

Do Early Adolescents Want Family Involvement in Their Education? Hearing Voices from Those Who Matter Most

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Abstract

Although the views and influences of early adolescents are considered critical to middle school family involvement, their voices are noticeably absent from much contemporary family involvement literature. This study examines the attitudes of early adolescents toward middle school family involvement in urban settings. Data for this study were collected from two sources: (1) a survey of students from five middle schools in one urban school district, and (2) a focus group interview with students in one of the middle schools surveyed. The findings revealed that a majority of the students wanted their families to be involved in their education, particularly through family-initiated involvement activities. The study suggests that students' desire for autonomy serves as a variable moderating their preferences for certain types of family involvement activities, rather than forming an overall barrier to family involvement at the middle school level. Thus, this study challenges the prevalent view that the primary barrier existing for middle school family involvement is adolescents not wanting their parents to be involved at all, due to their desire for autonomy. Implications from the study are discussed in the light of these findings.

Introduction

One crucial challenge facing this nation's schools is how to involve families from diverse cultural backgrounds (Deering, 1996; Epstein, 1995; Hidalgo, Siu, Bright, Swap, & Epstein, 1995) and at the middle school level (Berla, 1991; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Swick, 1979). Although the views and influences of early adolescents are considered critical to middle school family involvement, their voices are noticeably absent from much contemporary family involvement literature.

What is known about the attitudes of early adolescents toward middle school family involvement has largely been based on the prevalent view that they simply do *not* want their parents to be involved with their education at this developmental stage (Baker, 2000; Barber & Patin, 1997; Berla, 1991; Dwyer & Hecht, 2001; Eccles & Harold, 1993; Foster-Harrison & Peel, 1995; Henderson & Wilcox, 1998; Johnston, 1998; Schine, 1998). However, scant research exists to support this assumption. On the contrary, data derived from several recent studies seemed to raise questions about this assumption (Connors & Epstein, 1994; Pryor, 1995; The Metropolitan Life Survey of the American Teacher, 1998). However, none of these studies examine this assumption, in general, or with early adolescents from diverse cultural backgrounds, in particular.

The purpose of this study is to examine the views and attitudes of early adolescents toward middle school family involvement in urban settings. If the assumption that middle school students do not desire family involvement is left unexamined, we are likely to back off from involving families in school. Or we involve families despite this assumption, treating early adolescents as “objects” or “inert organisms” (Clinchy, 1995), viewing family involvement as something to be done *to* them, not *with* them. In either case, we may continue to miss insights on and opportunities for involving families at this critical stage of their child's education.

Related Literature

There is a consensus in the research community that parent involvement is desirable and beneficial (Arvizu, 1996; Comer, 1993; Cortes, 1996; Epstein, 1995; Lynn, 1997; Osborne, 1996; Swap, 1993). One major legislation – The Goals 2000: Educate America Act and the reauthorized Elementary and Secondary Education Act – has made parent involvement in children's education a national priority. More recently, a Phi Delta Kappa Poll of Teachers suggests that, like researchers and policymakers, teachers also see a critical need for parent involvement (Langdon & Vesper, 2000). When asked “if there is one thing you could change to improve

the public schools in your community, what would that be,” the largest proportion of the teachers desired more parent involvement (p. 609).

Family involvement becomes a particularly important issue at the middle school level and for families from diverse cultural backgrounds. Osborne (1996), in his review of the literature on culturally relevant pedagogy, finds that “the issue of parental involvement has not been investigated widely by interpretive ethnographers” (p. 294). Similarly, Hidalgo, et al. (1995) state that an area that deserves close attention is “the nature of school, family, and community partnerships for families and children with diverse cultural backgrounds” (p. 499).

Middle school family involvement has long been a neglected area (Berla, 1991; Henderson & Wilcox, 1998; Swick, 1979). Studies show that family involvement drops at the middle school level, even where home-school partnerships have been reasonably effective in the early school years (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Schine, 1998). Yet, the decline in family involvement when children enter adolescence could not occur at a worse time, especially for minority and working-class students, “as they undergo profound developmental changes in all realms – social, psychological, and physical... [and] as they often face heightened threats to their physical well-being in school and the community and come to school with cultural capital that is often devalued in schools” (Deering, 1996, pp. 21-22).

It has been argued that a number of factors make parent involvement at this level difficult. These factors include: (a) the more impersonal structure of the middle school compared to the elementary school (Berla, 1991; Epstein, 1996); (b) the attitudes of middle schools, which make fewer efforts to involve parents (Barber & Patin, 1997; Berla, 1991); and (c) the knowledge of parents, who feel less equipped to work with children as the curriculum becomes more advanced (Baker, 2000; Schine, 1998).

However, the most-frequently cited factor – perceived as the primary barrier to middle school family involvement – is that early adolescents do *not* want their parents to be involved with their education. This perception has largely been based on an unexamined assumption that early adolescents begin demanding a greater sense of autonomy in and control over their lives (Baker, 2000; Johnston, 1998), strive toward independence from their parents (Berla, 1991; Foster-Harrison & Peel, 1995; Henderson & Wilcox, 1998; Johnston, 1998), and often do not want their parents to come to school (Barber & Patin, 1997; Foster-Harrison & Peel, 1995; Schine, 1998).

Recently, several studies began to touch on the attitudes of adolescents toward family involvement, and the results from these studies raised questions about the assumption that early adolescents, in general, do not want their parents to be involved with their education. In a nationally representative survey of 1,306 students in grades 7-12 (The Metropolitan Life Survey of the American Teacher,

1998), the majority (72%) of adolescents surveyed believed that it was a good idea for parents to get involved with their education. As to where parent involvement should occur, a majority (63%) again felt that it was important for parents to be involved in both the school and the home. One in three (34%) felt that it was important to be involved mainly at home, and only a few (3%) felt that it was important to be involved at school itself. In addition, seven in ten (68%) students would like their parents to remain involved at their current level, while other students wanted to see their parents become more involved (14%) or less involved (14%). The Metropolitan Life data further revealed that:

Students who do better academically are more likely than students who have academic difficulties to feel that their parents take an active interest in their school lives, that they provide them with the home support they need to succeed academically, and that they encourage them to pursue their dreams. (p. 3)

The study concluded that the students felt positive about the role that parents could play and did play in supporting their education.

Other studies revealed similar findings. Connors and Epstein (1994) surveyed over 1,300 ninth graders at six high schools in Maryland about their attitude toward and need for school and family partnerships. Most adolescents (82%) agreed that even in high school their parents needed to be involved in their education. Specifically, over three-quarters (75-88%) were willing to inform and involve their families in things they were learning in school (e.g., asking parents for ideas for a project, working with them to achieve and maintain good grades). However, the adolescents were ambivalent about the need to develop more opportunities for parents to volunteer to their schools, with only 40% seeing such a need. The authors speculated that this ambivalence perhaps reflected whether volunteers would affect their developing autonomy and independence from parents.

Could the concern with autonomy exist in other areas as well? In another study, Pryor (1995) surveyed the views of 516 ninth graders about family-school relations in five Midwestern school districts. In addition, the author conducted focus group interviews. The data revealed that these students wanted their parents to help with their academic work and to be available as advocates when they needed them. On the other hand, they wanted their parents to stay out of their social lives – yet not show too much detachment. The study concluded that schools needed to listen to adolescents, take their views seriously, and advocate for their best interests.

Taken together these studies suggest that a majority of students see benefits of family involvement in the middle school level and want their families involved in their education. However, none of these studies expressly targeted the middle school level, nor did they specifically focus on early adolescents from diverse cultural backgrounds. In addition, they largely relied on quantitative survey data,

providing few insights into and explanations for early adolescents' attitudes toward middle school family involvement in a life context. Thus, there is a need to hear voices, particularly from early adolescents from diverse cultural backgrounds because (a) they face heightened threats to their well-being (Deering, 1996), (b) the cultural expectations and beliefs of the school are likely to be in conflict with their families (Rutherford, Anderson, & Billig, 1997), and (c) there is a lack of research on the nature of school and family partnerships for families from diverse cultural backgrounds (Hidalgo et al., 1995; Osborne, 1996).

This was the point of departure for the present study. When asked to voice their opinions about middle school family involvement, how do early adolescents from diverse cultural backgrounds reply? Do they see benefits in family involvement at the middle school level? Do they want their families involved in their education? Do they prefer some family involvement activities to others? How may their voices shed light on middle school family involvement and provide insights about how to involve families from diverse cultural backgrounds at this developmental stage? These questions and issues are examined in this study, using both quantitative and qualitative data sources. By focusing on these questions and issues, the present study may be viewed as bridging a gap in research on family involvement.

Method

Sample

The present study surveyed one to three classes of students (number of classes selected from a school depended on the school size) from five public middle schools in a large urban school district. A total of 154 out of 193 sampled students responded to the survey, resulting in an 80% return rate. The respondents included 44% Latino, 31% Asian American, 11% African American, 3% Caucasian, 7% Mixed or Multiracial, and 4% Other. Among them, 54% were male, and 79% of them spoke a second language at home.

Data Collection

During this study, the author worked as a researcher in a university research center. His interest in middle school family involvement was influenced by his previous work on cultural interchange among the staff, students, and their families from diverse cultural backgrounds in one urban middle school (Xu, 1999). Data for the present study were collected from two sources: (1) a focus group interview with students in one middle school, and (2) a survey of students from the five middle schools.

Focus group interview. The focus group interview was conducted with eight students from one of the five middle schools in June 1999. Six identified themselves as Latino and two identified themselves as Asian American. All of them noted that they spoke either Spanish or Chinese at home. The group was evenly divided male and female, and half were 7th graders and half were 8th graders. In addition, five reported that they lived with both parents while three reported that they lived with their mother only.

The purpose of the interview was to gain insights about their attitudes toward and their perceptions of family involvement in their life contexts. Examples of questions were: “What does family involvement mean to you?” “What aspects of family involvement, if any, are most important to you?” The focus group interview was held during the school day, lasted approximately one hour, and was recorded on audiotape.

Survey. The survey of students was conducted in December 1999. In addition to serving as a data source itself, the focus group interview was used to inform the development of the survey items. Also incorporated in this survey were some relevant items from school and family partnership surveys developed by Joyce Epstein and Karen Salinas (1993).

The survey asked students to rate the importance of different types of family involvement in their schools (10 items) and at home (7 items), ranging from “not important,” “a little important,” “pretty important,” to “very important.” They were further asked the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with a set of statements on family involvement (9 items), using the Likert Scale. Finally, the survey included one open-ended question, which asked students to name three activities that their school and family could do to help them learn better.

Procedure

The survey was shared with the district superintendent and some middle school principals and teachers in October 1999. Based on their comments, the initial six-page survey was then reduced to three pages to make it more manageable for students to complete. The final questionnaire was translated into Spanish and Chinese Mandarin to make it easier for some students whose first language was not English. Professional translators were used, and the accuracy of the translation was further assured by subjecting both versions to the scrutiny of two educators whose native languages were, respectively, Spanish and Chinese. The administration of the survey took approximately thirty minutes.

Analytical Methods

For this paper, data analysis focused on using descriptive statistics to compare students' perceived importance given various family involvement activities in their schools and at home, as well as to examine their other attitudes towards middle school family involvement. In addition, one way, within-subjects analysis of variance was conducted to examine whether there was a significant main effect of adolescents' preferences over certain family involvement activities.

The audiotaped focus interview was transcribed and checked for accuracy against the original recording. The focus interview group transcripts, along with student responses to the open-ended question in the survey, were coded according to relevant themes (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Krathwohl, 1998; Patton, 1990). Attention was paid to two types of themes: those that directly corresponded to the survey items, and those that were inductively derived from the qualitative data. These themes were then discussed in the light of the quantitative survey data.

During this process, triangulation of different data sources was used to enhance the credibility of the findings and interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Results

Quantitative Results

The quantitative survey data revealed that the early adolescents wanted their family involved in their education, judging from their responses to three categories of opinion statements (see Table 1).

The first category, including the first four statements in Table 1, relates to the adolescents' perceived importance of family involvement in general (i.e., at the middle school level, in their schools, and at home) and whether or not they wanted their families more involved. Across these four statements, 13% to 18% of the adolescents strongly disagreed or disagreed, while 24% to 37% were not sure. The majority, however, reported favorable attitudes toward family involvement in general. Of the adolescents surveyed, 63% strongly agreed or agreed that family involvement was important for their success at the middle school level; 46% to 51% strongly agreed or agreed that family involvement was a priority in the school and in their family. Consistent with these opinions, then, it was not a surprise to find that 58% strongly agreed or agreed with the statement that they wanted their family more involved in their education, while only 15% strongly disagreed or disagreed and 27% were not sure.

The second category includes the next three statements listed in Table 1, more specifically relating to student reactions toward having their family members come

Table 1. Adolescent Opinions about Family Involvement

Opinions	Percentage of Students Who		
	Strongly Disagree or Disagree	Not Sure	Strongly Agree or Agree
Family involvement is important for my success in middle school.	13	24	63
Family involvement in my education is a priority in my family.	18	31	51
Family involvement is a priority in this school.	17	37	46
I want my family more involved in my education.	15	27	58
I think that the school wants my family to come to school to find out what I'm learning.	16	28	57
I think that the school wants my family to come to school to see if I'm misbehaving or not.	27	24	50
I don't want my family to come school to attend any meetings.	55	30	15
I think that students would do better if they knew their families cared about them and were interested in their school work.	13	15	72

to the school building. Over half the students strongly agreed or agreed that the school wanted their family to visit the school to find out what they were learning and to see if they were misbehaving or not, while 16% to 27% strongly disagreed or disagreed and 24% to 28% were unsure. Only 15% of the students strongly agreed or agreed with the statement that they did *not* want their family to come to school to attend any meetings, while 55% strongly disagreed or disagreed, and 30% were not sure.

The third category concerns the last statement in Table 1, which asked for the students' opinions about family involvement from another angle. Of the respondents, 72% strongly agreed or agreed that they would do better if they knew their families cared about them and were interested in their schoolwork, while only 13% strongly disagreed or disagreed, and 15% were unsure.

Thus, it seems that the adolescents' responses to these items formed a converging line of evidence that most of them did want their family more involved in their education in general, to come to school more often, and to show more interest in their education.

The survey data further revealed that these adolescents perceived certain family involvement activities as more important than others. First, in terms of family-initiated involvement activities (see Table 2), at the top of the list were:

Table 2. Adolescent Perceptions of Various Types of Family-Initiated Involvement Activity

Types of Family-Initiated Involvement Activity	Percentage of Students Who Considered Each Activity To Be “Very Important” or “Pretty Important”
Setting up a quiet place and time for the child to study at home	90
Showing interests in the child's school work	89
Assisting with homework when the child needs help	86
Attending parent-teacher conference	80
Planning and initiating learning activities at home and in the community	68
Talking to teachers about families' concerns related to the child's learning	68
Attending PTA meetings and workshops	45

(1) helping set up a quiet place and time for child to study, (2) showing an interest in the child's school work, (3) assisting with homework, and (4) attending parent-teacher conferences. Twice as many adolescents (80% - 90%) considered these activities to be “very important” or “pretty important,” in contrast to those who valued family members attending PTA meetings and workshops (45%).

One way, within-subjects analysis of variance revealed that there was a significant main effect of adolescents' preferences over family-initiated involvement activities [$F(6,840) = 40.78, p < .001$]. The adjusted Bonferroni post-hoc comparison was used to detect specific differences among these activities. The result revealed that family members' attending PTA meetings and workshops was not viewed as important as each of the other four activities listed above.

The respondents also considered certain school-initiated family involvement activities as more important than others (see Table 3).

Table 3. Adolescent Perceptions of Various Types of School-Initiated Family Involvement Activity

Types of School-Initiated Family Involvement Activity	Percentage of Students Who Considered Each Activity To Be “Very Important” or “Pretty Important”
Developing programs for after-school activities, recreation, and homework help	87
Communications from the school that my family can understand	85
Seeking families’ opinions about how help children to learn better in school	76
Contacting families when a child does something well in the school	75
Contacting families about a child’s problems	73
Connecting families to resources in the school community to build parenting skills	70
Working with families to develop activities that families can use at home or in the community to help the child learn better	68
Requesting information from families on children’s talents and interests	68
Involving families in school or district wide decision-making processes	67
Seeking family volunteers in the school to assist teachers and staff	58

At the top of the list were the development of after-school programs and communications from the school that the family could readily understand; 85 to 87% considered these “very important” or “pretty important.” At the bottom of the list were seeking family volunteers in the school to assist teachers and staff; only 58% felt that this was “very important” or “pretty important.”

Another one way, within-subjects analysis of variance was conducted, which revealed that there was a significant main effect of adolescents' preferences over school-initiated involvement activities [$F(9,1287) = 12.95, p < .001$]. Again, the adjusted Bonferroni post-hoc comparison was used to detect specific differences among the adolescents' preference over these activities. The results revealed that seeking family volunteers was not viewed as important as after-school programs and school-to-home communications.

Qualitative Results

Open-ended question. The open-ended question asked the students to name three activities that the school and their family could do to help them learn better. Of the respondents, 77 out of 150 mentioned at least one activity. The data revealed that the adolescents wanted their families involved in their education, both directly and indirectly. In terms of family involvement activities at home, about half of the respondents wanted their families *directly* involved in helping them study at home. The requested help ranged from providing general homework assistance (e.g., "Work with me in my homework more") to engaging in a broad spectrum of schoolwork (e.g., "Have parents help students with work, have drills with math, and read with your child, and work on their vocabulary.?).

About half of the respondents wanted their families to be *indirectly* involved in their schooling. That meant not helping with their work directly, but caring and showing interest in their education. For some, this meant being aware of what they were doing (e.g., "The first thing that I think that can make me do better is to make my parents aware of my school work. I want them to be aware of my behavior and I want my parents aware of my grades"). For others, this meant talking to them about their work (e.g., "Talk to me about my report card") or providing a general structure to encourage them to do their work (e.g., "One thing is to stay on top of me and make sure I do all of my work – homework and anything else.?).

Relating to family involvement activities in the school, about one quarter of the respondents wanted to have more after-school programs (e.g., "Make sure that there are enough after-school activities to help me learn."). Also, about one quarter of the respondents requested that their families visit their school, including coming to school to check on them (e.g., "Come to see what I'm learning.") and sharing ideas (e.g., "[Have] dinner where teachers, parents, and children express their opinions on how to make the school better [and] meetings on how to choose the right high school."). Furthermore, about one sixth of the respondents were interested in family members attending parent-teacher conferences, while only one twelfth wanted family attendance at P.T.A. meetings.

In addition, the data obtained from the open-ended question shed some light on early adolescents' attitudes towards different types of family involvement activities that were untouched by the quantitative data. About one sixth of the respondents pointed to the importance of communication between teachers and their families. Among them, one third wanted teachers to take initiative in communicating with families (e.g., "Teachers tell parents what we are doing such as themes, tests, etc.") or wanted both sides to share the responsibility in initiating school-family communication (e.g., "Contact each other if they think the kid is messing up."). On the other hand, two thirds wanted family members to take initiative in communicating with teachers, including getting to know their teachers (e.g., "Parents should have good relationships with our teachers."), sharing relevant information about them (e.g., "Maybe my mom could tell my teacher of what I like to do to get me to do work that involves what I like to do."), and finding ways to address specific concerns (e.g., "My parents could tell my teachers where my parents think I need help and set up a program for other children that need help, too.").

About one eighth of the respondents stated that they wanted their voices to be heard by their teachers (e.g., "The teachers should listen to the students' suggestions or a least keep an open mind.") and their families (e.g., "Our families can help by believing in us and standing by us, through thick and thin."). They desired more freedom and more inclusion in educational decision-making processes.

Focus Group Interview. Several themes emerged from the focus group interview. First, students wanted their families to be involved in their learning at home, especially with reading, math, and science. They wanted their families to help with homework problems – anything that they did not understand – and offer assistance and suggestions. Some also wanted their families to be involved in their life in school as well, for example, "when you have a problem in school or in relationships, or if you don't get along with one of the teachers." Others wanted family involvement in more broad terms (e.g., "Help me with my life [when I need help]" and "Help us try to be a man or a woman").

Noticeably, some of the adolescents were not sure to what extent they could count on their families for help in these areas. One student acknowledged, "we still learn from parents." Yet, sometimes they had to learn for themselves, because "parents probably didn't go through the same studies as we have" or they did not finish high school or go to college. Another student agreed, from a different angle: "Sometimes they don't speak the language that I do, so they can't help – so we have to do it by ourselves." This view was shared by the majority of the students. One student raised another concern:

Sometimes they [the parents] don't live with their kids. So, they can't help us if they are not there. They do phone calls, they visit on weekends – but sometimes that doesn't even happen. Some kids live with only the mother

or the father, and sometimes they don't even get to see the other parent.

Second, the focus group interview raised the issue of family involvement as it relates to the adolescent desire for autonomy. Consistent with the survey data, the question was not so much whether early adolescents wanted family involvement or not, but rather what types of involvement activities were perceived as desirable and when, and under what conditions. A major concern raised by one adolescent (shared by the other seven students in the group) was that "when I need them [my parents], they're not there; when I don't, they're there." Another student similarly noted: "When you need help, you know, 'Mom, I need help.' Just come. You don't have to be with us 24/7, just help and respond." A third student agreed:

The same thing happens at my house; Like when I need help, I say, "Mom, I need help." She'll reply, "I'm busy." Then when I don't need help, she comes right over to me, "Do you need help?" I'm like, "No." Every time I do need help, she's too busy, washing dishes or doing this or that. That really makes me mad.

Third, these students showed less interest in having their families involved in school-initiated activities, such as P.T.A. meetings. Only one out of the eight students reported that his father came to the school to attend these meetings. They discussed a wide range of reasons for this lack of interest. Some reported that parents worked long hours or had night shifts or had to give attention to younger children. Others noted that when parents did come and attend P.T.A. meetings, "they don't find them interesting." One student said, "my father doesn't come, he says that they don't listen to him and he gets bored." Another student agreed that "if they [the P.T.A. leaders] don't want to listen, then why [should parents] bother coming?" Several students wanted the school to "listen to parents' ideas and try them out."

The early adolescents in this focus group were ambivalent about communication sent from the school to home. They did not like teachers calling or sending letters to home just about "bad news." The following account illustrates their prevailing attitude:

One time last week my mom got a letter telling her about the Regents [exam]. She thought that it was one of those letters. . . . She got mad because she thought I was doing badly. However, when she opened it up, she started laughing. I started laughing too, although at first I was scared because I thought I had done something bad.

On the other hand, they believed that it was to their benefit for the school to focus on specific needs of individual students, even using contacts like warning letters. One student said, "If they [parents] find out that the school may have to fail their kid in a certain subject, then they come, have a meeting, and get their act together to help that kid."

The one area that seemed inconsistent with the quantitative survey data was related to having families come to school to see how their children were doing. The majority of the adolescents expressed some degree of reluctance. A typical response was, "You have to be great at everything at school if your mother's going to be coming." Several students were concerned that they were going to get a lecture from their parents if teachers showed their grades to them. Still others did not want their teachers to share some of their secrets with their parents.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study focused on early adolescents' attitudes toward family involvement. The quantitative and qualitative data formed a converging line of evidence that the majority of the early adolescents in this study recognized the importance of family involvement for their success at the middle school level; consequently, they wanted their families to be more involved in their education in certain ways. Thus, in agreement with other related studies (Connors & Epstein, 1994; The Metropolitan Life Survey of the American Teacher, 1998; Pryor, 1995), this present study directly challenges the prevalent view that adolescents overall do not want their parents involved in their education due to their desire for more autonomy, and that this is the primary barrier to middle school family involvement.

Preference for Family-Initiated Involvement

The survey data from the Metropolitan Life Survey of the American Teacher (1998) revealed the adolescents surveyed desired certain family involvement activities (e.g., involvement at home relating to their school learning). The present study advances our understanding in this area. The data revealed that the adolescents in this study placed more importance on family-initiated involvement activities than on school-initiated activities. These family-initiated activities can be divided into two categories: activities that require families to become *directly* involved in their children's education (e.g., assisting them in their homework), and activities that require families to become *indirectly* involved (e.g., showing a general interest in the children's education and helping provide a supportive environment for them to study at home).

In addition, qualitative data shed some light on possible explanations of the adolescents' desire to obtain indirect help from their families. The majority of the adolescents in the focus group commented that they had difficulty in getting direct help from their parents, due to their limited formal education, limited knowledge of English, or living away from where the student lived. Coupled with these common realities was the adolescents' sense of autonomy, which affected when and under

what conditions they wanted their families' help. This demand for autonomy was further substantiated by the responses to the open-ended question in the survey, in which adolescents suggested that they wanted their families to help them *indirectly* – by giving them more elbow-room, just being there for them, believing in them, and standing by them “through thick and thin.”

The fact that these adolescents placed more importance on family-initiated involvement activities than school-initiated activities was further evident in the area of home-school communication. Although survey data indicated that the adolescents valued communication from the school at times, an analysis of their responses to the open-ended question indicated that two thirds of them wanted their families to take more initiative in communicating with teachers. Their preference for family-initiated communication may be explained, in part, by their perception that family-initiated communications were more responsive to their needs (e.g., sharing information with their teachers to make their homework more interesting). This preference is probably also colored by their ambivalence toward school-to-home communication, which was often associated with “bad news.”

School-Initiated Involvement

One exception to the adolescents' preference for family-initiated involvement activities was their request to develop more after-school programs (e.g., to offer homework help). However, such a request may be explained on the basis that many of them could not obtain direct help from their families with their schoolwork. Thus, in this sense, it could be argued that their interest in after-school programs resulted from the reality that they were not able to get adequate direct help via family-initiated activities in the first place.

Related to school-initiated family involvement activities, it appeared the adolescents preferred more individualized activities to more formally organized activities. This was evident in the survey, where almost twice as many adolescents considered attending parent-teacher conferences as very important or pretty important compared to the number who considered attending P.T.A. meetings and workshops very important or pretty important. This pattern was repeated in student responses to the open-ended question in the survey. This finding may be explained by the data from the focus group discussion, where adolescents articulated their reasons for attributing less importance to more formally organized activities (e.g., P.T.A.). Besides the issue of scheduling that prevented many families from participating in school-organized activities, these adolescents complained that these activities were often not relevant enough to hold their parents' interests nor did they provide opportunities for the families' voices to really be heard.

The data provided less conclusive evidence about the adolescents' attitudes toward having their parents come to school. Quantitative survey data showed that the majority of the adolescents wanted their families to come to school to attend meetings, a statement that was further substantiated by responses to the survey's open-ended question. However, a majority of the students in the focus group revealed varying degrees of reluctance. This inconsistency may be explained by the struggle these adolescents faced at this developmental stage. On the one hand, they wanted their families to be aware of and show interest in what they were doing at school. On the other hand, they also wanted some things not to be shared with their families, another indication of pursuing a greater sense of autonomy.

To sum up, the majority of these early adolescents from diverse cultural backgrounds wanted their families to be involved in their education, particularly through family-initiated involvement activities. Like other studies (Connors & Epstein, 1994; Pryor, 1995), the issue of student autonomy surfaced in this present study. However, unlike the prevailing assumption that adolescents do not want families to be involved with their education due to their desire for autonomy (Baker, 2000; Barber & Patin, 1997; Berla, 1991; Dwyer & Hecht, 2001; Eccles & Harold, 1993; Foster-Harrison & Peel, 1995; Henderson & Wilcox, 1998; Johnston, 1998; Schine, 1998), the data from the present study suggest that adolescents' desire for autonomy serves as a moderator that influences their preferences for certain types of family involvement activities, rather than as a primary barrier to middle school family involvement. For example, the pursuit of these adolescents for greater autonomy at home along with situations where family members could not or did not give them the direct educational help that they needed prompted them to seek more indirect help from their families and direct help from after-school programs. It also seemed that their ambivalence toward their families visiting the school (probably due to their quest for autonomy) contributed to their preference for certain individualized involvement activities (e.g., home-to-school communication) over other formally-organized activities in the school (e.g., P.T.A. meetings).

Implications

What can be made of these findings? The fact that a majority of the adolescents prefer family-initiated to school-initiated involvement activities does not mean that middle schools should downplay their importance in involving families from diverse cultural backgrounds. On the contrary, schools should envision a different and perhaps even more challenging role. The data suggest that middle schools need go beyond the myth that early adolescents do not want their families to be involved at all in their education. Rather, schools need to listen more closely to adolescents' voices and take their preferences into careful consideration when

developing school-initiated family involvement strategies. It would be beneficial for schools to give priority to the improvement of family-initiated involvement activities, by promoting activities that serve to enhance the family's capacity to help adolescents at home and by tailoring school-initiated involvement activities to relate better to the needs and desires of the adolescents and their families. For example, middle schools can enhance families' capacity to help students by establishing homework hotlines to accommodate diverse work-family schedules and routines (Balli, Demo, & Wedman, 1998) and by helping these families structure and monitor adolescents' homework. This type of capacity-building appears particularly important for the following reasons: (a) parents of middle-grade students reported that they felt less able to help their children with homework (Dauber & Epstein, 1993), (b) parents helping their adolescents establish positive study routines was found to be more important than assisting them in the academic areas of homework (Reetz, 1991), and (c) families of all kinds can play a role in promoting responsible homework behavior in children through and beyond the elementary years (Xu & Corno, 1998; Xu & Corno, 2001).

Meanwhile, there seems to be a need for schools to provide more individualized learning opportunities to serve early adolescents (e.g., after-school programs that offer homework help), especially opportunities to help families from diverse cultural backgrounds who have difficulty directly assisting their children on their own—opportunities that can help alleviate difficult demands on these families so that they might focus their resources and energies in ways that are more helpful to adolescents.

Middle schools may find it helpful to reexamine their existing practices of family involvement. For example, the early adolescents in this study showed marked ambivalence about school-to-home communication. Even though they acknowledged the importance and usefulness of such communication in certain instances, still there was a widespread fright expressed over the family's receipt of such a communication. This finding seems consistent with another study (The Metropolitan Life Survey of the American Teacher, 1998), in which two out of three students agreed with the statement that their schools contact parents only when there is a problem with their child. Interestingly, in the same study, three out of four teachers disagreed with the same statement. It is certainly debatable that what counts as a negative message. However, what is important here is early adolescents' perception of negativity associated with school-to-home communication. To offset this negative tone, middle schools need to make deliberate efforts to communicate with families about their adolescents' progress and accomplishments at school – or “the good stuff” as one student noted in the focus group interview – and elicit families' input about how to develop these adolescents' interests, strengths, and talents. In addition, schools need to communicate “bad news” with families more construc-

tively, communicating not so much about how bad the news is, but rather about how families can help with their adolescents in light of the bad news. This shift of focus is important since the data from this present study showed that the adolescents' perceptions of negativity associated with school-to-home communication is often not about the message per se, but rather their families' intense reactions to the message. If schools can communicate bad news more constructively, and if schools can enhance families' capacity to better support their adolescents' learning (as discussed above), then families should not have to resort to intense reactions to the "bad news" as the only way to make a statement to their adolescents. This, in turn, will set a different tone and help their adolescents to deal with the bad news more constructively as well.

Perhaps more fundamentally, the role of early adolescents in middle school family involvement needs to be reconceptualized, so that their quest for autonomy is not viewed as an impenetrable barrier but as a gateway that can lead to more meaningful middle school family involvement. Each student needs to be viewed as an active partner and a variable in the research process (Epstein, 1995, 1996; Mack, 1992). The data from the present study, along with survey data from related studies (Connors & Epstein, 1994; The Metropolitan Life Survey of the American Teacher, 1998), suggest that early adolescents are aware of the importance of family involvement at the middle school level in general, and also that they have clear preferences for certain types of involvement in particular. Thus, it is reasonable to expect all parties, including middle schools, adolescents, and their families, to benefit from listening more carefully to students' voices relating to middle school family involvement. These voices may provide a sound basis for exploring new strategies that could be vitally helpful in involving families more effectively at this developmental stage. Armed with this information, families and schools can provide more relevant support for adolescents' various needs, while also helping them develop and exercise their autonomy in more responsible and self-rewarding ways. This, in turn, will encourage them to take more personal interest in voicing their evolving needs in relation to involving their families and achieving their educational goals.

As to implications for further research, it would be beneficial to continue the line of investigation started here, to explore further early adolescent attitudes and thoughts about middle school family involvement in urban or rural settings. How might factors such as class, ethnicity, student achievement (on various levels), social concerns (e.g., dating, peer pressure, and harassment), and severe family situations (e.g., family strife, poverty, and health problems) work to mediate or moderate adolescents' views toward family involvement and the school reaching out for the same? Particularly, it would be beneficial to investigate how the desire for autonomy, working together with these and other factors seen in modern adolescents' lives, might moderate or mediate their preferences over certain types of family involvement

activities. Further study of the nature and kinds of family involvement that build on students' preferences and contribute to their success at the middle school level and beyond would undoubtedly be of benefit to students, their families, and their schools.

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