight the knowledge gained from data collected from a series of family and staff focus groups regarding parent and staff perceptions of barriers to family involvement and from families' suggestions as to what could be done differently to increase engagement. Using applied thematic analysis, five themes common to both families and staff are discussed: providing opportunities for involvement, improving communication, welcoming families into the building, making time, and moving from involvement to engagement. Findings show that, generally, parents and school staff agree on barriers to parent involvement but offer contrasting solutions. While parent solutions directly address the barriers identified and support parent engagement, staff frequently offered disconnected solutions, reiterating parent involvement—the necessity of parents being present in the building, rather than parent engagement—multiple constructions of how parents are involved.

Key Words: parent involvement, culturally responsive family engagement, teachers, staff, parents, families, perceptions, barriers, solutions, communication, welcoming schools, focus group research

Introduction

The evidence is now beyond dispute. When schools work together with families to support learning, children tend to succeed not just in school, but throughout life.

Henderson & Berla, 1994, p. 1

A common complaint of educators is that parents are not involved enough in their children's schooling (Mapp, 2003; McKenna & Millen, 2013). Research has shown that the benefits of parent involvement include creating better school–community relationships (Lawson & Alameda-Lawson, 2012), contributing to greater gains in academic achievement (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Lawson & Alameda-Lawson, 2012), and enhancing emotional development and behavior (Cai, Moyer, & Wang, 1997; Greenwood & Hickman, 1991). Parent involvement has been characterized as including “demonstrable actions...like attendance at school events and reading to one's child” (Jeynes, 2013, para. 1) as well as participating in prescribed activities that the school organizes (Jeynes, 2013). Parent involvement and parent engagement have been characterized differently by some authors, with each having specific parent behaviors associated with the construct. Parent engagement, according to Ferlazzo (2011), is about engaging families to become partners with the school and listening to “what parents think, dream, and worry about” (p. 12). Additionally, Redding, Langdon, Meyer, and Sheley (2004) discuss qualities of parent engagement, including “building a foundation of trust and respect, reaching out to parents beyond the school” (p. 1). While there are distinct differences in characterization, there are similar benefits of increasing either. Parent involvement activities such as volunteering have been associated with a reduction in the number of students disciplined in school, fewer detentions, and a reduction in the number of students receiving multiple disciplinary consequences from one year to the next (Sheldon & Epstein, 2002). Furthermore, increases in frequent and high quality interactions amongst teachers and parents yielded greater trust and respect, increased social capital for students, and provided more support for student success (Redding et al., 2004). The purpose of this article is to discuss the findings from focus groups with parents and school staff during which participants were asked about involvement at the school. It was found that questions about involvement developed into discussions about engagement. Thus, removing barriers to involvement may become a course of action to parent engagement.

Family and staff focus groups were held in six schools in one Midwestern state involved in a discipline reform effort. As part of that reform and based on

research and a framework developed by PBIS Indiana (2010), the participating schools were to address five areas of culturally responsive family engagement:

- feedback systems to determine family preferences for ongoing communication (Fantuzzo & Tighe, 2000);
- specific efforts to involve families who generally have low participation rates (Harry, 2008; LaRocque, Kleiman, & Darling, 2011);
- family and community involvement in making decisions about programs and services that meet the needs of all students (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011);
- staff involvement in finding ways to include the use of community resources (such as libraries or cultural and community centers; Sheldon & Epstein, 2002); and
- family events that are held off-site in the community (Landsman & Lewis, 2006).

This paper uses the results of this reform effort to address how schools can move from parent involvement (merely being present) to parent engagement (intentional efforts by the school to recognize and respond to parents' voices and to help school staff to better understand how to address barriers that parents have identified). This paper concludes with a discussion and recommendations about moving from involvement to engagement.

Parents and Schools

The term parent involvement has been used by teachers, school administrators, and parents to include several characteristics of parent and school relationships (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). Parent involvement has been perceived as being present in the school building or school-centric involvement (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Jeynes, 2013; Lawson, 2003); this was based on the idea that schools and teachers should direct parental involvement. Moreover, there was an emphasis on telling families how they can be involved in the school, rather than listening to parents and asking for their suggestions on improving students' academic achievement and behavior (Ferlazzo, 2011). It is encouraging that recently, best practice in involving parents in schools has begun to expand beyond typical notions of parent involvement (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Mapp & Kuttner, 2013), which often require parents to participate in traditional and more limited ways, such as attending parent–teacher conferences and helping with or attending events at the school (Jeynes, 2013; Mapp, 2003), to embrace a more expansive view of *parent engagement*—multiple constructions of how parents are involved (Redding et al., 2004). These constructions include seeing parents, guardians, and other critical adults as equal partners in the success of students (Ferlazzo & Hammond, 2009). In addition to parent–teacher conferences and homework, parents spend time

with their children in meaningful ways that help them in school, for example, attending local community activities, traveling, being involved with a spiritual community, and being involved in extracurricular activities (Mapp, 2003). Home-based activities that parents typically engage in are important in how parents view their role in supporting their children and supporting the school (Epstein, 1995; Okagaki & Frensch, 1998; Tran, 2014).

A primary factor in children's educational successes is parent interest and support (Berger, 1995), and studies of parent involvement have shown measurable gains in academic achievement as parents become more engaged (Amatea & Dolan, 2009; Henderson, 1981, 1987; Tran, 2014). Engaged parents have greater educational aspirations for their children (Greenwood & Hickman, 1991; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011), improved communication with their child (Chavkin, 1989; Wilder, 2014), and more positive attitudes toward their child's teacher (Peña, 2000; Tran, 2014). They often feel more confident about their abilities to help their children, gain a better understanding of both formal and informal rules of the school, and develop an appreciation and a greater knowledge about the importance of their role in their child's education (Amatea & Dolan, 2009; Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2006; Johnson, Pugach, & Hawkins, 2004). Additionally, schools are becoming more aware of the benefits to the quality of school life when schools and families form collaborative relationships (Smith, Wohlstetter, Kuzin, & De Pedro, 2011). School climate and academic learning improved in some schools when family engagement increased (Muscott et al., 2008). Decreases in disciplinary incidences have been documented as a result of family-school collaborations, which are also associated with an overall increase in student safety (Sheldon & Epstein, 2002). As relationships between schools and families improve, teachers gain a more positive view of their students' families and feel more supported in their work with students (Amatea & Dolan, 2009; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Sheldon & Epstein, 2002). Schools that implement consistent and comprehensive parent programs over long periods of time are more effective in engaging parents and outperform schools with little or no parent involvement (Peña, 2000).

While parents and guardians are increasingly expressing the desire to become more involved in their children's education (Mapp, 2003; Warren, Hong, Rubin, & Uy, 2009), a number of barriers hinder parents' ability to be involved, particularly in the more traditional and visible forms of family involvement such as volunteering at school events and attending parent-teacher conferences each grading period (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). One barrier noted by parents/guardians is a lack of or the poor timing of communication between the school and home (Good et al., 1997; Lawson, 2003), so that parents are unaware of school events and activities. For families for whom English is not

the first language, language barriers may contribute to the difficulty of communication between school and home (Chrispeels & Rivero, 2001; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Smith et al., 2011). Barriers can also arise when parents' negative experiences in schools, either as a child themselves or previously with older children, as well as parents' level of education, lead to feelings of inability to help their children academically (Chrispeels & Rivero, 2001; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Lawson, 2003), which may cause parents to feel inferior to school personnel (Barton, Drake, Perez, Louis, & George, 2004; Blue-Banning, Summers, Frankland, Nelson, & Beegle, 2004).

The attitudes of teachers and school personnel towards families can also be a possible barrier to high levels of involvement (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). Parents are most likely to be motivated to be involved when they have confidence that they have some degree of control and influence over their child's learning (Hoover-Dempsey, 2011). When school personnel exhibit positive attitudes toward families and family involvement, there seems to be an increase in parents' feelings of being welcome in the school (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Waanders, Mendez, & Downer, 2007). In addition, logistical issues may limit a parent's ability to attend school activities or events. Participation in events such as parent-teacher conferences may be hindered by a range of practical constraints such as lack of transportation, work schedule, or the need for child care (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Lawson, 2003; Smith et al., 2011; Waanders et al., 2007). Finally, some have suggested that the age of the students may function as a barrier, as older children may have less positive attitudes toward parental participation in school activities (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011).

From Involvement to Engagement

One of the most widely known family engagement frameworks, developed by Joyce Epstein (1995) and her colleagues, defines family-school involvement in six ways. Listed below, these indicators include both home- and school-based family involvement descriptions and are important for educators to remember when identifying how family members are involved in their child's education:

- Parenting to support children's education
- Communicating with the schools
- Volunteering in children's schools and extracurricular activities
- Assisting with homework and learning opportunities in the home
- Participating in decision-making within the schools
- Collaborating between the school and community (Epstein & Salinas, 2004; Epstein & Sanders, 2006)

Additionally, as the student population continues to grow in diversity (Dotger & Bennett, 2010), the importance of educators becoming aware of diverse

family dynamics is central. Awareness and implementation of effective strategies can help families support their children in different ways (Gándara, 2011), ultimately moving from involvement—being present in the school building—to parent engagement—collaboration built through multiple constructions of how parents are involved.

Using the literature support provided, this study draws from parent and staff perspectives about parent involvement and engagement in school collected from 20 focus groups across 6 schools. Two research questions were addressed: (1) What are the barriers or limitations to families attending school events? and (2) What can be done differently to increase family involvement? Interestingly, the findings from the two questions posed resulted in a conversational shift from family involvement to engagement. This paper explicates how schools might address barriers to parent involvement to help parents and schools create momentum and move from involvement to engagement.

Methods

Families and staff in six schools in a Midwestern state were invited to participate in focus groups. The schools were selected for the study based on their implementation of positive behavior interventions and supports (PBIS) and willingness to integrate culturally responsive practices into their ongoing implementation of PBIS. The intent of the focus groups was to elicit information and conversation from participants about a variety of subjects, including the school's implementation of system-based disciplinary reform, communication, parent involvement, and overall satisfaction with the school.

In each of the selected schools, the research team requested that the school principal select participants for the teacher/staff focus group. Principals were asked to create a diverse group of teachers and other staff members by considering their racial/ethnic identification, grade level, subject area, length of teaching career, age, and role. It is noted that the principals' ability to adhere to the outlined criteria was mitigated by teacher schedules and availability.

For the family focus groups, principals recruited families to be inclusive of varying races/ethnicities, SES levels, students with IEPs, and grade level of students. The goal was to have 10–12 participants in each focus group, with the focus group convening prior to or during an onsite school event.

Each data collection team included one research associate, one project associate, and either one or two graduate research assistants, all female who racially identify as either Black or White. These teams facilitated the parent and staff focus groups. Focus group facilitators had never been to the respective schools prior to their initial visit when they began conducting the data collection.

Data Collection

Focus group protocols were developed by the research project team in order to learn more about overall implementation of culturally responsive PBIS and the five areas of culturally responsive family engagement described in the introduction above. The focus group protocol for *families* consisted of 12 questions divided into 5 areas: (1) family participation in their children’s school and education, (2) school expectations and behavior, (3) communication, (4) disciplinary procedures, and (5) overall satisfaction. The focus group protocol for *staff* consisted of 14 structured questions divided into seven areas: (1) school safety, (2) student interaction across racial groups, (3) getting to know students, (4) getting to know families, (5) student behavior, (6) schoolwide expectations, and (7) PBIS implementation.

Participants

A total of 50 parents and 76 staff across the six schools were engaged in facilitated discussions about their school. Three were elementary level schools, two were middle schools, and one was a high school. Tables 1 and 2 document the number of participants, location of the focus groups, and the duration of the focus groups. While it was requested that there be two separate focus groups for each category in each school (two for families and two for staff), in some schools, only one focus group for families was held. This limitation is due to some principals not being able to recruit enough participants to conduct a second family focus group in that particular school.

Table 1. Description of Family Focus Groups

School Type	N: Group 1	N: Group 2	Duration (minutes) Group 1/ Group 2
Elementary	6	8	45/52
Elementary	6	--	48/ --
Elementary	8	7	42/25
Middle	7 1 interpreter*	--	76/ --
Middle	2	--	49/ --
High School	6	--	68/ --

*Note. 1 interpreter was present for one middle school focus group

Family focus group participants. Participants in the family focus groups ranged in age and ethnicity, some schools being more diverse than others. The

focus group participants were overwhelmingly female and identified as either mother or grandmother of a student. While there was no formal identification of age, gender, race/ethnicity, or parental role, based on research notes and transcript analysis, some participant demographics were noted. These noted demographics are not formally shared as they were not confirmed by participants. Additionally, one of the schools had a Spanish-speaking participant in the family focus group. This participant had an interpreter; the bilingual interpreter was a staff member of the school.

Staff focus group participants. Staff focus group participants ranged in years present at the school as well as position held. Among those that participated, most were classroom teachers with other staff participating including instructional aides and office staff.

Table 2. Description of Staff Focus Group

School Type	N: Group 1	N: Group 2	Duration (minutes) Group 1/ Group 2
Elementary	3	2	28/25
Elementary	7	8	42/36
Elementary	6	5	33/45
Middle	6	5	43/46
Middle	10	10	50/42
High School	6	7	40/47

Data Analysis

This article focuses on two questions from the focus group protocol that pertained to issues of parent involvement: (a) “What are the barriers or limitations to families attending school events?” and (b) “What can be done differently to increase family involvement?” Considering that the original drafting of these questions was for the purpose of learning more from parents for the schools, the answers from parents evolved over the course of our focus groups to discuss engagement, even though we initially asked about involvement.

An applied thematic analysis (ATA) was used as a framework for identifying themes, organizing codes, and structuring a team approach to focus group data analysis. ATA is useful in examining texts with complexity of meaning due to the structured and flexible application of several qualitative theories and analytic techniques (Guest, Namey, & Mitchell, 2012). ATA provides a framework to organize and explicitly account for the variance in issues that are related to qualitative analysis.

The ATA (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2010) process of structural coding—using the structure of the interview or protocol documents to organize coding schemes—was employed, because the data set is organized by the structured focus group protocols. Coders were assigned transcripts and used Dedoose Version 6.1.18 as the data management and analysis software. The process for data analysis included a coding team who read and coded transcripts and came to consensus on definitions and assignment of meaning, so that all codes systematically aligned among coders (Saldaña, 2012). The approach consisted of the full coding team reading a single transcript and identifying codes individually and then coming together to reach consensus on themes.

Due to the structure for data collection, the codes and transcript excerpts were organized based on the focus group protocol questions. The two questions that are the focus of this analysis were extracted from the original coding and reexamined by two researchers to identify secondary codes that are discussed below in the findings.

Findings

The findings reported here reflect the responses of focus group participants when discussing family involvement and the barriers that exist. As the discussion progressed, questions about parent involvement moved into a conceptualization of parent engagement. Analysis of the data identified five themes common to both families and staff: providing opportunities for involvement, improving communication, welcoming families into the building, time conflicts or making time, and moving from involvement to engagement. Additionally, themes identified only by staff members include: overcoming negative school experiences and breaking down barriers to access. The following sections discuss these themes, noting the barriers and relating solutions offered by participants.

Providing Opportunities for Involvement

Parents in the focus groups noted both barriers and opportunities for parent involvement (being present at the school) based on their perceptions of the degree of family-friendliness in their school. The opportunities included providing childcare, having weekend activities, and improving communication. Parent respondents viewed providing opportunities for involvement as a responsibility of the school.

When identifying barriers, families felt that opportunities for family involvement were hindered by several issues. Having other children made it more difficult to volunteer or help at programs, and parents found it difficult to feed their entire family prior to a school event. One parent stated, “When we have

events for the children, keep in mind, 9 times out of 10 there are other children in the family, too.” Another barrier mentioned was conflict with parent schedules; as one woman stated, “I work late hours.” Staff agreed that work schedules were a barrier: “A lot of our students have parents working either second or third shift or working two jobs, and that’s a significant portion of our population.” Additionally, school staff identified having other children as a barrier. “A lot of times they’re caring for other children.”

Parents suggested the school provide opportunities to reduce conflicts with parent work schedules; this could also help to facilitate involvement. Some parents proposed weekend activities: “I do think that Saturday activities would be nice.” Working with and around parent work schedules was seen by parents as benefitting all parties—school personnel, parents, and students. Suggestions to address siblings and related issues included having the school provide child care for other children, coordinating with other schools to make sure they are not holding events on the same day, and providing a meal or food for families. Staff also stated food as a solution: “...I mean usually if you have food they will come.” The offered solutions support the notion of parent involvement as being present in the school building.

Improving Communication

Parents and staff expressed the critical need for good communication because it provides information and assists in the ability of either parents or staff to help the child. Barriers to communication varied across groups. While parents’ barriers to communication included timeliness of the communication, the quality of the communication, and clarity of the communication, staff saw communication issues as also including language barriers and not having correct contact information to communicate with families.

Poor communication is a significant barrier that seems to make parents perceive a school to be less family-friendly. Parents noted that they found out about events too late or received inconsistent communication from the school regarding events. One parent stated, “Last minute communication. I know it’s big on that, like you send a flyer home two days before, and you have to budget, you have to make plans for things, and two days notification is a short time.” Others expressed concern that they receive communication about their child’s progress in school only after major problems have arisen. These concerns regarding communication about their child’s progress were especially common at the middle and high school level. In middle and high schools, parents expressed disappointment in teacher communications. One parent of a secondary school student stated: “Some teachers communicate well; teachers who email and call keep parents updated...my child does better in [the class].”

Parents also suggested that teachers conduct a needs assessment and share the results with parents so that parents could decide how they could assist in the classroom. One elementary parent stated:

I think my struggle, which I've communicated before here at the school, is they need to do a better job of assessing what their needs are and communicating to the parents what their needs are. Just for an example, a teacher mentioned having someone come in and help kindergarteners zip their jackets up at the end of the day when it's cold outside or teaching them to tie their shoes, things of that nature. But I said, "we can't help you if we don't know what those needs are." So communication, to me, is the key; and not only communication but timely communication.

Staff saw communication as a barrier as well; however, the staff perception of barriers to communication focused on the problem of getting in contact with the parent, not the parent's inability to learn information from the school. One staff member said, "We have tried different things. Like putting it [event information] on Facebook, like Tweets, like putting it on the Internet. We send home reminders, phone calls."

When considering language as a barrier, a staff member commented, "But [communication] could potentially still be a barrier if somebody—especially for our family night—if somebody's not there to translate, it could be a barrier for sure." Language may be a barrier not only in getting information out, but also when families are present at the school for an event like family night.

The experience of the interviewed parents confirms that when teachers communicate more consistently and more frequently, their students do better in school, and parents feel they could be more involved by being better informed. Increasing the frequency of communication about a single event through multiple mediums of communication was identified by parents as a way to improve involvement. In response to concerns about finding out about events too late, one parent stated, "Send it in an email, text me, call, and then put it in my kid's backpack." The parents in the focus groups valued consistency in teacher contact for everything including school events, rule violations, and academic performance, and they especially desired more proactive communication. Proactive communication would allow parents to become involved prior to a major discipline offense or before their child falls behind academically.

In addition, soliciting support and involvement in the school through communication for specific and concrete needs is a viable way to ask parents to become involved. A staff member suggested, "emailing teachers even though your [the parent] schedule isn't flexible and you can't physically show up, you can still have a voice through email or voicemail or something like that." Furthermore, staff discussed the availability of online systems:

We also have parent access for our parents, where they can go on the computer; at any time, they can see their [children's] discipline, their attendance, their grades, I mean missing assignments...the teacher's email is right on that parent access. They can email the teacher right away.

Many schools host a parent access portal for their online systems, and staff discussed encouraging parents to use the online systems for checking grades, teacher websites, and homework assignments in order to stay informed. Staff did not mention whether or not some families might lack consistent access to the Internet.

Welcoming Families Into the Building

Just as research has identified the importance of students' feelings of belonging in school (Baskin, Wampold, Quintana, & Enright, 2010; Osterman, 2000), parents' sense of belonging is important to their involvement as well (Barton et al., 2004). Our respondents noted how school actions and attitudes send a clear message that parents are or are not welcome in school. Parents discussed the ways that their individual school welcomed parents into the school building.

A major barrier to parent participation expressed by the focus groups was the level of comfort parents felt in coming to the school. One parent stated:

In the past, previous leaders, they didn't want you here as a parent, because I've got a 26-year-old, and when he went through this school, as a parent, I honestly did not feel like I was welcomed in this building at all. They did not want you here.

Another parent spoke to the school climate and the feel of the school upon entering: "If a parent stops by school, they should be invited into the classroom to observe everyday functions of class. Not persecuted by office personnel." The use of a term as strong as "persecuted" shows the extent to which this parent did not feel a part of the school and did not feel welcome in the building and classrooms.

Staff likewise recognized that "sometimes I think [parents] feel intimidated, I don't know, for lack of a better word. They may be uneducated, so they feel like coming in here and looking at us...I think we intimidate them sometimes." This staff member's statement expressed both the staff perception of some parents being uneducated and acknowledged that the school environment can be intimidating to parents.

One suggestion consistently expressed as important by a number of parents was being able to sit in on an actual class—to visit the classroom as a way to check on their student and observe the teacher. The families viewed the school

restrictions on classroom visits as a hindrance to involvement and a limit on their ability to support their child in school. One parent stated, “How can I help if I can’t come to the school?” This idea of being able to be present in the classroom as a way to be involved was expressed by a middle school parent:

Allowing the parents to come inside the classrooms, especially if your child has had problems inside of class. You should be able to come in, and sit in, and once the kids will know that my parent will come up here at any time, that will sometimes stop some of the behaviors.

Parents viewed sitting in on a class as a way to be involved, to connect with students and teachers, and to ultimately be a help to the school and their child.

Time Conflicts or Making Time

Sentiments about how time affects involvement were expressed in two ways: conflicts with other events, and conflicts with parents’ work schedules. The way in which time and timeliness impacts parent participation was discussed; one parent stated the greatest barrier to involvement was “Just time.”

Other parents spoke of the fact that all families have their own schedules, and these often conflict with the time or day of events. Said one parent, “And I know with me, a lot of days they do it on Thursday nights, and I have Christian meetings on Thursday nights, so that just blocks out all of my family from attending.”

Parents also noted conflicts between the times meetings are scheduled and their work schedules. As one parent noted:

Sometimes the designated start times of things, like the PTA, I was heavily involved in it from when my daughter was in kindergarten, but they have their meetings so early, like some days they’re at like 2:30, and it’s just hard to walk away from work to attend those meetings. I think they try to do a good job, though, by having some in the morning, some in the afternoon.

One parent reflected on what happens when schools are able to reduce time conflicts:

It was packed [choir concert] because a lot of parents could come. So I think, in this community, because it is so working class, it’s not out of the ordinary to ask a parent to come at 6:30, because it’s almost like, “Okay good, I don’t have to take off from work and get home, get dinner at home.”

The day of the week, the start time, and providing food all were discussed as methods that could remedy time constraints.

Moving From Involvement to Engagement

Parents in the focus groups suggested that parent involvement should be viewed in multiple ways that move beyond and differ from traditional methods of parent involvement (e.g., not simply being satisfied that parents are physically present in the building). Respondents hoped that schools would see parent involvement as going beyond presence in the building and consider the multitude of things that parents can do to help their students be successful.

Parents addressed the way that schools want them to be involved as a barrier to parent engagement: “I would like to see more ways parents who are working can help, I’m just not sure,” and “Give more detailed info on how parents can be more involved academic-wise. Suggest ideas that make learning fun at home.” In addition, parents also considered the complexity of curriculum as a barrier:

Considering the level of classes now required, I cannot imagine how frustrating and difficult it must be for parents who don’t have a college education or have [not] taken algebra, geometry, chemistry, etc. to assist their child with these classes with no knowledge themselves—would love to see some basic info provided to help those parents help themselves and their child.

Parents sought assistance in being engaged, such as activities to do at home and instructions for parents to help their child with more advanced subjects.

One parent asked that schools be willing to count actions parents take in supporting their children’s education outside school as being part of parent involvement/engagement: “It’s the way they want parents to be involved; shift to parent involvement without showing up.” Such a shift in understanding would constitute acknowledgement of the various ways parents are involved in their child’s education—even “without showing up” at the school.

Parents offered other examples of how they were engaged in their child’s education. For example, one stated, “And I think responsibilities at home are really important. We even implement a chore chart that comes with allowance, and it’s based on his behavior sheet from school, too, so if you got a red check, allowance is minimized.” Some parents saw their attendance at sporting events as engagement—“I attend track meets”—as well as other related activities they participate in after and outside of school. For one parent, being engaged after and outside of school meant participating in a variety of things:

I try to do a lot of...as far as afterschool activities, like she was talking about, problem-based learning...we try to implement something after school, whether it’s park fun, we do YMCA sports, lots of library activities...just going to the library, not just checking out a book, but actually participating in what they have going on there...and it’s free.

Thus, recognizing and recommending that parents use community resources such as the YMCA and the library could expand the school's definition of parent engagement.

Parents suggested that promoting parents' presence at community events could be a viable way to engage parents who will attend events that are not at the school. One parent reflected on their community:

The city does events in the park. That park is packed any time they have an event. If the city can get the people out, then the schools need to tap in. What do they do? A lot of times it's free food, hot dogs in the park.

Clearly there are several barriers that limit parent involvement in the schools, and addressing these barriers is critical to improving involvement and moving into engagement. Based on these remarks, parents are seeking guidance from the school about how they can help their children, with the school providing support or resources that teach parents how to help or giving tools to assist parents in helping their children. With many school events occurring in the evenings or during work hours, parents that work are hindered from being present. The addition of siblings and the lack of timely communication that would allow parents time to change work schedules all exacerbate the situation for a parent who may want to be involved and engaged. Addressing barriers and listening to parent-provided solutions is one way to move from parent involvement to engagement.

Staff Only

Staff identified some additional barriers that families did not address. In examining these differing barriers, we saw a contrast in how staff saw barriers to family involvement, and we also saw some staff attitudes about barriers for families. One staff member stated:

So I don't know what is going on exactly, but over the years, let's say 16 years, I've seen a huge shift in parental involvement, period, on a school-wide level. Do we still have parents that want to be a part of their kids' lives? Yes. Do they want to be involved? Yes. That percentage is very little compared to the rest that are too busy, don't want to, or who cares, or can't because they can't. I have to say that. I think we put it out there.

While this staff member's statement affirms that some parents want to be involved, it also expresses the view that this group is small, a perception at odds with what we hear from parents who are asking for the school to widen their view and assist parents to get involved by supporting modes of parent involvement that do not require showing up in school, thus shifting to engagement.

Overcoming Negative School Experiences

This perception that parents do not want to be involved was characterized by staff in terms of negative school experiences, apathy, and being uneducated. Teachers seemed to think that parents have a “degree of apathy”; that there is a “lack of value of education”; or that “Sometimes I think [parents] just feel intimidated, [or] they may be uneducated.” Staff members suspected that parents may feel intimidated and that intimidation may prevent or discourage parents from being present at the school.

One staff member stated, “I think if they’ve had a negative experience, you know, when they were in school, they tend to have a negative outlook of their child’s experience here in the school, too.” Not only did staff identify prior school experience as a barrier to involvement, they also identified apathy as a barrier: “I’m going to say, I think there’s a certain degree of apathy as well, and not just apathy, but kind of hand-in-hand with that, also to know who do you have to call or involve about certain issues...” It is interesting to note that the staff member mentioned uncertainty and apathy together. This identified apathy as the parents’ reason for lack of involvement but simultaneously recognized the uncertainty that parents often have regarding how to be involved or who to contact.

Breaking Down Barriers to Access

One barrier to parent involvement that was quickly identified by staff was transportation: “No transportation;” “Car. Some of them don’t have a car.” Other barriers identified included having a single-parent home, being adoptive parents, passing a background check, and meeting the cost of involvement.

Across schools, staff noted the barrier of single parent families or foster families, biologically related or not, raising the child and being involved at the school: “so many single parents, and single parents that have to work full time; that makes it more difficult to be involved in their child’s life especially at the school day level.” In one district, staff discussed a significant foster population: “we have a very high foster [population] and single parents, so there’s one that you have to work around, and a lot of them have, like I said, aunts, uncles, parents, grandparents are raising them.” Staff perceived communicating with and engaging foster parents as even more difficult than with biological parents. Staff also considered these families as those that need more support. One staff member said:

Yes. A lot of our students who have more discipline incidents and who have academic challenges are coming from households that need some extra support. The parents either can’t be or choose not to be as involved as some of our more successful students.

Staff also identified a background check as a major barrier to volunteering (for field trips or as room helper). A staff member commented, “But they don’t want to take [a background check]....They are concerned about taking the background check.” When discussing how the background check presented a barrier, staff talked about family members who were willing to volunteer at or for the school but when presented with the need for a background check, refused to complete the process in order to become a volunteer. Some staff expressed that the family members would have been great additions or very helpful but were just unwilling to submit to a background check.

Furthermore, staff named the cost of involvement as a barrier as well. In response to discussing the cost for school sports and how some parents can’t afford the expense, one staff member said, “\$100 to participate per kid. There is a monetary expense.” Not only is it the expense of the child playing the sport, but also attending games or events, including transportation and entry fees.

When asked for ways of overcoming these barriers, staff members sometimes thought in terms of specific responses to individual situations, such as one staff member’s response to transportation issues for a parent: “Last year I had a specific parent that couldn’t come because she didn’t have a car at that time, so I went to her.” More often, when a question specifically asked staff members to respond to what they were doing to address barriers such as transportation and financial concerns, they struggled to actually respond in ways that showed they were addressing the identified barriers, talking instead about how adults can participate in the school and build positive relationships.

This phenomenon is illustrated in this excerpt from a staff focus group (Note: I = facilitator; M = staff member):

I: You talked about home visits. What are some other things that you all are doing to overcome the barriers that you identified? So you guys talked about finances as a barrier, transportation, intimidation, work schedules, not knowing how to deal with whatever concern the student may have, what are some things that [the school] is doing to try to overcome those barriers?

M: We’ve had a few. We’re trying to get parents and families in as much as possible. We’ve done a couple of things this year that have been really neat and have gotten some participation. We’ve had boy’s night out, girl’s night out, game night, trivia night, and parents can attend with their children to participate in activities. We’ve had pretty good turnouts at all of those events so far. Then as the word gets out, we’re hoping that they go even further and get more participation.

I: Are there things that are specifically done within those events that address transportation or financial concerns?

M: At the boy's night out and the girl's night out we brought in guest speakers. I didn't attend the girl's one, but I heard about it, and they addressed some of those things. Then at the boy's night out they talked about positive relationships and that was kind of tied into it. We had a guest speaker come in and talk about how to participate and be in a positive relationship and support and the kind of things that adults still need to be aware of.

These responses did not address the identified barriers of transportation and financial concerns, but rather pointed out trying to provide interesting events, returning to the concept of parent involvement by being present in the building. Even when the question was specifically asking staff to respond to what they are doing to address the barriers they themselves outlined, they struggled to actually answer in ways that showed they were addressing the identified barriers. The response in the example above did not address the identified barriers of transportation and financial concerns but did address the importance of what parents can learn if they show up. Parents, in their comments, discussed ways that they are engaged with their children outside of school and within school from helping with homework to trips to local events and the local library; all these forms of engagement are negated when, as evidenced by the excerpt above, the notion of parent engagement is only described as being present at the school building.

Discussion and Implications

This study examined how parent and staff focus groups provided data illuminating two questions: (1) "What are barriers or limitations to families attending school events?" and (2) "What can be done differently to increase family involvement?" Changing the way schools perceive appropriate and consistent parent involvement could assist in moving towards greater parent engagement. Some promising practices suggest that when working with parents from diverse backgrounds, it may be beneficial to incorporate the following four strategies for interaction: empower the families to help their children in academics; use outreach programs to reach families in the community; connect them to community resources; and offer resources to provide support for families (Abdul-Adil & Farmer, 2006).

In our effort to learn more about how schools can encourage families it perceives as not involved to be more engaged in the school, we identified five themes through the data analysis: providing opportunities for involvement, improving communication, welcoming families into the building, time conflicts or making time, and moving from involvement to engagement.

Our findings show that parents are able to identify both barriers and solutions to these barriers. Consistently, when parents identified barriers they provided connected solutions. When discussing barriers to being present at the school, parents suggested the school offer childcare for siblings, weekend activities, and provide food as a part of weeknight events—ideas with which staff agreed. Likewise Johnson, Pugach, and Hawkins (2004) found that providing school-arranged transportation and childcare for school meetings reduced logistical barriers for parents' attendance. While addressing barriers to communication, parents suggested frequent and multiple forms of communication for school events and expectations of parents via email, text message, and paper flyer in the child's backpack. Our parent respondents strongly believed that teachers who communicated consistently and more often had students who were more academically engaged and had fewer behavior incidents; therefore, parents suggested more proactive communication especially in relationship to academic performance and behavior.

For some students and families, language is a significant barrier. When school personnel suspect the possibility of a language barrier, translators may be utilized in schools during meetings, and papers and newsletters should be translated in order to ensure mutual understanding and increased communication (Henderson et al., 2006; Johnson et al., 2004; Smith et al., 2011). Some of the principals in the participating focus group schools have been intentional about hiring faculty and other staff that identify linguistically, culturally, and/or ethnically with parents and students (PBIS Indiana, 2013). In the absence of the ability to hire staff that identify with parents and students, providing professional development for all current professional and support staff in effective methods of communicating and connecting with families and parents in a culturally responsive manner remains an important component of ensuring parent engagement (Iruka, Curenton, & Eke, 2014; Tran, 2014).

In this study, *time* was expressed in two ways: conflicts with other events, and conflicts with parent's work schedules. Due to the way that time was expressed, addressing the barriers identified may take effort to discern what is meant by *time* for the community of parents that the school serves. To define time conflicts and respond with sustainable solutions, it becomes necessary to facilitate conversations with both parents and staff about how the barrier of *time* can be addressed. Additionally, surveys and focus groups can also be used to gather information from families about their needs and their ideas for improving family involvement (Knopf & Swick, 2008). Conducting a needs assessment in secondary schools could be helpful in identifying both academic and nonacademic support that parents could provide that they and the students would see as more age-appropriate.

Our findings also showed that staff were able to identify barriers but often posed disconnected solutions that did not directly address the barrier identified. Shifting from parent involvement to engagement is a shift in a school's attitude toward parents (Ferlazzo, 2011)—this shift includes the way teachers and staff view barriers and effectively alleviate them. In order to remove barriers, a concentrated effort to see parent engagement as beyond just being present at the school is needed, as reiterated by one parent, “It is the way they want parents to be involved; shift to parent involvement without showing up.”

The fact that parents and staff were both able to name these barriers shows that parents and staff are both aware of the barriers to parent involvement. However, the disconnected nature of the solutions offered by staff, in contrast with those originating with parents, brought to light an unfortunate reality of how schools too often engage in addressing barriers. In effect, many schools are not addressing the barriers of the families they serve. The knowledge that was gained from families in this study can help schools to address the barriers parents and staff face, and the solutions offered by parents involved in the focus groups can serve as a starting point for schools to move from parent involvement to parent engagement. Further research should be undertaken to document specific endeavors to move from involvement to engagement, including addressing teacher attitudes about parent engagement through professional development or furthering the documentation of parents' constructions of parent engagement through more in-depth interviews, adding to the work of Hornby and Lafaele (2011).

In conclusion, to move from parent involvement to engagement, schools should embrace a more expansive view of parent engagement which includes multiple constructions of how parents are involved. Parents who may have too many competing obligations or responsibilities to be able to consistently be present at the school are looking for alternatives and for school staff who value their input and participation outside the school building. Moving from parent presence to engagement may require a profound attitude shift that focuses on the strengths and resources that families can bring to their child's education (Peña, 2000) and intentional and consistent attention to addressing barriers with connected solutions.

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