A Model of Parental Participation: A Secondary Data Analysis

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Abstract

This paper addresses the issues surrounding parental participation with special attention to issues associated with race and class differentiations of participation. Based on a secondary data analysis, the paper suggests a model of prediction of parental participation and some strategies for addressing differential participation.

Introduction

Stakeholder participation has taken on renewed interest in recent school reform efforts. With the advent of reform efforts such as TQM being applied to school contexts, we have seen a shift to viewing parents and students as "clients" or "customers" of the educational system. Attention to parent populations is critical to increased public support for public schools. Most school personnel will agree that parental participation is important but in almost all cases, it's sorely lacking. This is particularly true for certain population variables including race, class and gender (Carr, 1995a). It is imperative that schools begin to recognize which parent groups are not participating in schools and attempt to reach out to those populations.

This study explores race, class, educational level and parental perceptions as they effect parental participation in schools. In an effort to confirm practitioners' views of parental participation and the history of underrepresentation, this quantitative analysis of parental participation vari-

ables validates school personnel impressions. Statistical modeling through regression analyses helps to form a theoretical model of parental participation, which requires further, more detailed, testing. The purpose of such a model of prediction is ultimately to aid school personnel in targeting and including populations who heretofore have been inactive in school decision making.

Theoretical Framework

The positive impact of community participation on the improvement of curricular aspects of schools has been well established (e.g., Fantini, 1980; Indelicato, 1980; Wiles, 1974; Davies 1981). The terms community participation and stakeholder approach are rooted in definitions of stakeholder evaluation (Stake, 1986) and point to the influence of school policy and direction as stakeholders' primary function in the educational system (Mauriel, 1989). Power, interest and conflict resolution are critical to any definition of stakeholder (Bowles, 1989). However, it is uncommon for all community stakeholders to be accorded substantive power in school decision-making (Yaffe, 1994; Dawson, 1982). Although the history of community participation shows a waxing and waning of community power (Davies, 1981), authority remains an issue today even when a broad base of stakeholders are engaged in collaborative decision making efforts.

The systemic nature of authentic parent participation is highlighted by Sarason (1995), "taking the political principle seriously in one part of the system creates disturbance in other parts of that system" (p. 37). However, systems theorists and systemic change advocates are particularly interested in stakeholder participation because it is seen as the primary path to substantive change, "owned" by the entire community (Reigeluth, 1992; Carr 1995b) and because stakeholder participation is most closely aligned with the values of user-design which is fundamental to systemic change (Banathy, 1991; Carr, 1997; Schuler & Namioka, 1993).

Obstacles to Authentic Parental Participation

In heterogeneous American society, entertaining competing ideologies in the service of educational systems design consumes much time and energy. Sarason (1995) recognizes the difficulties that sincere participation pose for those currently in control, "...school personnel believe that keeping parents at a distance is less trouble-some than sincerely involving them. On this last point educators could not be more realistic in the sense that once you take parent-community involvement seriously, life becomes more complicated, messy and even more unpredictable than it was before" (p. 84).

Pragmatic Obstacles

In many cases, the ways in which individuals are recruited and selected can be a pragmatic obstacle to participation. Rutherford & Billig (1995) outline eight lessons for community involvement including active advocacy by leaders, connections to the curriculum and a support structure of front-line workers to assist in effective community participation. They quote a Minneapolis parent as saying, "I wanted to be involved, but I just didn't know how to get involved. If it hadn't been for one of the teachers calling and personally inviting me to come in to the school and help, I wouldn't be here today" (p. 66). Williams (1989) suggests that the PTA have an integral role to play in the inclusion, awareness and recruitment functions of community participation. Yaffe (1994) suggests in a study of community involvement, that selection criteria are not to be taken lightly. Quoting her respondents she writes, "We chose people we knew had credibility in the community—people who are not rubber stamps, who think for themselves, and who are outspoken in their belief system but who are reasonable and would listen to all sides...in order to get a well-rounded committee another parent was recruited...those voices are out there...and if you don't let them have the opportunity for outlet, they only collect energy over time until they explode" (p. 699).

In other cases, it is not recruitment or selection which deters participation, it can be more mundane obstacles such as transportation, child care, or simply a lack of available free time to devote to school change efforts (Carr, 1995a). As Moffett (1994) puts it in his brilliant book on spiritual awakening and education, "Most parents today focus so exclusively on just managing their lives that they cannot afford to think about schools" (p. 61).

Systemic Obstacles

Community participation traditionally has had difficulties with power relationships. The promise of decision-making authority in an effort to gain community "buy-in" represents one of the most common incentives for parental participation. Carlisle (1993) writes, "The establishment must accommodate the desires of disenfranchised parents who want more choice—real involvement—in their children's education" (p. 520). However, these promises and efforts often fall short of their goal when leaders or special interest groups react to decisions made by councils.

Involvement of school personnel in site-based decision making teams (teachers, administrators, staff) is another common trend which can subtly undermine the ability of minority members to fully participate. Design teams which mix professional staff and community members ordinarily meet during the school day, a time that is almost impossible for working people to attend. While such schedules have the apparent advantage of working within teacher union parameters, businessmen, working single mothers, and most

fathers cannot attend daytime meetings unless they are able to obtain work release or to suffer loss of pay. These schedules encourage differential power distributions skewed toward non-working mothers, upper and middle class fathers, high-level businessmen[1], and professional educators.

Finally, expertise real, perceived and extolled can be the cause of unbalanced community participation (Carr, 1995b). Community-based decision-making teams easily devolve into "rubber stamp" committees whose purpose is to approve professional educators' initiatives in order to give the appearance of community participation and voice where there really is none (e.g., Daresh, 1992). Expert power and legitimation based on higher education, degrees, and professional knowledge ensconced in educational jargon may elevate the profession of teaching and supervision, but may also serve to distance educators from communities and perpetuate the hegemony of current educational systems (Dawson, 1982). Boards of education were intended to keep the management of schools close to their communities, however, while Board members are typically elected, the political valance associated with the process tends to keep boards from being truly responsive in any real sense to the communities they serve (Brock, 1994; Sarason, 1995). Moffett (1994) suggests usurping such expert power, "This is populist in that people take over from the experts and collaborate to heal each other. Surely, it will only be by some such process of spreading specialty expertise that America will ever solve its problem of health care and treatment—or of public education" (p. 187).

Racial Obstacles

Most of the research conducted in education on race, class and gender has focused on the students in the school environment (e.g., Grant, 1989; Sadker & Sadker, 1985; Moore & Smith, 1986; Velez, 1989). A few important sources of information do exist with regard to race and parental participation (e.g., Collins, Moles & Cross, 1982, Epstein, 1987). One important study was conducted by Becker & Epstein (1982), in which it was found that parental educational level was related to teacher's efforts to involve parents in homework with children. Among teachers who infrequently involved parents the claim was made that teachers perceived "parents who had less than a high school education [as lacking] the ability or willingness to help" (Epstein, 1987, p. 131).

Lightfoot (1978) identifies basic misunderstandings between teacher and parent populations as key to the "closed doors" that "black dreams" suffer in the current educational system. While parents see teachers as hopeless with regard to their children, teachers "continue to view [black parents] as uncaring, unsympathetic, and ignorant of the value of education for their children and unconcerned about their children's academic success in school" (p.166).

Lightfoot, therefore sees the central difficulty with minority parental involvement as misperceptions between teachers and parents.

Comer (1988) extends this argument by identifying that some parents, ashamed of their speech, dress or failure to hold jobs, maintain a defensive posture, which can lead to hostility and avoidance of any contact with schools. Comer suggests that a mutual distrust builds among populations who are unfamiliar with one another, which can lead to alienation between school and home. This alienation in turn produces a difficulty in nurturing a bond between child and teacher that can support development and learning. The child becomes disappointed in school and risks dropping out of the educational system entirely. This is a vicious cycle which repeats itself because students who drop out of school and in turn have families of their own become parents who cannot walk school halls with dignity because of their shame from dropping out. Invitations to parents to become involved via fliers mailed home will not break through these difficult walls of dissonance, shame, and alienation.

Recent research has focused on systemic qualities of the relationship between schools and communities with special attention to minority parents' low levels of participation in decision-making teams (Carr, 1994). Variables such as income, race, transportation, and availability of day care all seemed to play a role in the activity level of parents in their child's education. However, these findings were qualitative in nature and focused primarily on decision-making teams in the Midwest.

Study Hypotheses

These findings during qualitative research needed to be refined into focused questions, which can be investigated quantitatively. This combination of methods allows for the inquirer to discover questions, which emerge from naturalistic inquiry and follow up with quantitative data to confirm or refute hypotheses formed during personal interviews.

This paper reports a secondary data analysis of the 1990 Survey of Parents and Children conducted by the National Commission on Children (1991). In exploring the relationship between parent populations and the school community, we have identified dependent and independent variables that were measured in this survey. These variables were chosen based on researchers' hypotheses regarding involvement in school efforts and prior qualitative research findings. Hypotheses were generated based on interviews conducted with specialized community populations involved or previously involved in school change teams, and other prior qualitative research findings.

Primary variables such as race and class were hypothesized to have direct impact on school participation, feelings of empowerment, satisfaction with school and expectations. There were also several intervening variables, which

we expected to find high correlation to socio-economic status; these included parental education level, school type, and neighborhood. The expectation for this study as an outcome was the creation of a more tightly focused model of parental participation prediction, which could be verified, and then used to generate strategies for school leaders to target underrepresented populations for full school participation.

Method

These hypotheses were tested using secondary data analysis from data generated by the National Commission on Children (1991) in a survey. The purpose of the survey was to "gather direct, up-to-date, and nationally representative data on the current state of family life, the quality of the relationship between parents and their children and their interactions with the major institutions affecting the family" (p. 2). The focus of the survey was on the shifts evidenced in family life and their relationship to education. Our purposes in re-examining the data were to contextualize it in the frame of educators interested in what moves people to action in school participation. The survey included a number of items that would help us understand the interactions of race, class and gender in terms of their impact on school participation.

The original survey was conducted by telephone, nationally among 1738 respondents. Response rates are estimated at 71% based on three rates: contact rate, cooperation rate, and completion rate. Sampling was generated randomly by telephone numbers for the general population. Special considerations were made to include African American and Hispanic populations via supplemental samples that were also randomly drawn from telephone numbers and screened for eligibility by race.

Only a few of the original questions were considered in this secondary analysis. The questions identified clustered around a group of independent and dependent variables. Independent variables included race, income, relative advantage/disadvantage, parental education level, public versus private school enrollment and respondents' perceptions of their own neighborhood. We hypothesized that these variables would have an impact on school participation, feelings of empowerment, expectations of schools, and satisfaction with schools (the dependent variables).

Original data was then recoded so that all the variables of interest were coded in the same direction. Four scales were created based on the dependent variables for (a) school participation; (b) parent efficacy or perceptions of personal control; (c) school satisfaction; and (d) parent expectations. Based on the construction of these scales, a series of correlations, scale correlations and stepwise regressions was conducted.

Results

Correlations

Based on the literature review and the experiences of the authors, several correlations were run first to determine direct relationships. A clear and not surprising correlation was found between race and indicators of relative advantage/disadvantage. Specifically, there was a positive relationship between respondents who are African American and the use of foodstamps (r=.17, p=.000) or AFDC support (r=.18, p=.000). Conversely, there was a negative relationship between respondents who are European American and the use of foodstamps (r= -.22, p=.000) or AFDC support (r= -.20, p=.000). These findings confirm that the sample includes an interaction between race and class.

Race and financial advantage or disadvantage was also linked to respondents' perceptions of safety in their child's school. There was a negative relationship between respondents who are African American and the perception of the safety of their child's school (r= -.13, p=.000) and a correspondingly positive relationship for European American respondents (r=.13, p=.000). Not surprisingly, there were negative relationships between those respondents using foodstamps (r= -.08, p=.004) or AFDC (R= -.11, p=.000) and perceptions of their child's school safety.

Race and financial advantage or disadvantage was also linked to respondents' participation in extra curricular activities in school. There was a negative relationship between respondents who are African American and likelihood of attending a school activity such as a play or concert in the prior year (r= -.10, p=.000). Conversely there was a positive relationship between respondents who are European American and the likelihood of attending a school activity in the prior year (r=.16, p=.000). The negative relationship is again mirrored in those respondents who were using foodstamps (r= -.14, p=.000) or AFDC (r= -.09, p=.000).

Race alone was negatively related to a respondent's perception of the teacher as caring about the child. African American respondents were more likely to negatively grade teachers based on how much they care about students (r= -.07, p=.01) where European American respondents were more likely to positively grade teachers' caring (r=.06, p=.02). Race also seems linked to contact with teachers only for African American respondents. African American parents were more likely to indicate some contact with a teacher in the past year (r=.12, p=.000).

Educational level showed perhaps the strongest relationship to measures of school participation such as attending PTA meetings or extra curricular activities. The respondent's educational level was linked to the likelihood of

helping their child with homework (r=.14, p=.000) as was spousal educational level (r=.12, p=.000). The respondent's educational level was also linked to the likelihood of having had contact with a teacher in the past year (r=.18, p=.000) as was spousal educational level (r=.12, p=.000). The respondent's educational level was linked to the likelihood of having attended a PTA meeting (r=.14, p=.000) as was spousal educational level (r=. 09, p=.01). Finally, the respondent's educational level was also linked to the likelihood of having attended an extracurricular school activity (r=.25, p=.000) as was spousal educational level (r=.23, p=.000).

Scale Correlations

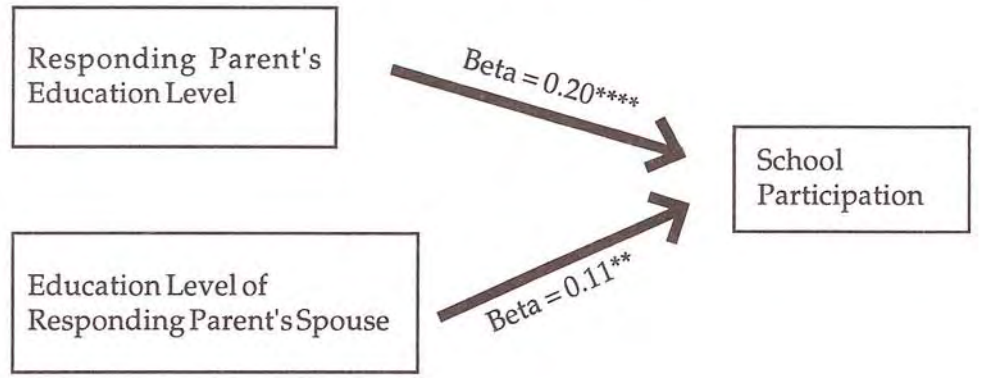
As described above (in the methods section), several scales were created to measure respondent's feelings of efficacy in their child's lives, their academic expectations for their child and their satisfaction with their school. We anticipated that these three scales would be linked to the school participation scale (e.g. attending PTA meetings, helping with homework). There was a positive relationship between respondent's feelings of efficacy and school participation (r=. 24, p=. 000). There was also a positive relationship between academic expectations and school participation (r=. 20, p=. 000). Finally, there was a small positive relationship between school satisfaction and school participation (r=. 09, p=. 001).

Regression Analysis

While these correlations gave us some insight into the relationships between variables, their predictive value is quite limited. In order to more fully understand likelihood of school participation we used multiple regression to develop a more sophisticated predictive model. At this exploratory stage, we chose to develop one model utilizing stepwise regression analysis. We conducted three sets of stepwise regression analyses. First, we examined relatively stable demographic variables such as race, marital status, and educational background. Next we examined three "process" variables which included respondents' academic expectations for their child, respondents' sense of parenting efficacy and respondents' satisfaction with their child's school. Finally we developed a model which included both classes of variables—background and process.

According to the results of the stepwise regression for background variables, only the educational level of the respondent and their spouse was important (See Figure 1).

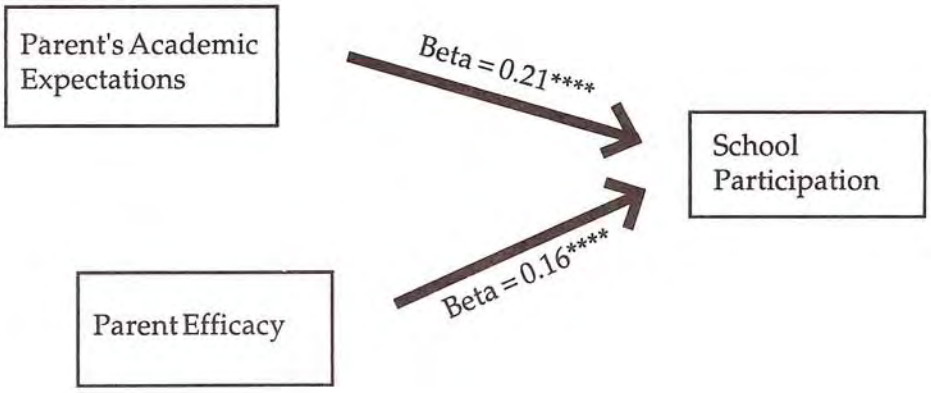
Figure 1
Stepwise Regression: Background Variables



$F(2/944) = 40.76^{****}$
Adjusted R - Square = .08
*p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001 ****p<.0001

Results of the stepwise regression on process variables revealed two significant predictors of the dependent variable: the academic expectations of the parent and the parent sense of efficacy (See Figure 2). In both of these models, the adjusted R^2 is only 0.08, but the combined model improves it to 0.12, suggesting that the third model is a better predictor of the dependent variable.

Figure 2
Stepwise Regression: Process Variables



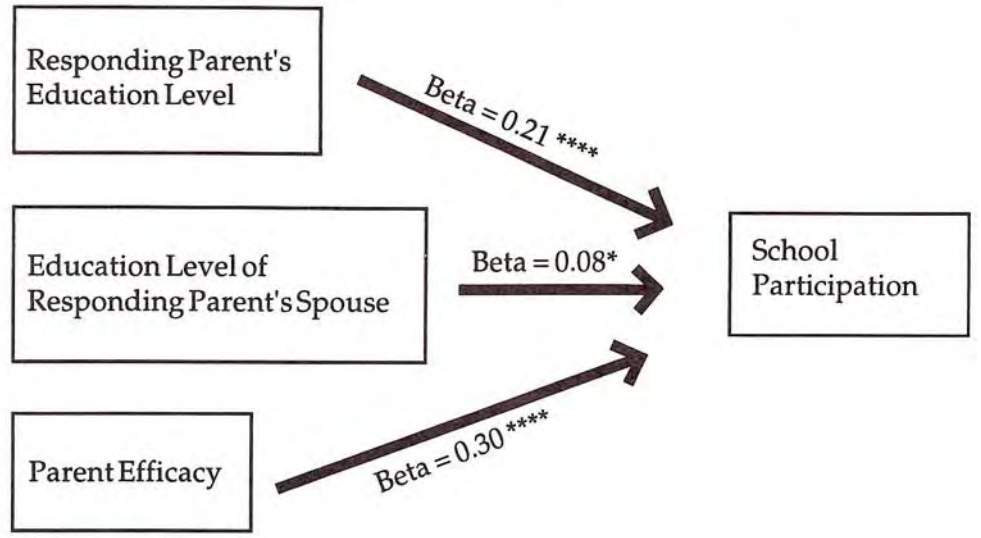
F (2/1399) = 61.56****
Adjusted R - Square = .08
*p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001 ****p<.0001

The combined results include only three of the original four variables from the previous analyses. Parent's academic expectation was not a significant predictor of school participation when simultaneously considered with background variables (See Figure 3). This final step suggests that distal variables, to coin a term used by child psychologists, are the most significant predictors of the dependent variable. This final model is a better model, based on the R^2, but the separate models provide important information: parent's academic expectations are important predictors.

Discussion

The simple correlational results of the survey are not surprising. The relationships between race, disadvantage, educational level and participation in various school activities is supported by qualitative research in the field and personal experiences of the authors in schools. David (1994) finds that participation does not break from traditional involvement trends. In many ways this offers quantitative validation of what many school administrators have believed for some time about patterns of parental participation. Quoting a principal, she writes, "reflecting historical patterns of involvement, overall participation is low, and that of poor and minority parents is nonexistent" (p. 708). In a recent qualitative study of parental participation (Carr, 1995a) the interaction of race, class, and gender as variables affecting

Figure 3
Stepwise Regression: Background and Process Variables



F (3/936) = 45.65****
Adjusted R - Square = .12
*p<.05 **p< .01 ***p < .001 ****p < .0001

parental participation also support these findings.

In addition, the strong connection to parental educational level was not surprising (although this phenomenon is generally underrepresented in parent participation literature) and has also been confirmed through previous and ongoing qualitative work. Describing the lack of parental participation in her school, one administrator is quoted in Carr (1995a):

> Some of these parents are overwhelmed by teachers. They may have been dropouts or delinquent when they were in school. They don't want to be talked down to—they want to be able to walk in these halls and maintain their dignity and pride (p. 29).

And in a similar vein, a parent describes the fears of many parents in Carr (1996):

> They don't feel equal. So how can I say, we are talking about some particular subject in social studies, about changing the

> whole curriculum. If #1, I barely made it out of high school, I don't know what the heck you are talking about, why am I even going to come to give my opinion, and why do you listen if you know that about me (p. 12).

What is perhaps surprising is the lack of strength of these relationships. Given observations of others in the field we would have expected much stronger relationships between class, race and participation. This result is partially explained by the data and survey instrument itself. The questions related to school participation are unfortunately too vague to give clear indications of level of participation. Having had contact with a teacher in the past year could have been either a positive or a negative contact. Without knowing the quality of the interaction, the correlation between African Americans and teacher contact cannot be fully understood. Other similar problems are found in the limited variance in the responses offered by surveyors. Attending a PTA meeting was a Yes or No question. Therefore, we do not know if some parents attended 10 meetings while others attended only one. The variance in the responses limits our ability to truly understand the level of participation by respondents.

Similar effects can be seen in the scaled correlations. It was interesting that satisfaction was a weak predictor of participation. This suggests that parents are not likely to be more involved in their school if they are satisfied with it supporting the concept of dissatisfaction as a motivator.

Finally, the regression analyses rendered models, which indicate that educational background, academic expectations and feelings of efficacy, are the most important predictors of parental involvement. Not surprisingly parents with higher levels of education might be thought to feel quite comfortable in institutions of education. After all, their educational levels suggest relatively high levels of success in such institutions. They are also likely to feel "on a par" or perhaps even superior to well-educated teachers and educational personnel. Parents who have high expectations for their own children's academic success are also likely to be involved particularly if they already have feelings of efficacy or impact in their child's life. This is an important finding from the standpoint that many parents do not feel that they can have strong impact on their schools and this, while not included in this survey, might be related to their feelings that they can have an impact on their child's lives.

One important caveat is worthy of mention here. Taking these correlations and interactions between role, class and school participation as in any way causal is already an inappropriate and hegemonic use of these findings. It is as unacceptable to suggest that *because* people are poor or African American they don't participate in schools as it would be to say that nonparticipation in schools causes one to be poor or African American. Nor is it

appropriate to blame these populations for the lack of participation. As this study has tried to clearly lay out, participation is a complex, dynamic, system of interrelated interdependencies. These findings, instead, are intended to be used to understand more completely the terrain of generalized apathy in school-community relations.

Future Research Specifications

While it is tempting to suggest specific strategies for educational administrators at this point based on these analyses, it is also premature. The survey was not specific enough in terms of the nature of school participation. While findings suggest that feelings of parent efficacy might be targeted for action, instead a more specific model of prediction is offered for future testing (See Figure 4).

Figure 4
Proposed Model for Predicting Parental Participation

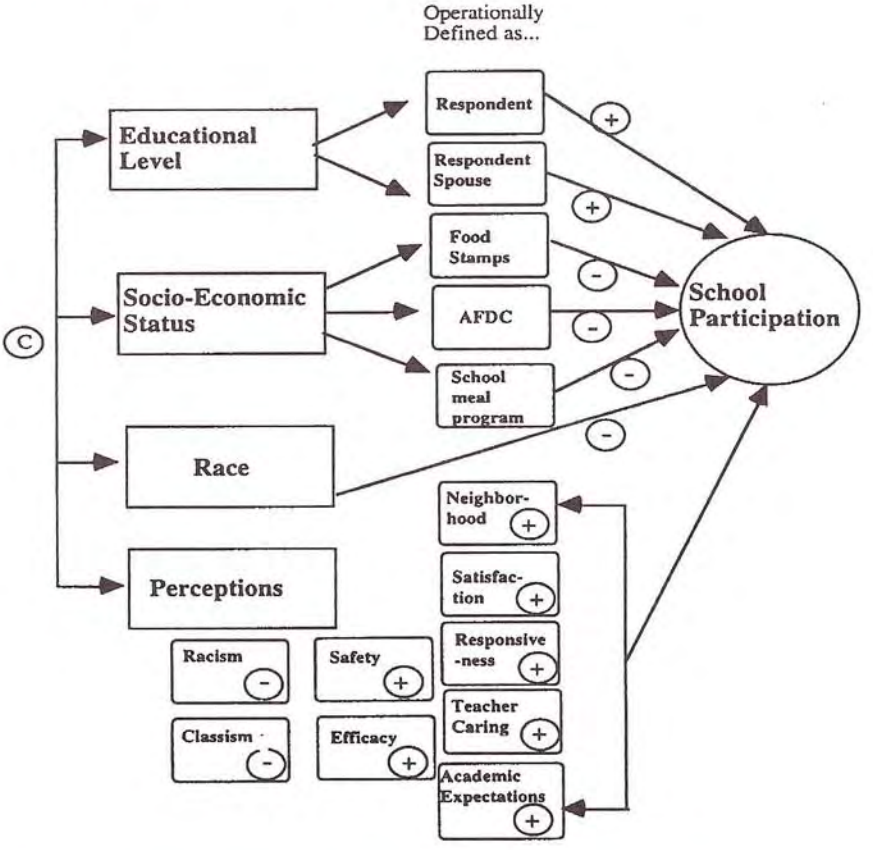


Figure 4 identifies four major components of a predictive model of school participation among community members, or more specifically, parents. First, the educational level has been shown in this study to be a significant variable. Educational level is operationally defined as both the level of education attained by the spouse and the respondent. To the extent that the educational levels of both the respondent and the respondent's spouse are high, we would expect an increase in school participation, thus a positive relationship is denoted in Figure 4 between the operational definition of the independent variable, "Educational Level" and the dependent variable "School Participation."

Second, the socio-economic status of the respondent is expected to show a negative relationship to participation. Socio-economic status is operationalized as a combination of three indicators, food stamps, AFDC, and participation in school meal programs (both lunch and breakfast where available). Third, it is anticipated that race, in this case African American background, will be a negative predictor of school participation as has historically been the case.

Finally, a combination of a number of perceptions is expected to predict both positively and negatively, the level of school participation among all respondents. Although it is clear that many of these variables interact, that race is related to class, that race and class are related to perceptions of neighborhood and safety, for example, we are interested in not only these interactions but also in the effect of these variables when viewed as independent variables predicting school participation. In the case of "Perceptions" we have operationalized the variable by including a large number of perceptions including views of the safety of the school, the neighborhood, satisfaction with the school, responsiveness of the school, and an estimation of the caring attitude of the teachers in the school. A respondent's assessment of their efficacy in their own child's life and education as well as their academic expectations for their child are included in this construct. All of these perceptions are expected to have a positive effect on school participation. That is, to the extent that parents feel their school is safe, responsive, caring and satisfactory, and to the extent that they feel that they have an impact in their child's life along with high academic expectations, we would expect to see higher rates of school participation. On the other hand, to the extent that respondent's perceive racism or classism present in their school, neighborhood, community or larger society, we would expect to see lower rates of school participation.

This model requires a new survey including more specific examination of participation behaviors such as type of teacher interaction with parents, frequency of attending school meetings and extra curricular activities, type of meetings and activities attended, and inclusion/participation in any deci-

sion-making/design teams in schools undergoing restructuring or substantive change initiatives. In addition, understanding respondents' views of the school in terms that are more qualitative and exploratory is important. Respondents' feelings of efficacy in the school, satisfaction with various aspects of their child's educational experiences and attitudes toward educational personnel should all be included in future research. This sort of survey may help to strengthen the predictive value of the model suggested in Figure 4, facilitating more targeted strategies to increase participation among parents who have traditionally been underrepresented on school decision making teams.

Conclusion

This research found clear interactions and correlations between race, class, educational level and respondent's perceptions and their participation in school activities of various sorts. The study is limited by the secondary data analysis and lack of depth in the survey instrument used. However, a stronger predictive model and ways of investigating its robustness are offered for further research. It is important for school leaders to begin to unravel the mysteries of differential participation in order to engage the whole community in school endeavors. This becomes increasingly important with the advent of school change efforts, which seek to gain community ownership and designership. It is inappropriate to expect that new, innovative systems of human learning are likely to emerge from unbalanced teams of community members. Employing strategies for seeking out, inviting in, and retaining historically disenfranchised populations is essential in any decision-oriented change effort in schools today.

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[1]Only powerful, high-level, or management businessmen are typically able to grant themselves release time allowing participation without direct financial repercussions.