

Parental Involvement: The Missing Link in School Achievement

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The value of parental participation is widely accepted, but participation is difficult to promote and maintain. Schools are becoming more diverse, and a great challenge facing educators is meeting the needs of all students. Closing the achievement gap and increasing student learning requires the collaboration of various interested groups, most notably parents. Families play an important role in creating a school that meets their child's needs, yet teachers admit they have little information or training on how to effectively work with diverse parents. In this article, numerous strategies for addressing barriers to school involvement and participation are presented. Methods for using families' cultures and experiences are also explored as a base for new learning and understanding.

Keywords: academic success, closing achievement gap, collaboration, cultural differences, diversity, educational equity, involvement, parental involvement

Parenting a child is an awesome joy and responsibility. The role of parent is all-encompassing to include the role of educator. Typically parents and caregivers are a child's first and most interested teachers. This role does not cease to exist when children enter school; in fact, families play a critical role in the education of their children. Working with the school, parents and caregivers can help create collaborative partnerships that support all aspects of a child's achievement at school. Increased parental involvement in their child's education has many positive implications, including increased achievement levels (Epstein, 1994). Despite continued efforts by educators, achievement levels are not consistent across students. Students from diverse backgrounds—such as African American, Native American, and Hispanic—typically lag behind their peers in terms of achievement (Vang, 2006). Researchers have suggested varied explanations to explain this disparity. One suggestion is that the education system provides different educational opportunities for students on the basis of their race, gender, religion, social class, language, and ethnicity. As their student bodies becomes more diverse, schools face greater challenges in meeting the needs of all students.

One challenge that schools face is ensuring the achievement of all students. Many factors affect the educational achievement of students. Some researchers have suggested that the missing link in educational equity, in terms of ed-

ucational achievement, is parental involvement (Colombo, 2006). Schools, even well-intentioned ones, cannot educate every child on their own. They need the active support of community and family. School improvement requires the collaboration of various interest groups—families, community groups, and educators (Epstein, Coates, Salinas, Sanders, & Simon, 1997). These groups often have different concerns and issues with regards to the schools. They may have different perspectives on how best to meet the needs of the children. For school improvement efforts to be successful, these various interest groups have to communicate with each other effectively. Families, community groups, and educators each have a role to play in the educational achievement and success of students. It is important that each of these constituents have a clear understanding of what each others' roles entail. The importance of families playing an active role in students' education has been well documented (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). What is not always clear is what that role should be. As a result, parents cannot be viewed as a homogeneous group because they do not participate in the same ways; some have more of a presence in the school than do others. There is a need to move from this idea that parents are the same, with the same needs, and that children should be treated the same. Given that increased level of parental involvement in schools and in the education of their children is positively correlated with increasing educational achievement, it is important to devise ways to increase parental involvement. Knowing that the educational achievement levels of students who are from diverse backgrounds lag behind their

White counterparts, it is important to know how to increase the achievement levels of these students. In this article, we explore the issues affecting parental involvement, particularly for parents from diverse backgrounds. In this article, we also explore what schools can do to facilitate the involvement of these parents in order to ultimately positively affect their students' educational achievement.

Changing demographics in today's schools

The population of our society is becoming increasingly diverse (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001); therefore, the student body in public schools is also becoming increasingly diverse. However, teachers in these schools remain predominantly White and middle class (Nieto, 2002). This is not a problem in itself, but such a mismatch between student demographics and teacher demographics often creates situations in which cultural differences are evident and sometimes conflict. These cultural differences present a potential for real and perceived cultural misunderstanding. Differences among cultural groups are varied and range from minimal differences—such as differences in accepted distance for personal space—to more complex issues—such as perceptions of authority figures or outlook on what is considered sharing behaviors. Consider the child who has been reared in the cultural belief that touching is frequent and welcomed, that there is no personal ownership of materials, and that each person has authority only over themselves; a teacher who is unfamiliar with these or similar cultural beliefs may view this child as a thief who has no social boundaries or respect for authority. These types of cultural conflicts are sometimes heightened when teachers interact with the parents who are from different cultural backgrounds from their own and can become even more challenging when we consider the critical nature and implications for positive parent–teacher interactions. These dichotomous interactions may also affect the ways in which family involvement is perceived by teachers and parents.

Family involvement

Family involvement can be generally defined as the parents' or caregivers' investment in the education of their children. There are varied ways that caregivers can demonstrate their adherence to this investment. In practice, family involvement may be demonstrated via participation in a hierarchy of activities such as the following:

- volunteering at school;
- helping children with their homework;
- attending school functions;
- visiting the child's classroom;
- sharing expertise or experience with the class through guest speaking; and
- taking on leadership roles in the school and participating in the decision-making process.

These types of involvement are often chosen by different types of parents. Factors that affect the ways in which families are involved (ways in which they demonstrate their investment) differ and are often based on a number of sociopolitical factors. The sociopolitical factors may include socioeconomic status, parents' own past experience with schools and schooling, and so forth. Regardless of how they are able to demonstrate their investment, the notion that families play a very important role in creating a school that provides a nurturing and safe environment for their children is becoming widely accepted (Epstein et al., 1997). Movement toward a shared understanding of this notion is demonstrated via legislative acts as well.

The No Child Left Behind Act has brought parental involvement to the forefront. This legislation has formalized the parents' right to know what is happening in schools. It means that schools have to move beyond talking about involvement to actively facilitating this involvement. However, teachers admit that they have little training in strategies for working with parents. Teachers report that they do not know how to use parents to effectively facilitate the education of their children, much beyond just asking them to make copies. Teachers who report they have some skills typically describe strategies limited to managing difficult parents, rather than strategies that foster more meaningful involvement. Likewise, even when families want to build positive relationships with the school personnel, they are not always sure of how to become involved in a way that the school personnel values. This has been particularly true for African American families, Hispanic families, and those from low-income backgrounds (Barton, Drake, Perez, St. Louis & George, 2004). This uncertainty also leads to decreased involvement for parents from diverse backgrounds. However, not knowing how to become involved is not the only thing inhibiting parental involvement.

Logistical barriers often serve as an inhibitor of effective parental involvement for some parents. For some families, competing factors such as employment issues, whereby they may have hourly jobs with inadequate health insurance and other benefits, thus not allowing them to participate in the amount and in the ways that their counterparts that have salaried, more stable employment can. These logistical barriers can often inhibit parental participation. Their jobs limit their ability to become involved in schools during regular school hours. Their efforts to advocate for their children lead to frustration because they are unable to participate in school conferences and activities. For these reasons, these parents are often viewed as difficult. Koonce and Harper (2005) found that the insights of these parents were often dismissed because they were not viewed as actively involved in their child's education or knowledgeable of the day-to-day activities of the school. Dismissal of their insights further alienate these parents and tends to contribute to their withdrawal from the advocacy role. Parents as advocates for their children is a role that many parents need

to take on based on the educational experiences of their children.

Parental involvement is of particular importance for children with disabilities, being served in special education, because these students tend to be more vulnerable to violation of students' rights (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, & Office of Special Education Programs (2004). These students are in greater need for their parents to serve as advocates for their rights (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, & Office of Special Education Programs, 2004). Furthermore, given that there is an overrepresentation of diverse students (including low-income and ethnic minority) in special education services (Hosp & Reschly, 2004), parental involvement for these particular children is also crucial. However, low-income and ethnic minority parents are the least likely to participate in the school of their child (Desimone, 2001). These students that need the most participation are the ones who are least likely to have parents advocating for them. In addition to the previously described logistical barriers, there may also be barriers to effective participation on the basis of the cultural viewpoint of some of these families who are from diverse backgrounds. For example, teachers may be viewed as the expert with specialized skills, and questioning them may be considered disrespectful. It is important, therefore, for educators to develop strategies for families to advocate effectively for their children's needs. To allay the effect of these differing viewpoints, ongoing communication can help build trust between parents and professionals. For example, rather than follow strict guidelines of who can be an advocate, teachers can gain insight on who the family considers relevant by paying attention to the composition of the child's advocate group. This is helpful knowledge in ongoing interactions with families. In working with students with a disability or any other students in the general classroom, cultural considerations should be taken into account. Parents want the best for their children; however, they are sometimes not able to articulate this value on the basis of their cultural mores or norms.

Even though the value of parental participation is widely accepted (Garcia, 2002), parental involvement is not easy to promote or maintain. This has become even more challenging as the parents represent a greater diversity of cultures. This diversity in families' cultural backgrounds adds to the complexity of the parent-teacher relationship. The basic goal is to have a good parent-teacher relationship from which positive student outcomes will flow. There is a wide spectrum of what constitutes a good relationship. It ranges from "schools as extended family" to "family meeting school expectations efficiently while school effectively educates the child with no excessive demands on the family." Schools and parents need to have a shared notion of what constitutes a good relationship. One way to move toward a shared notion of understanding what constitutes a good relationship and toward matching (or at least bring-

ing close together) the value parents have for their children's education and achievement with the values teachers have for their students' education and achievement might be through role delineation.

There are some clear differences in the roles played by the parents and the teachers. It is important that the roles be clear to both parties. Roles have been categorized as *parent focused*, *school focused*, and *partnership focused* (Keyes, 2002). These classifications may mean different things to parents and teachers. For parents, involvement that is *parent focused* suggests that parents have the primary responsibility in the education of their children; involvement that is *school focused* signifies putting primary responsibility on the school; and involvement that is *partnership focused* signifies teachers and parents working together and being collectively responsible. For teachers, the parent-focused construct means empowering parents by giving them teaching roles. In contrast, the school-focused approach emphasizes effective separation of home and school. This separation has been the most prevalent approach. However, more recently, the partnership-focused approach, in which family and school work together cooperatively, has developed.

What schools need to know

Parental involvement has been found to be beneficial to students' academic success (Epstein, 1994, Hiatt-Michael, 2001). Higher levels of parental involvement has been associated with better student attendance, higher math and reading scores, higher graduation rates, and less grade retention. Parental involvement has also been found to be important for the quality of education the students receive beyond just achievement. It has been associated with nonacademic outcomes such as parent and student satisfaction with school and fewer discipline problems (Hiatt-Michael) as well as positive attitudes and more effective programs and schools (Lewis, 1993). Parental involvement has benefits for families too; they become better informed about teachers' objectives and the needs of their children. They develop more positive attitudes toward the teachers. Furthermore, increased involvement has been associated with parents developing higher educational aspirations for their children. They even begin to seek additional education for themselves (Peña, 2001). Parental involvement produces benefits for teachers too; teachers gain insights on how to better meet the needs of their students. Information from parents can help teachers plan activities and set appropriate goal for students. Two-way communication allows parents and teachers to be on the same page regarding the child's educational progress. It may be that some helpful activities are better suited for home than school. It becomes important that parents and teachers have a common understanding. Schools that have comprehensive parental involvement programs tend to be more effective than those without because it pertains to student achievement and

overall quality. Besides providing valuable resources, such programs contribute to a better overall school–community relation.

Overstreet, Devine, Bevans, and Efreom (2005) classified parental involvement into three types: school involvement, cognitive-intellectual involvement, and personal involvement. *School involvement* includes activities that take place at school and school-related activities that take place at home such as providing homework help. *Cognitive-intellectual involvement* refers to exposure to intellectually stimulating activities that parents engage in with their children such as reading together. *Personal involvement* is about knowing what is going on with the child at school and what the child is working on at school.

In a study examining these three types of involvement, Overstreet et al. (2005) found that school involvement was the most salient type of involvement. The findings indicated that for the low-income African American families studied, school involvement has a stronger association with academic outcomes than did at-home involvement. This piece of information is significant when considering that some studies (e.g., Eccles & Harold, 1996) show African American parents having greater involvement in home-based activities. In Overstreet et al.'s study, the most important factors in encouraging involvement were school practices designed to involve parents. This highlights the importance of schools initiating family–school contact and making an effort to encourage parental involvement with families in general and particularly families who are from diverse backgrounds.

What can schools do

Teacher attitudes and actions will greatly influence how all parents perceive schools interest in their families and their relation with the school. Teachers often perceive parents from diverse backgrounds as uninvolved and disinterested (Carlisle, Stanley, & Kemple, 2006; Floyd, 2005). Such perceptions can be widely off the mark. For example, historically, African American parents pursued education for their children when Caucasian leaders ignored the education of their children. There were several instances when former slaves built schools for their children indicating how much they valued the acquisition of knowledge. The family involvement may be categorized as less direct in that the parents were not actually in the school; however, they constantly interacted informally with teachers (e.g., at the grocery store), and they participated in activities at home. There was trust and mutual respect between home and school.

It would appear that in many instances, the trust has been lost. Parents may be interested and committed to the education of their children, but their roles and efforts may not be as apparent. Where historically their role was outside the school, teachers now expect more direct participation.

One would argue that this type of involvement is more easily quantifiable, given that the face-to-face interaction between parents and teachers is evident. It may be more helpful to parents if teachers request specific forms of involvement, by describing exactly what parental expectations are. In doing so, teachers should be attentive to logistical barriers and perhaps cultural considerations when conceptualizing the varied ways in which parents can become involved. Studies have shown that parents more often respond to specific requests from teachers (Fields-Smith, 2005). As mentioned earlier in this article, teachers are sometimes not able to devise these specific requests of parents for involvement. Not knowing on the teacher's part may lead to some fear of encouraging parents to participate in the schools.

Teachers should learn not to fear parental involvement. They should operate on the belief that parents are a valuable resource with powerful knowledge that can be used to help students succeed. This can come from building mutual trust between parents and teachers. Teachers should find a systematic way to involve parents. Fear and mistrust are barriers arising from ignorance and lack of relationships. The importance of meeting with parents cannot be overemphasized, and yet the number of parents reporting that they have never met their children's teachers informally is staggering. In a survey conducted by Epstein (1994), 67% of the teachers stated that parents had never met their children's teachers informally.

Schools and teachers need to address emotional barriers, physical barriers, and cultural differences to increase parent involvement for all families, and in particular families who are from diverse backgrounds.

Addressing emotional barriers

Historically, there are groups of people who have felt excluded from the education system. This is especially evident in the case of parents who are from diverse backgrounds (Nieto, 2002). They might not have been successful in school themselves. They may have a lingering mistrust for the system. The teacher can play a vital role in expediting the process of building back the trust of these families. Addressing these emotional barriers can present a challenge. Taking the time to learn the acceptable way to address the parents (e.g., using first names vs. "mister" or "missus") can go a long way in showing parents that they are respected. Embracing blended or nontraditional family structures is also necessary. Demonstrating that the parent input is given a high priority is a step in the right direction. For example, teachers could encourage parents to share their expectations of the teacher just as the teacher shares expectations of the students and their families. With regular interactions and the teacher's encouragement, parents can begin to feel more comfortable and confident in the school setting.

Some parents do not feel adequate to the task of supporting their children because of their own low level of education. Such parents should be reassured that they are

not expected to understand the content to support their child's education. The support can come in the form of nonacademic tasks such as providing a regular place and time to complete homework, ensuring that the child completes homework, or contacting the teacher if the child consistently seems to struggle with homework.

Teachers are better placed to present a variety of ways in which parents can participate. It is important to create a sense of community and to understand family challenges. In addition to providing several options to participate, clear job descriptions for each task go a long way to alleviate the fear of not knowing what to do. Teachers can invite those with particular knowledge and experience to come into the classroom and share this with students. To communicate their willingness to have parental involvement, teachers should both implicitly and explicitly ask parents to participate in the school environment. Parents are much more likely to become involved when they feel welcomed and valued. Some schools have activities that foster these beliefs, such as a reading day in the library where parents can share their favorite childhood book. To be more inclusive, this can be extended to include a favorite childhood story because not all parents will have a favorite book or may be hesitant to read for an audience.

Addressing language barriers

In a number of instances, parents feel intimidated by the professional language used in school. This is even more evident when students have disabilities. The language can appear so academic, scientific, or abstract that it can be experienced as impersonal. This may cause parents to withdraw, which can be misconstrued as lack of care. It is up to the teacher to help the parents feel needed by the way he or she interacts with the family. To facilitate communication, teachers can use translators. Whenever possible, these should be people with whom the families are confident. However, teachers and schools should avoid the pitfall of using use children as interpreters for their parents; this practice upsets the balance and authority in the parent-child relationship. As an alternative, other parents who speak the same language can be of assistance in this capacity. Some other simple steps include using a variety of means of communication when communicating with parents, such as translating newsletters or written communication, using pictures, or videos. In the case of students with disabilities in which the language can be technical, families may find it helpful if schools provide a glossary of the technical terms in a simplified format. In addition, oral communication (in person or by phone) may be preferred to written communication; it allows for immediate clarification in case of misunderstanding. For parental involvement programs to be effective, school should consider cultural and economic differences of families. It is important to understand different family structures. For example, it may be necessary to acknowledge the need for bilingual advocacy in schools

in which language barriers exist. To address the difficulty some families face with getting to the school the Northrop High School in Fort Wayne, Indiana, introduced neighborhood meetings called "On Your Turf" that held meetings in neighborhood homes.

Addressing physical barriers

By addressing physical barriers, schools can facilitate parents being able to physically attend school activities. It may be as simple as scheduling parent-teacher conferences to accommodate the schedules of the family. If teachers provide a variety of meeting times, there is a greater likelihood that parents will find a time that suits their schedules or if schools provide childcare or suggest alternate locations for meetings, those parents for whom these types of issues constitute barriers will be better positioned to being able to physically attend and meet with teachers. Such efforts can be time consuming and challenging but worthwhile. Machen, Wilson, and Notar (2005) found that efforts to involve parents paid off. A program put in place to increase parental involvement for first-grade students resulted in increased parental participation to levels more than 94%. They found that parents' lack of knowledge in the subject did not hinder interest. When barriers related to transportation and babysitting were addressed, these first-grade students' parents responded positively.

For school-based activities, school buses can be used to pick up parents before meetings and return them to bus stops near their homes. This was the case for Back to School Night at one school (Peña, 2001). In this instance, parent involvement was greatly increased. For any parental involvement program to be effective, school should consider cultural and economic differences of families. To address some of the unique challenges faced by these families, such as not being able to physically attend school functions, teachers and schools can ensure that some parents do not feel left out by providing opportunities for these parents to participate from home. Some solutions require changes in policies such as tax incentives aimed at encouraging parental involvement. One type of tax incentive might encourage employers to offer flexible work schedules, thereby allowing parents who otherwise would not have been able, to participate in activities that require them to be present. Obviously, this is not something over which teachers have a lot of control. Such a solution would require community involvement and advocacy. Teachers can certainly be advocates for such involvement if they can articulate the benefit to be gained by students. Such solutions are helpful in facilitating school-based participation.

Addressing cultural differences

Understanding the families can be a tool in dissuading teachers from making erroneous assumptions. Parents who have less of a presence in the school care about their

children as much as parents whose presence is more readily observed. As previously stated, the studies show differences in levels of parental involvement on the basis of ethnic background. This, however, does not translate into different levels of devotion to their children. What may differ is the way in which parents express their devotion. This should not come as a surprise because all people are a product of their culture. In the need to interact with each other, it is important to demonstrate cultural reciprocity. This involves a dynamic process in which teachers and families exchange knowledge, values, and perspectives of their different cultural backgrounds. For an authentic exchange to take place, there should be mutual respect. More often than not, parents and teachers have the same goal for the child: academic success. In their literacy program, Nistler and Maiers (2000) found that although the families highlighted several barriers to their participation in the program, none lacked the desire to participate. What can affect parents' desire to participate is being involved in misunderstandings between them and the schools or blaring mismatch between the cultural beliefs of teachers/schools and their own.

Misunderstandings can be intensified when cultural differences relate to students with disabilities. Quite often when families do not respond in a manner the teacher considers rational, there is a temptation to conclude that they are in denial. An implication of this (perhaps erroneous) conclusion is to view the perspective of the family as a wrong perspective to have. It would be more productive to respectfully seek reasons for the disagreement. This process of seeking reasons is predicated on cultural understanding. In the case of a child with a disability, the teacher might have physical etiological interpretations and explanations for the child's disability; however, the family may have spiritual etiological interpretations and explanations for their child's condition. Kalyanpur and Harry (1997) described an example of such a case in their discussion of a Hmong family whose child had club feet. In the family's culture, this condition was viewed as a blessing, thus no need to rectify the condition. However, the teacher interpreted the family's opinion as something close to parental neglect (Kalyanpur & Harry). Parents have a nuanced intimate knowledge of their children; therefore, what they have to offer can provide teachers and schools with valuable insights. Acknowledging family members' expertise helps them feel valued as partners in the education of their child. Having some understanding of families' visible and invisible cultural nuances can go a long way in helping schools find something of value in these families. Visible cultural nuances include facets such as language or clothing; invisible culture includes facets such as communication style, status, or imbedded values. It is important for the families and teachers to gain an understanding of the mutual benefit of parental involvement in the students' education and its impact on teacher expectations and instructional practices.

Culture shapes behavior and is the filter through which the world is viewed. Teachers can use culture and students'

experiences as a launch pad for new learning. Being culturally competent does not necessarily mean changing what a parent does to suit his or her child, but it does mean understanding the role culture plays in students' learning and in interactions with the families. It provides an opportunity to address areas of incompatibility between family systems and school. When the teacher is culturally aware, the conflict between systems is minimized, and there is formulation of strategies to work around differences.

Bronfenbrenner's (1989) ecological theory is helpful in recognizing the complexity of factors that impact parental involvement. In addition to individual parent characteristics, there are characteristics of the child as well as the school and community norms and cultural beliefs. As school administrators think about programs to increase parental involvement, they should start with an explicit policy that legitimizes the importance of parental involvement (Plevyak, 2003). There are many different parties engaged in forming a successful parental involvement program. This makes it difficult to place all responsibility in one party. Each has a role to play to encourage greater participation. Consider the following examples:

- School administrators can facilitate the development of a parental involvement committee.
- Teachers can receive professional development in communication skills necessary to work with families.
- Colleges of education can include the teaching of how educators can successfully include parents in education.
- Support networks can provide the forum for parents to motivate each other.
- Students can play a role in getting their parents excited about school happenings.
- Businesses and community organizations can provide financial and service support so that parents, teachers and students can spend time together. Through two-way communication, the roles and expectations can become clearer.

Schools should not fear parental involvement. Collaboration between home and school can only help the students. It is a reciprocal process in which each party should listen to understand the other's perspective. By showing parents that their voice matter, the schools empower them. Information from parents can help teachers develop successful strategies for working with all students.

Ramirez (2003) reported that for Latino parents, the perception was that teachers had lower expectation for their children. The parents provided examples of when their children had been recommended for special education when they did not need it or when they had been denied the opportunity to enter an honors course when they were sufficiently able. An exasperated parent stated that all she wanted was for her child to succeed in school and have a better life. However, when she asked a teacher to write down homework assignments for her so she could support her child at home, the teacher refused. She shared how the

school personnel made her feel stupid because of her trouble with English. It is essential that teachers examine their attitudes to ensure that as much as possible their actions are not driven by stereotypes and preconceived notions about the students and their parents.

Conclusion

There is a clear need to move from the idea that parents are the same, with the same needs and that children should be treated the same. This may be a result assuming *fairness* and *sameness* are synonyms. Such an approach misses the complexity of needs and roles that students and parents who are from diverse backgrounds play in the education process. It also makes it very easy to miss the barriers to participation that may exist for these families. There is no one best way for parental involvement. School systems should strive to reflect the full spectrum of the plurality of the United States to accommodate ethnically and racially diverse families and children. Parents base their participation on a variety of factors such as comfort level, knowledge, self confidence, motivation, and language skills. Teachers should strive to make involvement familiar and more meaningful for parents. This will encourage parent participation. To enable parents to grow in their ability to help their children get the best education possible, encouraging parental involvement has to be viewed as a process rather than a one-time event. Teachers and schools need to get to know the community in order to improve understanding and attitude between themselves and parents. They need to understand the needs and opportunities of the families they serve. The structure within which schools operate may need to change as opposed to doing more of the same. Trying to change within the same structure may not lead to the desired results of greater parental involvement. For instance, it is clear that there is need for greater communication but this is a great responsibility for the already busy teacher. Some necessary adjustment may include working with one's team to brainstorm ways to share administrative duties and explicitly making communication a priority. Teachers can request in-service training that reflects this focus so that sessions on how to communicate with all types of families can be included.

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