Two Communities, One School: Educational Leaders and Parents/Caregivers Talk Across the Divide in an Urban High School

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Abstract

Family involvement has emerged as an essential component of education with the expectation that school leaders strive to engage families in their children's learning effectively. Yet traditional models of "involvement" often fail families in minority, lower socio-economic status (SES) communities. This qualitative case study documents perceived barriers to involvement and identifies gaps in understanding between two groups of stakeholders – school leadership and personnel and parents and caregivers in a lower SES, minority, urban school district. Data collected in individual interviews and focus groups revealed systemic patterns that have created two closed and sometimes conflicting communities inhabiting the same physical space.

Keywords: Urban school, urban education, family involvement, parent involvement, parent engagement

The facilitation of family involvement and engagement has long been established as a best practice in schools that positively affects academic, social-emotional, and behavioral outcomes for students (Epstein, 1995; Jeynes, 2016; Ross, 2016). Educational leadership standards, promulgated by the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), established the expectation that school leaders and other school personnel strive to engage families effectively (CCSSO, 1996). Nevertheless, for minority families with lower socio-economic status (SES) in urban schools, multiple barriers to such involvement persist, barriers such as lack of resources, limited parental abilities, and limited time available to enable involvement and engagement (Brown et al., 2020; Hornby & Blackwell, 2018; Jeynes, 2015 Murphy, 2010; Reynolds et al., 2015; Wassell et al., 2017).

The terms *parental involvement* and *parental engagement* have been used interchangeably in the related literature. Recently, several authors have delineated the difference between these two concepts (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014; Hill et al., 2004; O'Toole, 2019). Hill et al. (2004) characterized parental involvement as parents' interactions with the school to promote student academic success. Involvement, however, denotes school agency, as opposed to parent agency, meaning that parents participate in structures and processes created by school personnel. Parental engagement, however, is qualitatively different and is one wherein parents and caregivers take part in their children's education process through structures and processes that they helped to co-create. Engagement suggests strong parental ownership or agency. Goodall and Montgomery (2014) proposed a conceptual continuum with parent involvement on one end and parental engagement on the other.

For school personnel, a lack of training in family engagement strategies and tools, some evidence of insensitivity, and the prevalence of traditional practices of involvement can make it difficult to surmount these barriers and work effectively with families (Murphy, 2010). While research has documented the barriers as mentioned above, few studies have explored the barriers that exist at the high school level in minority, low SES urban schools with the goal of understanding first-hand any divisions or conflicts that may exist between families and schools in these communities. Without a closer, real world view of what is happening in these schools and surrounding homes, it may be difficult to close the achievement gap for at-risk students and the larger population as a whole.

Literature Review

> *"The way schools care about children is reflected in the way schools care about the children's families." (Epstein, 1995, p.81)*

Scholars have been increasingly investigating the family's role in the educational equation since the mid-1990s when Joyce L. Epstein published her seminal work describing six *types of parental involvement*: (1) basic parenting, (2) learning in the home, (3) communication with the school, (4) volunteering, (5) participating in school decision making, and (6) making connections to the community (Epstein, 1995). Epstein presented three overlapping spheres that influence a student's life: the school, the family, and the community. She advocated that schools make every effort to tie these three spheres together through careful and thorough communication and high-quality interaction. She wrote,

> With frequent interactions between schools, families, and communities, more students are more likely to receive common messages from various people about the importance of school, of working hard, of thinking creatively, of helping one another, and of staying in school. (p. 82)

Over the last two decades, research has established that students whose parents/caregivers are involved in their education do better in school. Thus, the *impact* of parental involvement and community engagement on student learning is undoubtedly powerful and lasting (Epstein, 1995: Jeynes 2015, 2016; Ross, 2016; Wilder, 2014).

During this same time frame, school leaders have formalized and repeatedly strengthened the importance of family involvement in standards to guide policy development, pre-service training programs, and practice at all levels. In the most recent iteration, the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL), Standard 8 (of 10) calls for "Meaningful Engagement of Families and Community" (National Policy Board for Educational Administration [NPBEA], 2015). Specifically, it states: "Effective educational leaders engage families and the community in meaningful, reciprocal, and mutually beneficial ways to promote each student's academic success and well-being" (NPBEA, 2015, p. 16). Accompanying this revised standard are now ten indicators describing specific behaviors that school leaders are expected to demonstrate in their efforts to engage the school community (i.e., families, care providers, partners, students, school personnel) in meaningful ways.

Yet, despite the proven effectiveness of parent/caregiver involvement and its endorsement by the educational leadership profession, researchers continue to document *limited participation* from parents. As Murphy observes in his expert review of the literature supporting the standards (2017), "This research [on parental involvement in schools] typically demonstrates that minority and low-income parents participate less frequently than middle- and upper-class white parents" (p. 227). Barriers identified that may hinder parental involvement with schools, particularly among low-income parents, include a lack of resources, limited parental abilities, the possession of lesser amounts of cultural capital, and limited time available to enable involvement (Brown et al., 2020; Hornby & Blackwell, 2018; Jeynes, 2015; Reynolds et al., 2015; Wassell et al., 2017). Families of ethnic minorities may experience particular barriers such as disparate academic outcomes, racism, and a perceived dearth of opportunities for school engagement (Reynolds, 2010; Clark, Anderson, Clark, & Williams, 1999). Parents who identify as ethnic minorities report attending less in-school events or activities, and volunteering for school committees or fundraising events (NCES, 2016). Researchers have found, however, that minority caregivers do engage in their students' academics, but that the parental involvement in these families may be more subtle and less traditional than in Caucasian families (Jeynes, 2015).

Researchers have also identified possible shortcomings in school personnel, such as a lack of understanding about the various types of parental involvement that they might promote (Auerbach, 2009; Chavis et al., 1997; Epstein, 1995; Reynolds et al., 2015; Wassell et al., 2017). Of cause for more concern, researchers have also identified the presence of negative and unwelcoming attitudes on the part of school personnel toward involving parents in the educational process (Auerbach, 2009; Chavis et al., 1997). Eccles & Harold (1996) stated that such attitudes might lead to hostility toward parents and to a school culture that does not welcome parents as an integral part of the education of their children.

To overcome these shortcomings, some researchers have suggested that school personnel engage in targeted training to help educators understand (a) how critical parental involvement is to the education of children, (b) the various ways that parents can become involved in the school, and (c) to increase awareness of how to promote parental engagement (Chavis et al., 1997; Reynolds et al., 2015; Wassell et al., 2017). Others point to the importance of school leaders actively *building trust* between the school and its families through increased communication

(Eccles & Harold, 1996), school meetings and events in a variety of spaces and times (Auerbach, 2009; Johnson & Asera, 1999; Lloyd, 1996), opportunities for parents to observe classes (Johnson & Asera, 1999), and a professional parent coordinator who develops and nurtures parent-school relations (Epstein, 1995).

More recently, Epstein and Sheldon (2016) urge school leaders and other personnel to refocus their thinking about parental involvement and engagement through a more updated lens of *school, family, and community partnership*, a lens that recognizes that children's learning is firmly embedded in a context that involves the school, family, and community in which they live. Still, how this refocusing can be accomplished, without a shared understanding of concepts like *parental involvement*, *parental engagement*, and *community partnerships*, remains an open question, as discussed in a comprehensive review of more recent literature by O'Toole and colleagues (2019). Other researchers highlight the myriad challenges of moving beyond traditional paradigms to more progressive ones (Brown et al., 2020; Dockett et al., 2012; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Robinson & Harris, 2014). What is not in question, however, is the conclusion that traditional models of "involvement" often fail families in the minority, lower socio-economic status (SES) communities, with negative academic consequences for the children. The purpose of this qualitative instrumental case study was to document perceived barriers to involvement and identify gaps in understanding between two relevant groups of stakeholders – school leadership and personnel and parents and caregivers in a lower SES, minority, urban school district.

Methods

The high school under study, a Title I institution situated in a smaller, urban school district in the southeast, serves an enrollment of fewer than 500 students. Of this student population, 95% self-identify as African American, and approximately 80% qualify for free and reduced lunch. Researchers employed a community-based participatory approach to elicit perspectives from all stakeholder groups within the school system, including parents/guardians, district and school administrators, teachers, and affiliated staff. A combination of individual interviews and focus groups were utilized to explore stakeholders' perspectives of current family engagement practices and perceived barriers to family-school-community collaboration. To facilitate confidentiality for school personnel participants and to best accommodate their schedules, individual interviews were completed with 11 administrators, administrative staff members, and faculty in their respective offices. Researchers also conducted a focus group with 12 parents and caregivers of students at the high school under study. Interview and focus group questions were similar across stakeholder groups and included questions addressing how participants saw caregivers and parents' current involvement in the school, their perspectives on how caregivers and families can best be involved in their child's education, their perspectives of barriers to effective family-school involvement at the high school, and their perspective on how this involvement could be improved. Resulting transcripts were organized by stakeholder groups and analyzed using thematic analysis. Themes were compared and contrasted between groups to explore potential areas of conflict in the system's parental-school relationships. Data were collected under approval of the Institutional Review Board. All participant identifiers were removed from transcripts, pseudonyms were assigned, and all content was stored on a secure server.

Results

Overarching thematic findings were identified through thematic analysis of the collected interview and focus group transcripts and comparisons and contrasts between themes occurring within the various participant groups. Four main themes emerged: 1) the presence of two isolated and separate systems, 2) incongruencies in beliefs regarding parent involvement in schools, 3) the impeding role of historical influences, and 4) the persistence of traditional models.

Theme 1: The Presence of Two Isolated and Separate Systems

The division between these overlapping systems emerged as a complicating factor in the pursuit of increased parental involvement and engagement within the school system and community. Both systems, one consisting of parents and families in the community and the other containing the school environment/community and school personnel, existed and functioned mainly in the absence of one another. The school and its staff seemed to exist both figuratively and physically separate from the community system in which the students and caregivers resided, with students tasked to transverse the boundaries of these incompatible systems. Factors contributing to this separation included a teaching and administrative faculty that commute to the school from outside communities, perceived differences and expectations, and a lack of agency of parents and caregivers within the school system. Regarding turnover, both caregivers and school personnel highlighted the weight of this barrier and the influence of economics in its persistence. As one parent stated, "If [teachers] get a better paying job, they're gone. A lot of them I know personally were good teachers, and they cared about the kids". These sentiments and observations were mirrored by school personnel:

> If you look at that makeup, and again, not to really down anybody, like the teachers and the people that tend to make the most money, of course, we don't really live here, but the people that, you know, don't make as much as a teacher, they're the ones that live here, and so that's also, you know, a difference between us.…

Both groups of participants described systems that are kept separate by relatively rigid boundaries, contributing to a breakdown in communication that does not allow each system to understand the other's challenges and ultimately widening the gap between them. Additionally, the potential for the school environment to be intimidating or unwelcoming to some families can act as a mechanism to keep the systems separate. Further complicating the interaction between the two systems is the lack of role definition for both families and school personnel. Families may not be sure of the role that they are meant to play in the school system, and school personnel may not be aware of the role that they are intended to inhabit among families. As one teacher discussed, "I think we could do a better job of letting parents know that they could come into the school and the classrooms. I don't think they know that they can". These complications often produced misunderstandings in perceptions and purpose, such as caregivers interpreting school policies and personnel as intimidating or inaccessible, stating that they "just don't feel comfortable" interjecting in their child's education. This experience was also perceived by personnel within the school. As one teacher responded:

> Some of the parents don't know how they will be perceived. You know, you're the teacher, so you seem like you might be more critical than I am or you're the principal, so you might be more important than I am…

Theme 2: Incongruencies in Beliefs Regarding Parent Involvement in Schools

The schism between belief systems and the resulting perceptions of the opposite system emerged as a second theme. Not only is communication lacking or problematic, it often presented as deficit-based and largely one-way. Although espousing a more progressive approach to engagement, the reported communication activities were school-initiated, as has been the traditional model. One caregiver described her frustration with the form, focus, and top-down approach to communication by the school:

> There's no roles (for parents) because nothing's ever offered or brought to our attention…and they could probably give material to the kids, but I'm gonna tell you, my daughter comes home, and I probably won't get it until after she thinks about it. And I think there should be some type of notification that lets parents know exactly what's going on…

Participants also described deficit-based communication toward families that was frequently spurred by adverse events or when a child has exhibited poor academic or behavioral performance. Both caregivers and school personnel stated that they were aware that this was often the case, and both saw it as problematic in increasing engagement. As one teacher participant said:

> Also, another barrier is if we have a behavior problem, that will be the only time that they may feel like they hear from us. And, even though we're reaching out with the flyers, with the calls, um, I'm sure as a teacher, I could be better about calling saying, 'Oh, your daughter had a 100 on the exam today'.

Some school personnel participants posited beliefs that the caregivers of high school students are less interested in involvement or that some parents just may not place as much value on their child's education and academic achievements as others. The caregivers in the study, however, all discussed wanting more information and communication from the school and further opportunities to be involved. This highlights a disconnect between the caregivers' views of school collaboration and involvement and some school employees' perceptions of those views. For example, when asked about barriers to family involvement at the high school one administrator responded:

> … I don't know if at one point that if because of the age of the kids, the parents kind of feel like, "Oh, they're almost grown, they're at that point, like why do I need to…I don't have to walk them into school anymore," and you know, they're kind of on their own. I think that plays a big part, and I don't know, just maybe the mindset of some of the parents and not valuing education really, so they don't think that it's important to be active and a part of it.

Theme 3: The Impeding Influences of Personal School Histories

This third theme emerged at both at the systemic and individual levels, generated further barriers to involvement in the form of mistrust between systems and reduced collaboration. This reported mistrust emerged from specific incidents with the school system throughout the year, and caregivers' previous experiences as a student. Administrators discussed perceiving that some caregivers may be intimidated by coming or may be reluctant to being in the school environment due to negative experiences that they may have had as students. As one administrator states:

> ...some parents may just be intimidated by school in general just because if they didn't have a good experience, then they're not going to come or they may have had a negative

> experience with us, and nobody's tried to rectify that negative experience, and so they're like, "I'm not dealing with them anymore unless I absolutely have to."

School administrators described this lack of trust's effects being most strongly felt in school-to-parent communication and the reluctance of some caregivers to give updated contact information to the school. For many caregivers, prior communication had generated a sense of negativity and dread regarding school interaction and the inability to "keep taking time off to deal with something negative." The administration identified the connections between trust and communication:

> On the flip side, I think we've got to build a level of trust with the parents so that they give us the right phone number consistently or they give us an email address or they give us an alternative means of communicating with them because that's a big roadblock for us.

Theme 4: The Persistence of Traditional Models

The final theme centers around the concept that, while many schools and school personnel are eager to embrace the language and concept of "engagement" versus "involvement," the structure and environment of the school remains based on traditional models. Despite stating a desire to utilize modern co-constructed models of engagement typified by shared power and decision-making, the school personnel in this study described past and current utilizations of top-down power structures and lines of communication. Both caregivers and teachers described communication and invitations for involvement as school initiated, definitions of involvement professed by the school required caregivers to be responsive to their communications and invitation, and involvement was primarily seen as caregivers being present in the schools and at school meetings and events. While school personnel use the language of engagement, and many expressed knowing the difference between the concepts of involvement and engagement, the practices still seem to be embedded in the school-centered models of involvement. One administrator discussed how she would like parents to be more involved:

> …just because their child is not a little kid anymore, it matters just as much still to let them know that you're involved and that you care, that you're taking it seriously and they'll take it serious. And just, I don't know if upfront having a parent meeting every quarter just to keep stressing -- we want you in the building, we want you here, and you can come up here eat with your child, and you can come up here and volunteer or whatever, during the day if you're able.

A caregiver described her desire to have teachers interact differently with her and her child:

> I'd like to see teachers more engaged. You know, get to know my kid. Everyone has a different personality. Reach out to them and say, Hey, and, deep in my heart, I know she's struggling with something… so you know, the teacher needs to do that while they're in the classroom. And if she's aware of something, then let the parent know and let the parent help out.

Discussion

The results of this study demonstrate that while both the caregivers and school personnel seem to understand the importance of family involvement in education and both want families and caregivers to be involved, multiple barriers exist for effective collaboration and engagement. Within the school unit under study, there exists a disconnect between how both sides seemed to

value school involvement and the continued use of a traditional school model of parental involvement, which appeared to be limiting the possibilities of change. Although the school cited elements of a more progressive engagement model as the foundation for their approach, the more traditional model that underscored the actions discussed here embodies a top-down approach of institutional dictation of relationships. This effectively hinders communication and strips parents and caregivers of agency, creating two closed and conflicting systems or communities inhabiting the same physical space.

When describing the concept of engagement, Goodall and Montgomery (2014) state that "engagement with children's learning may not equate to – and should not be judged on the basis of – engagement with the school" (p.400). Multiple researchers have found that caregivers who identify as ethnic minorities often report difficulty engaging with schools, and they still express wanting to be part of their child's academics and education (Cooper, 2009; Crozier, 2001; Latunde, 2018; Reynolds et al., 2015). Many of the descriptions of involvement or engagement in this study from both caregivers and school personnel focus on involvement within the school environment. There is not much acknowledgment from any of the participants of caregivers' behavior or energy towards engagement in their child's education outside of the school.

Further, there is little evidence that school personnel in this study have much knowledge of their students' caregivers' non-school or home-based involvement or engagement. This demonstrates the need for school personnel to value and have knowledge of multiple definitions of engagement. Among her six types of involvement, Epstein (1995) includes "parenting," which includes parents' beliefs about education, parents' academic expectations for their children, and "learning at home," which encompasses parents assisting with and monitoring homework, providing learning experiences for their children, etc. Both of these types of involvement fall under caregivers' environments, and purview and are generally hidden from school personnel unless deliberately uncovered or solicited. Given that, for many school personnel, courses and learning experiences that focus on effective practices in caregiver and parent involvement remain scarce, it stands to reason that they would fall back on traditional involvement practices that are more deeply-rooted (Greenwood & Hickman, 1991; Young & Hite, 1994).

The barriers presented in this study largely have a basis in the research literature, though there are some specific differences. Hornby and Lafaele (2011) presented a model describing barriers that affect parent-school involvement in four major areas, including parent and family factors, child factors, parent-teacher factors, and societal factors. Parent and family factors such as parents' beliefs about school involvement and perceptions of invitations of involvement by the school could be recognized in barriers described by participants in the current study. The parent-teacher category of barriers, however, seemed to be the category that best fits many of the obstacles described in this study, including the perception of mistrust by caregivers towards school personnel, differing attitudes towards and perceptions of each other, and the rhetoric and language that informs their understanding of family-school relationships (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). The participants in this study were much less likely to specifically discuss individual child factors and societal factors.

Additionally, specific barriers mentioned by participants here such as the perception that school personnel were primarily removed from or temporary in the community system, and school personnel's lack of recognition of the traditional models in which they were operating, were not as prevalent in other studies. Hornby and Lafaele (2011) also discussed the gap between rhetoric and research around the importance of parental involvement and the actual range of practices that were employed in schools. That gap can be seen in the microcosm of this school, as school

personnel would discuss the importance of parental engagement but described traditional school-centered practices.

Notably, the school personnel and caregivers in this study did agree on many of the barriers to involvement in their school. While they identified many of these common themes, they showed little understanding or detail of the other's perspective, and little consensus on how to address these barriers. There was blame in some areas, but the disconnect was rooted mainly in the lack of communication and the lack of invitation for parents to share their student's and family's needs and ideas with the school. Rather than the families being granted equal partnership and agency, the school created involvement initiatives based on their perception of families' needs and their experience with what involvement initiatives worked from trial and error. The traditional models could be seen in school personnel's descriptions of involvement as expecting caregivers to enter the school environment and expecting caregivers to be responsive when contacted or called.

Findings from this study offer school leaders a unique opportunity to reevaluate parental engagement strategies within their schools. Deliberately working to connect the school mission and vision, and to communicate the mission and vision for family and community engagement is essential to this process. Involving all stakeholder groups in creating a mission and vision for the school, leaders can help to define and develop what is meant by collaboration between and among various groups who have invested in the school and community.

Additionally, school leaders must understand the difference between family and community *involvement* (Hill et al., 2004) and true family-community *engagement* through the enrollment of stakeholder groups in the processes of co-construction and shared ownership in educating students (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014, O'Toole et al., 2019). Educators must be willing to examine their assumptions about family and community engagement by looking closely at the current state of their context to determine whether a disconnect exists between stakeholder groups as well as developing mutual understanding between the groups to bridge that disconnect where possible (Epstein, 1995; 2011; Epstein & Sheldon, 2016; Wassell et al., 2017).

Further research on effective ways of bringing caregivers and school personnel together through engagement practices and breaching barriers in urban high schools, in particular, is needed to fully understand the interconnections of context and school climate at these grade levels. As much family involvement research occurs at the elementary level, examining how urban high schools transition from traditional models of involvement to progressive engagement models will further discussions in building this foundation for possibilities and suggestions for best practice.

Additionally, the researchers recommend extended training and professional development to encourage the application of these ideas of engagement in high school systems. Further effort should be focused on translating the research suggested above into useful and effective training for school leaders as well as reassessing program policies to include this content in certifications and professional development offerings.

As a qualitative case study, the goal of this research is not generalizability but rather to add to a necessary spectrum of cases and contexts to more wholly understand the phenomenon of school-family partnerships and engagement. One of the aims of this study is to represent a case from a context that may be underrepresented in studies of engagement. To continue to inform the bigger picture of the challenges and barriers that different schools and communities may face in implementing effective family-school partnerships, further studies should be conducted in other demographics that are not examined as dominantly in the literature.

Conclusion

Overall, this study demonstrates the importance of recognizing and addressing the specific factors that can act as barriers to school personnel and families creating a cohesive system. A prominent barrier to the full implementation of authentic engagement in this context may have been superimposing the progressive engagement models over the traditional parental involvement foundation used within the school. This approach simply layered new actions for best practice over old paradigms without identifying and deconstructing these practices and their negative impact on genuine engagement. The result was a traditional involvement/school-focused model tempered with mild elements of engagement rather than an accurate application of engagement principles. For educational leaders, these tenets of engagement best practice should be embodied throughout all levels of the school environment as inherent and organic to the system rather than externally forced if an authentic change is to be seen. Although all participants shared a genuine interest in engagement and parental connectedness to the school and community, these underlying historical and interpersonal barriers continue to support the existence of two isolated systems operating under differing paradigms; paradigms that foster continued blame and hinder the growth of engagement in this multi-stressed school.

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