

**African-American and Non-Hispanic White Parental Involvement in the
Education of Elementary School-Aged Children**

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Introduction

Parental involvement is an important topic for research because of its perceived impact in positive achievement outcomes at school (Ames and Archer, 1987; Entwisle et al., 1987; Grolnick et al., 1997; Hill, 2001; Jimerson, et al., 1999; Kohl et al., 2000; Luster and McAdoo, 1996; Hill and Craft, 2003). Oftentimes social factors have been blamed for children's school failure, but when examined in depth, it appears that parental intervention is a much more important factor than income and family structure. Also, another important aspect to keep in mind about parental involvement is its many forms; there is more to it than simply helping with homework or being involved with the PTA.

Evidence from numerous studies has demonstrated how parental encouragement, home interest, and parent participation in schools have a positive influence on children's academic achievement; however, the involvement of parents in a child's education goes beyond help with homework and encompasses other areas such as home environment, school activities, and community groups. Joyce Epstein, a well-renowned sociologist and scholar, developed a framework that categorized the varieties of parental involvement into six types that will be addressed later.

There is no question that all parents desire for their children to succeed. However, every parent has different beliefs about their own role in facilitating such success in academics. In order for children to thrive academically, parental involvement is necessary to provide optimal success for children in the educational arena (Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, 1997). When a parent chooses to become involved at school, they are showing their children how important education is to them, giving value to their child's education (Grolnick and Slowiaczek, 1994; Stevenson and Baker, 1987, Sheldon, 2002). Parents play an important role in shaping a child's

value of achievement and behaviors (Slaughter and Epps, 1987). Parental support also provides the structure children need to ensure that they do what is expected of them at home as well as at school (Paul, 1995).

A significant amount of evidence has demonstrated the importance of family involvement in helping to improve student grades, test scores, attendance, as well as behaviors (Bever, 1994; Clark, 1983; Guttman and Wagner, 1995; Nweze, 1993; Weitock, 1991; Fantuzzo et al., 1995; Izzo et al., 1999; Hill and Craft, 2003). Longitudinal studies have also shown that parental involvement with students at home is a strong predictor of “higher reading and writing achievement test scores and higher report card grades” (Epstein, 1991; Keith et al., 1998; Steinberg et al., 1992; Van Voorhis, 2000; Sheldon, 2002, p. 302). Also, research shows that students fare better with any kind of parent involvement no matter the extent (Trotman, 2001).

Studies in the past have been conducted relating to parent involvement in education, but there is a lack of information surrounding whether parental behaviors are a direct reflection of parental beliefs, how parents perceive their own roles in facilitating their children’s education both at home and school and how it compares to their actual reported behaviors. This is an area that requires more research. To discover what the disparity is between parental involvement beliefs and behaviors would provide great insight to what is really happening within the family unit.

There are numerous studies, however, that examined how barriers negatively affect parental involvement at home and at school, and these barriers are possibly what causes inconsistencies between parental beliefs and behaviors. It is often the case that parents will have specific beliefs about their role in educating their children at home and being involved at school, but do not necessarily act in a manner that supports their beliefs. Perceived barriers to parents

may be partially to blame for any inconsistencies that might exist between parental involvement beliefs and behaviors.

Extensive research has not been done to examine parental involvement behaviors and beliefs in minority families, and few ethnic comparisons of parental involvement have been conducted either. As has been reported by Slaughter-Defoe, “the quality of interaction among and between family members and the children themselves” seems to be important to children’s school achievement (Clark, 1983; Schneider, 1983; Slaughter et al., 1990, Slaughter-Defoe, 1991, p. 356). The differences between reported barriers of African American and Non-Hispanic White parents will also be examined in hopes of determining if both groups face similar obstacles regarding involvement in their child’s education.

Also, after-school programs helped parents who worked late and needed care to be provided for their children while they were still at work (Epstein and Sheldon, 2002). After-school programs reflected the schools’ sensitivity regarding “the needs and challenges facing the families and communities they served” (Epstein and Sheldon, 2002, p. 316). The fact that some parents were still at work when their children finished school can be considered one of many barriers that some parents face when trying to be involved with their children’s education. By the school providing after school care for the children, they were helping the parents to overcome one of many aspects that may hinder a parent from being as involved as they or the school would like for them to be in their children’s education.

Parent Involvement Defined

Parental involvement can be defined in several ways. The Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL) defines parent involvement as “the active, ongoing

participation of a child's parent(s) or guardian(s) in his or her education," stressing the importance of the parental involvement as either active involvement in school functions or at home (Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 1999, Trotman, 2001, p. 276). This common definition implies parental involvement as a responsibility of the parents alone, and does not take into account outside factors. Grolnick and Slowiaczek, Epstein, and Sheldon take that common parental involvement definition more in depth by defining it in terms of the amount of resources parents invest in their children, which ranges from providing their child with breakfast to being on the school board (Grolnick and Slowiaczek, 1994; Epstein, 1995; Sheldon, 2002).

In his study, Sheldon defines parent involvement both at the home and the school. He views parent-child interactions relating to school or learning activities as parent involvement at home that are representative of the "direct investment of a parent's resources in her or his child's education" (Sheldon, 2002, p. 302). Sheldon defines parent involvement at school as involving interactions between the parent and school personnel (2002).

Perroncel defines parental involvement "as a partnership among home, school, and community members to support a child's education process," which is similar to Epstein's view of parent involvement as consisting of six types of parental involvement (1993; Trotman, 2001, p. 276). Epstein's model of involvement involves more than just parental behaviors, taking into account the basic obligations of the school as well as collaborations with the community in the parental involvement equation. This view of parental involvement as more than just the responsibility of the parents indicates how important other factors are in providing an optimal outcome for the child's educational success.

Based on the premise for which the Promoting Child Welfare initiative is based, children are more likely to thrive if their parents, guardians or caretakers can “build adult couple relationships that support healthy development of their families” (Promoting Child Welfare, 2004). Since there is no question that communication is a very important aspect within a relationship, the communication that Epstein deems as an obligation for schools is also stressed by Gottman in his book about marriage relationships, “The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work” (1999). Communication helps create strong bonds in any relationship, whether it is in or outside of the home. These strong bonds created through effective communication methods are what drive some parents to be more aware of their involvement in their children’s education.

In addition to communication, there are several other factors that can affect parent involvement. According to Epstein and Sheldon’s study, an aspect that was shown to improve parent involvement in school involved providing a form of communication between the parents and the school (2002). By providing a contact person to parents in addition to conducting workshops targeted to addressing issues such as school attendance, Epstein and Sheldon found that both increased parental involvement (2002). Having a contact person created a direct link between their children and the school through which to express concerns such as absenteeism (Epstein and Sheldon, 2002).

Factors Affecting Why Parents Choose to Become Involved in their Child’s Education

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler investigated some of the reasons why parents “choose to become involved and why their involvement, once underway, often positively influences educational outcomes” (1995, p. 311). When parents choose to be involved, Hoover-Dempsey

and Sandler believe that parental skill and knowledge, demands on time and energy, and requests of the school and their children guide the specific form of involvement that parents choose to

partake (1995). They suggested that parents become involved for several reasons:

- “they develop a personal construction of the parental role that includes participation in their children’s education,
- they have developed a positive sense of efficacy for helping their children succeed in school
- they perceive opportunities or demands for involvement from children and the school”_ (Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, 1995, 1997)

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Parental role construction reflects perceived expectations and beliefs surrounding involvement with children’s schooling (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001). These roles are generally shaped from personal experience, expectations, and perceptions of pertinent others (Biddle, 1986; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001). Consistent with the view of role theory, researchers have reported that parents believe that involvement in school is “a normal requirement and responsibility of parenting (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 1995; Okagaki, et al., 1995; Stevenson et al., 1990; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001, p. 201).

When parents have a positive sense of efficacy in their children’s educational development, they appear to become more involved in helping with children’s homework (Bandura, 1997; Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, 1997). Parental behaviors are oftentimes guided in part by expected outcomes to their behaviors, the stronger the perceived self-efficacy by the parent, the higher goals they will set for their children (Bandura, 1997, Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001). Also, it has been found that parental doubts surrounding involvement have been related

to “lack of adequate information” and not doubts of parental capability as some may think (Kay et al., 1994; Hoover- Dempsey et al., 2001, p. 201). The parents that help their children with their homework are “more likely to believe that their help positively influences student outcomes” (Chen and Stevenson, 1989; Stevenson et al., 1990; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001).

Parents also get involved when they perceive that their child or child’s teacher suggests that involvement is wanted and/or expected (Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, 1997; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001). Teacher invitations for parental involvement have been positively associated with increased parental involvement (Balli et al., 1998, Epstein and Dauber, 1991) and have been found to be more influential than socioeconomic status in motivating involvement (Dauber and Epstein, 1993; Walberg, et al., 1985; Hoover-Dempsey, et al., 2001). The significance of parental invitations from teachers to get involved in their children’s education is much more powerful than most believe or want to admit, especially when social factors are assumed to be the culprit.

Parental Involvement Among African American Families

The level of parental involvement varies between ethnic groups (Coleman, 1988; Yan, 1999). What has been reported in the past to represent parental involvement was based on White samplings that did not take individual ethnic differences into account (Yan, 1999). Also, much of the research done to examine parental involvement in diverse ethnic populations has “confounded ethnicity w/socioeconomic variables, making it difficult to disentangle the influence of ethnicity from socioeconomic factors when drawing conclusions on research findings” (Hill and Craft, 2003, p. 75). Some researchers insist that differing home experiences between these minority groups as well as differing parenting styles affect the extent of minority

parental involvement (Ogbu, 1992; Steinberg et al., 1992; Yan 1999; Lareau, 1996; Hill and Craft, 2003).

Despite differences in minority groups, the importance of parental involvement to academic success of African American students cannot be denied; parental involvement leads to positive academic outcomes (Coleman, 1991; Comer and Haynes, 1991; Cooper and Datnow, in press; Epstein, 1995; Lareau, 1989, Yan, 1999). Trotman stated that with low-income urban African American children, the “active participation of urban African American parents is essential in reversing the current disappointing school performance” and that although these families have lower levels of involvement than most, they still have the same high expectations for their children, making it appear to be a resource barrier affecting the minority families. (2001, p. 282).

A past study examining high-achieving African American students from low-income home environments performed by Clark found that parents of these students “engaged in distinctive parent-child interactions” such as creating a emotionally supportive environment at home, engaging in recurrent and meaningful dialogue with their children, helping with homework, and communicating consistent behavior limits to their children (Clark 1983, Yan, 1999). In a study by Hill and Craft, parental involvement at school improved math performance for African American children in kindergarten (2003). Specifically, parents’ involvement at school, including volunteering in the classroom and sending materials to school improved children’s academic skills, which in turn improved math performance for African American children.

Some researchers have found African American parents to be the least involved parents in their children are schooling (Kohl et al., 2000; Moles, 1993; Reynolds, et al., 1992; Hill and

Craft, 2003). Lynch and Stein reported that “Hispanic and African American parents offered fewer suggestions at special education meetings and knew significantly less about their child’s special services than did Caucasian parents” (in Kohl, 2000, p. 503-504; Lynch and Stein, 1987). If it is indeed the case that minority parents are less involved, the barriers that cause this phenomenon are important to investigate in order to promote more parental involvement in schools with minority populations.

A downfall of past studies examining the effect of parental involvement on African American students is the focus on risk factors of this group rather than looking into the ways their families promote “successful school achievement and experiences” through parent-child interactions and other involvement behaviors (Yan, 1999, p. 5). More recent research, however, has been aimed at examining more than just risk factors as part of the parental involvement equation.

Family norms, standards and values that govern a family, can also play a vital role in encouraging academic achievement (Coleman, 1991; Yan, 1999). If however, family norms are not strong enough to motivate children’s academic achievement, the high aspirations of parents for their children to succeed can provide substantial motivation for that child (Yan, 1999). As was illustrated in Clark’s study, despite the low income of the African American families investigated, the high aspirations that the children had for themselves was the motivating factor in achieving educational success (1983).

Barriers to Parent Involvement

Educators have identified several variables that contribute to low academic achievement, which include high poverty rates, lack of resources, low parental involvement rates, and poor

communication between the school and families (U.S. Census Bureau, 1999; Kozol, 1991; Wallis, 1995; Weitock, 1991; Trotman, 2001). Epstein also emphasizes the importance of communication between the school and home, arguing that it is a basic obligation of the school to communicate with families (1995).

Not only is it important for schools to communicate with student's families, but teacher's negative attitudes can often times create an unwelcoming school environment that discourages parental involvement in school (Trotman, 2001; Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, 1997; Sheldon, 2002). If a parent is not being met with support and understanding by their child's teacher, they will not see the school as a place they can rely on for assistance.

In every school there are children that excel in academics and those that do not. It may be easy to speculate several reasons for this, such as social issues like class, capital, or lack thereof, ambition, or home life, but this study's primary interest is in investigating parental involvement as a factor in children's educational achievement. As a way to explore academic achievement in early childhood, looking at the degree of parental involvement in education can provide a window into possible explanation for children's failure to succeed in a school environment.

Often times, parents are the ones to blame for their lack of parental involvement when children misbehave or make bad grades in school, but as Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler suggest, it is not that simple (1997). Parents must know their role in their child's education and be aware of how much that role can facilitate success in their child's learning experience (Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, 1997). What seems to happen is that parents do not realize how important their role outside of the classroom is to their children's education.

Social networks and interactions between parents, students, and schools “facilitate educational attainment” (Coleman, 1988; Yan, 1999). There is substantial evidence that links these social networks and interactions to improved student achievement in terms of grades and dropout rates (Carbonaro, 1998; Coleman and Hoffer, 1987; Kahne and Bailey, 1999; Schneider and Coleman, 1993; Stanton-Salazar and Dornbusch, 1995; Yan, 1999). Affluent families tend to have more extensive social networks within the community, while working class families tend to socialize within their own kinship group and cannot afford to take part in formal activities outside of school (Lareau, 1987, 1989; Yan, 1999). Despite the fact that affluent families have more resources, several researchers have shown that “SES, formal education, and racial background alone do not adequately explain which parents get actively involved in their children’s education”, which warrants the reasoning behind this study and others similar to it (Chavkin, 1993; Clark, 1983; Dauber and Epstein, 1993; Sheldon, 2002, p. 303).

Communication barriers.

Despite the fact that most parents want their children to succeed in school, many parents are not aware of ways to help their children’s performance in school (Epstein, 1986). According to Epstein and Sheldon’s study, an aspect that was shown to improve parent involvement in school involved providing a form of communication between the parents and the school (2002). By providing a contact person to parents in addition to conducting workshops targeted to addressing issues such as school attendance, Epstein and Sheldon found that both increased parental involvement (2002). Having a contact person created a direct link between their children and the school through which to express concerns such as absenteeism (Epstein and Sheldon, 2002).

Personal/life factors affecting the availability of resources.

Also, after-school programs helped parents who worked late and needed care to be provided for their children while they were still at work (Epstein and Sheldon, 2002). After-school programs reflected the schools' sensitivity regarding "the needs and challenges facing the families and communities they served" (Epstein and Sheldon, 2002, p. 316). The fact that some parents were still at work when their children finished school can be considered one of many barriers that some parents face when trying to be involved with their children's education (Weitock, 1991; Trotman, 2001). By the school providing after school care for the children, they were helping the parents to overcome one of many aspects that may hinder a parent from being as involved as they or the school would like for them to be in their children's education.

When parents do not have the time to devote to being involved, often times they are assumed to not care. Flood et al. state that most parents care deeply about their children's education, but their involvement with their children's education can be limited due to a variety of reasons including a hectic schedule, having to care for babies or younger children at home, both parents having to work, or the belief that teaching is the teacher's job (Flood et al., 1995; Trotman, 2001). It has been shown that mothers who are "employed full-time are less involved at school than other mothers", indicating the strong demand that work schedules can have on a parent (Eccles and Harold, 1996; Muller and Kerbow, 1993; Sheldon, 2002, p. 302).

Another barrier to parent involvement examined in a study by Kohl et al., was single-parent status (2000). If there is only one parent in the family, children receive less parental contact, thus limiting their access to social capital (Yan, 1999). Surprisingly though, Kohl et al. found that single parents did not "report lower levels of involvement with their children at home or endorsement at school" (2000, p. 519). This particular finding is a great example of

disproving the popular belief that tends to view certain family structures as lacking if it does not fit a certain mold for optimal child outcomes.

Maternal depression was also shown to be a factor in affecting parental involvement by negatively impacting parent-teacher contact, but being a single parent did not seem to negatively affect parental involvement (Kohl et al., 2000). I hope to find other findings such as this that help to redefine what types of parent involvement are prevalent and prove to be successful in children's education.

Role Construction, Efficacy, and School Environment.

Often times it seems that parents are the ones to blame for their lack of parental involvement when children misbehave or perform poorly in school, but is not that simple. The different skills parents possess as well as their comfort levels regarding parental involvement at school must also be taken into account when examining their role as parents (Decker et al., 1996; Trotman, 2001, p. 276). Dunst and Trivette, as well as Bandura defined parental empowerment as the perception of parental capability and skill that could make a difference in the education of their child (Dunst and Trivette, 1987; Trotman, 2001; Bandura, 1977). Bandura highlights the parental capability or skill of being able to find the resources necessary to facilitate learning (1977; Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, 1995; Sheldon, 2002). Resources are crucial because good intentions of a parent are not enough to produce results.

Involvement at the school level is not as cut as dry as one may think. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler suggested that "even well-designed school programs inviting involvement will meet with only limited success if they do not address issues of parental role construction and parental sense of efficacy for helping children succeed in school" (1997). Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler stress the importance of a parent's knowledge about their role and how effective they are or can

be in encouraging their child's academic progress (1997). This suggestion of involvement surrounding efficacy is also an example of exchange theory. The school must work with the parents and vice versa in a reciprocal relationship to ensure optimal involvement in children's education.

A parent's efficacy in the school is also related to the environment of the school itself. Urban parents oftentimes feel alienated from involvement in their children's schooling and do not see opportunities to become included in the education process itself, causing them to feel that they are not capable of working with school faculty (Harris and Heid, 1989). One survey found that inner city single parents with low income and educational levels were less satisfied than the parents who had higher incomes and education levels regarding the opportunities for parent involvement at their child's school (Rioux and Berla, 1993; Trotman, 2001). A possible explanation for this is that the involvement activities offered are tailored more towards the parents who have the higher incomes and education levels.

Socioeconomic status.

Socioeconomic factors can also be viewed as barriers to parental involvement. According to Coleman, there are three types and levels of capital that a family can possess: financial, human, and social (Coleman, 1988; Yan, 1999). Financial capital represents the income of the family, human capital represents parental education, and social capital represents social networks of the parents (Coleman, 1988; Yan, 1999). Substantial evidence supports a positive relationship between socioeconomic status and parental involvement (Coleman, 1991; Horn and West, 1992; Keith and Lichtman, 1992; Yan, 1999). The most common measures of socioeconomic status, education level of parents and family income, "have been shown to be strong predictors of children's educational success (Coleman et al., 1966, Desimone, 1999). It

has been found that parents with higher formal education provide supportive home environments that encourage educational activities (Yan, 1999). The argument made for parental education as being a causal factor in parent involvement was that “perhaps being better educated facilitates parent awareness of the importance of directly supporting their children’s education” (Kohl et al., 2000, p. 518).

Another explanation of why better educated parents might be more involved might be because “less educated parents may have had life (and school) experiences that caused them to feel less able to be actively involved in their child’s school”, an argument of human and social capital (Kohl et al., 2000, p. 518). It is speculated that the less educated parents probably had to balance more than one job and did not have much time between those jobs and basic parental duties of feeding the children. It might not be a matter of parents knowing their role, but more a matter of lack of resources available to the less educated parents, hence creating a barrier to those parents.

Epstein’s Six Types of Parent Involvement

Epstein parental involvement typology is a more integrated approach at viewing parental involvement as more than just the conventional mindset of helping or assisting the child at home or school. Her typology acknowledges the basic obligations that parents have in addition to other aspects that require effort from both the parent and community. Epstein’s six types of parent involvement are as follows:

- Type 1: basic obligations of families
- Type 2: basic obligations of schools
- Type 3: parental involvement at school

- Type 4: parental involvement in learning activities at home
- Type 5: parental involvement in decision making
- Type 6: collaboration and exchanges with community organizations

(1990, p. 113-114; 1991, p. 290-291)

According to Epstein, basic obligations of parents included ensuring children's health and safety, developing and maintaining parenting skills and child-rearing approaches that prepare children for school, and promoting healthy development (1990, 1991). The basic obligations involved in parental involvement are foundational elements that provide an optimal environment for a child to prosper academically. Examples of this would be providing food and shelter for a child or ensuring that a child learns values important to their family, such as respect for elders, which would ideally carry over into respect for a teacher in an academic environment.

Epstein's basic obligations of schools included the school's communication with families relating to school activities and child progress (1990, 1991). Epstein feels that the obligation for communication between schools and families is mostly a responsibility of the school (1990). If the school improves their communication methods to a point where information is more accessible and/or inviting to parents, then communication between parents and the school would prove to be a success in creating a stronger relationship between the two environments.

Parental involvement at school according to Epstein refers to parental volunteering in school related activities (1990, 1991). A parent's involvement in school can take on many forms, such as attending school events (sporting events, plays, and performances), volunteering to chaperone a field trip, or helping with a bake sale.

The fourth type of Epstein's involvement is parental involvement in learning activities at home, which includes assisting children with school related activities (1990, 1991). Oftentimes,

parental involvement at home relating to school activities is gauged by the school's active role to include them through avenues such as information and updates on child progress (Epstein 1990, 1991).

Parent involvement in decision making refers to their role in being actively involved in committees or groups at the school (Epstein, 1990, 1991). By being involved in a committee such as the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA), a parent can voice concerns or contribute significantly in making decisions. There are also various levels of involvement in governance from committees at the school level all the way to the state level of involvement with a school.

Epstein's sixth type of parental involvement relates to the connections that parents have with community organizations and other groups who share the responsibility of ensuring success in children's education (1991). These partnerships are important due to the fact that it encourages the collaboration of the community in facilitating children's learning opportunities.

There seem to be many factors as well as barriers surrounding parental involvement in education that need to be explored in order to determine any relationships between variables. Epstein approaches parental involvement from a sociological view that brings in outside factors that affect a family unit, such as community. Her approach views parental involvement as a collective effort, which is important because the family unit is very much affected by outside influences and barriers, it does not operate independently of outside influence.

Conclusion

There is a bulk of information about this topic from parent's involvement with volunteer opportunities with the school to involvement at home in encouraging or helping with homework and the like. It seems to be most beneficial to children when they have strong relationships with

their parents. With a strong relationship that comes through being involved in their children's lives, children will thrive academically and probably in other areas as well. The goal of this literature review was to shed light on parental involvement in elementary school-aged children. Children's education is just one aspect of promoting child welfare, but it is a very important one given that the education they receive now is what shapes their and our future.

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