Students at the Center: Student Voice in Parental Involvement and School–Family Partnerships

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Abstract

This essay summarizes the literature on the differences in perceptions between adolescent students and parents of parental involvement in education and discusses how such different perceptions are linked to students' academic achievement and other outcomes. We present psychological research on why students' perceptions of parental involvement are stronger predictors of academic outcomes than parents' perceptions. We then highlight empowering student voice as a strategy to improve parental involvement and school–family partnership practices, programs, and policies. Research on student-led parent–teacher conferences is discussed as a real-world example of students actively engaging in school–family interactions. We recommend evidence-based strategies that school leaders and teachers can use to support students in playing an active role in improving school–family partnerships. We conclude by describing gaps in existing research that will benefit from future research on the topic.

Key Words: parental involvement, school–family partnership, student voice, student perceptions, student-led parent–teacher conferences

Introduction

Parental involvement[1] in education can be defined as "parents'[2] work with schools and with their children to benefit their children's educational outcomes and future success" (Hill et al., 2004, p. 1491). Such involvement can take place in school, at home, and in other community settings (Hill & Tyson, 2009).

Studies have shown that parental involvement is associated with increased academic achievement and other positive student outcomes (Hill & Tyson, 2009; Wilder, 2014). Many may assume that parental involvement becomes less important as children enter adolescence, a time of remarkable physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development marked by a growing desire for autonomy and agency (Anderman & Maehr, 1994; Eccles et al., 1993). However, researchers have consistently found that many adolescents,[3] even those who consider their parents overly involved, believe parental involvement is helpful and valuable to their studies (Connors & Epstein, 1994; DePlanty et al., 2007; Harris & Goodall, 2008; Ramirez, 2002; Vega et al., 2015; Xu, 2002). In the meantime, adolescents often perceive parental involvement differently than do their parents, and adolescents' perceptions of and psychological experiences with parental involvement tend to be more closely associated with student outcomes than do parents' perceptions (Barwegen et al., 2004; DePlanty et al., 2007; Liu et al., 2021; Pomerantz et al., 2007; Thomas et al., 2020). Therefore, as Xu (2002) suggests, middle and high schools should reconsider the role of adolescents in parental involvement so that adolescents' need for autonomy and independence "is not viewed as an impenetrable barrier but as a gateway" that leads to improved practices and policies (p. 70).

One important form of parental involvement is parents partnering with the school to support students' educational experiences. Research on school–family partnerships has focused primarily on how adults, namely parents and school personnel, can work together to improve student outcomes. Limited attention has been paid to the roles and impacts of students in partnership practices and programs (Mitra, 2006). This essay serves as a launching pad for researchers and educators as they explore strategies for supporting students to become proactive drivers of their own learning and development, especially in discussions around school–family partnerships.

The primary purposes of this essay are to discuss the research landscape on the topic of student voice in school–family partnerships and to offer evidence-based and research-informed recommendations for educators and researchers. In the first section, we provide a concise overview of the benefits of parental involvement and school–family partnerships. In the second section, we discuss why and how attending to student voice may help improve school–family partnership practices, programs, and policies. Student-led parent–teacher conferences are analyzed as a popular example of students' role being elevated in school–family interactions. Next, we offer evidence-based recommendations to school leaders and educators on engaging students as key actors in school–family partnership efforts. We then conclude by describing potential directions for future research on this topic.

Benefits of Parental Involvement and School–Family Partnerships

Research consistently indicates that parental involvement is positively associated with students' academic achievement across grades, subjects, ethnicities, races, and genders (Hill & Tyson, 2009; Jeynes, 2007, 2016, 2017; Kim & Hill, 2015; Wilder, 2014). According to a meta-analysis conducted by Kim and Hill (2015), parents' involvement in children's education at both home and school is related to higher academic achievement from prekindergarten to high school. Jeynes's meta-analyses (2007, 2016, 2017) showed that parental involvement is significantly related to positive academic outcomes among urban, Latino/a, and African American adolescents. Studies have identified academic socialization—which includes parents (a) passing on their beliefs about the value of education to adolescents, (b) fostering educational and career aspirations in their adolescents, and (c) helping adolescents with preparing for and planning out their future paths—as having the strongest relationships with students' improved academic outcomes (Hill & Tyson, 2009; Kim & Hill, 2015). Other studies have identified parents' high expectations as a strong predictor of students' academic achievement (Erdem & Kaya, 2020; Fan & Chen, 2001; Jeynes, 2007; Wilder, 2014).

In her now classic and widely cited article, Epstein (1995) pointed out that as "overlapping spheres of influence" (p. 82), schools and families must form close, effective partnerships to support the student. Such partnerships convey consistent messages to students and create safe and supportive learning environments (Epstein, 1995). According to Epstein, not only are school–family partnerships beneficial to students' learning and development, but students also must be considered important members of such partnerships. Hence, drawing on a wide array of existing research, we discuss in the following section reasons why attending to student voice can be an important step towards more effective and impactful school–family partnerships.

Students at the Center

The term *student voice* can be broadly defined as students actively contributing to their schools, families, or communities by identifying problems, looking for strategies to address those problems, making plans, and carrying out solutions in collaboration with adults (Mitra, 2006). According to a study conducted by Kahne and associates (2022), when schools are responsive to student voice, students have better grades and attendance and reduced rates of chronic absenteeism. Besides sharing their observations and providing feedback to

adults, students may collaborate with their families and with school personnel to address the problems that they encounter during their educational experiences (Mitra, 2006). In the following paragraphs, we discuss why student voice matters in discussions about school–family partnerships.

Students' Perceptions Versus Adults' Perceptions

Studies have shown that there are discrepancies between parents' and adolescents' perceptions of parental involvement and that researchers, parents, and educators should take both perceptions into consideration. Parents tend to report higher levels of involvement than do adolescents. For example, Barwegen et al. (2004) found in a diverse sample of high school seniors that parents reported greater involvement than the students perceived. Results of other studies with adolescent populations in both the U.S. and Europe (e.g., DePlanty et al., 2007; Thomas et al., 2020) also suggest that, in general, parents report greater levels of parental involvement than is perceived by students. Such discrepancies in perceptions may be due to self-serving biases, with parents overestimating their own behavior or control and adolescents, who were becoming closer to their peers, underrating their parents' involvement.

Which Matters More?

Given the lack of alignment between students' and parents' perceptions about how much parents are involved, a logical question arises: What matters more for student outcomes—students' perceptions or parents' perceptions of involvement? Research suggests that students' perceptions of parental involvement tend to be better predictors of student outcomes than parental reports (Liu et al., 2021; Thomas et al., 2020). Thomas et al. (2020) found a mild, positive relationship between adolescents' perceptions of parental involvement and student achievement, but no significant correlation between parental perceptions and student achievement. Liu et al. (2021) highlighted that students' perceptions of parent–child communication predicted students' depression levels better than did parent-reported parent–teacher communication.

Psychological Explanations for the Differences

Educational psychological research offers potential explanations for the higher predictive power of students' perceptions of parental involvement. Findings from several studies bolster the notion that parental involvement does not exert its influence on academic outcomes by way of quantity of involvement (i.e., it's not necessarily the case that "more is better"; Pomerantz et al., 2007). Rather, research suggests that the quality of parental involvement (i.e., how adolescents perceive their parents' involvement) is what primarily influences academic outcomes (Pomerantz et al., 2007).

For example, parents' autonomy support has been identified as a strong predictor of positive student outcomes (Vasquez et al., 2015). Parental autonomy support is marked by parents acknowledging and showing empathy for adolescents' perspectives, creating opportunities for and encouraging adolescents to make choices, and solving problems together with adolescents (Lerner & Grolnick, 2020; Ryan & Deci, 2017). According to a meta-analysis of 36 studies, when parents' involvement supports students' autonomy, students are likely to experience numerous academic benefits (e.g., in the domains of academic achievement, perceived academic competence, engagement, effort, self-regulation, etc.) as well as psychological benefits (e.g., in the domains of mental health, attitudes toward school, perceived control, executive functioning, etc.; Vasquez et al., 2015). Other studies have shown that parents' autonomy support is associated, directly or indirectly, with adolescents' reduced school worry, decreased disruptive behavior in classrooms, less substance use, and improved subjective well-being and self-esteem (Lerner et al., 2022; Lerner & Grolnick, 2020; Shek, 2007; Wong, 2008). Establishing parental involvement profiles based on levels of parents' involvement and autonomy support, Li et al. (2020) found that adolescents who perceived their parents to be *highly autonomy-supportive* and *moderately involved* reported the most adaptive motivation and the highest levels of subjective well-being, even when compared to those who perceived high levels of both autonomy support and involvement from parents.

Revisiting the Discrepancies Between Students' and Parents' Perceptions

With such findings in mind, let us return to the earlier discussion of the differences between students' and parents' perceptions of parental involvement. Comparisons of results of studies conducted within different cultures shed some light on this topic. For example, in contrast to findings from many studies conducted on Western populations, survey results from a study of 1,550 Chinese middle school students and their parents revealed that the Chinese adolescents reported higher perceived parental academic involvement and parent–teacher communication than their parents reported (Liu et al., 2021). Comparing and contrasting their findings with those reported by DePlanty et al. (2008), who found higher parental reports for all involvement activities, Liu and colleagues (2021) speculated that such cross-cultural differences may be explained by Chinese parents' more controlling parenting styles when compared with their Western counterparts (Cheung & Pomerantz, 2011). Chinese adolescents may consider more involvement from parents as contributing to increased psychological control and stress (feelings not shared by parents), thus overrating the level of parental involvement (Liu et al., 2021). Such misalignments of students' and parents' perceptions and experiences illustrate the importance of considering students' perspectives and voices when designing,

developing, implementing, and evaluating parental involvement practices, programs, and policies.

Elevating Student Voice in School–Family Partnerships

Our review indicates that there is an important overlap between the literature on parental involvement and the literature on student voice that has had little investigation. On the one hand, studies on parental involvement have examined adolescents' perceptions of and opinions about parental involvement, but little has been said in the literature about the ways in which the perceptions and experiences of adolescents may translate into real improvement in school–family partnerships. On the other hand, the student voice literature has examined how student voice influences school-related processes and outcomes, but little research has examined the role of student voice in school–family partnerships (Mitra, 2006). Mitra's study (2006) was the first exploration of adolescents' role as bridges between schools and families. Connors and Epstein (1994) and Epstein (1995) were pioneers in the field of school–family partnerships, highlighting the roles of students in the processes. In discussing the rationale for student voice in school–family partnerships, the following sections rely on these older but highly influential articles (e.g., Connors & Epstein, 1994; Epstein, 1995; Mitra, 2006) while also drawing upon the broader literature on student voice. It is our hope that this essay will inspire future researchers to pay more attention to and depict a more nuanced, up-to-date understanding of this topic, especially given how the COVID-19 pandemic may have transformed the relationships among schools, families, and students.

Why Student Voice?

The primary goals of the student voice movement include (a) reflecting on students' aspirations, (b) highlighting students' perceptions of the assets and challenges of their schooling experiences, (c) revealing adolescents' ideas about improving instruction, and (d) identifying ways to pursue equitable access to education (Quaglia & Corso, 2014). Levin (2000) highlights five rationales for including and empowering students in school reforms. First, successful school improvements require participation and buy-in from not only school staff but also students. Second, students can contribute to the planning and implementation of school reforms with their unique knowledge and perspectives. Third, students' opinions can help encourage school staff and families to support and participate in the reform efforts. Fourth, playing a more active role in school will help students improve social skills and learn from peers and adults. Last but not least, students' involvement is fundamental to all school improvement processes because students' academic and developmental outcomes are the core purposes of schooling (Levin, 2000).

Research suggests that engaging students in various school processes is associated with positive school and student outcomes. In their systemic review, Mager and Nowak (2012) discovered that when students participate in schools' collective decision-making processes, schools tend to witness an improvement in school ethos evidenced by students' improved engagement in school, higher attendance rates, higher acceptance of and/or compliance with school rules, better school climate, decreased bullying and racism, and more democratic school processes. Drawing upon student records and survey data from over 10,000 ninth graders from 86 schools in the socioeconomically, ethnically, and racially diverse Chicago Public Schools, Kahne and colleagues (2022) found that a school's responsiveness to student voice at both the individual and organizational levels was associated with higher grade point averages (GPAs) and less chronic absenteeism when controlling for prior academic performance. Finally, Mitra (2004) analyzed data from interviews, observations, and written documentation from Whitman High School in northern California, where the community has a large population of first-generation Latino/a and Asian immigrants, as well as working-class African Americans and European Americans. Whitman High School had two student involvement groups, one focused on providing students with one-on-one tutoring and mentoring, and the other focused on improving students' involvement in school processes at the organizational level. The qualitative data revealed that participating in either student involvement group helped adolescents gain agency, a sense of belonging, and a sense of academic competence (Mitra, 2004). In sum, results from these studies consistently indicate that elevating student voice may lead to multiple positive student outcomes.

Why Student Voice in School–Family Partnerships?

Research on the role of student voice in school–family partnerships has been scant, especially over the past 20 years. Although conducted decades ago, studies by Connors and Epstein (1994), Mitra (2006), and Ramirez (2002) provided the most direct evidence supporting the importance of engaging students in school–family partnerships. This evidence yields several conclusions that can help guide future efforts to enhance the roles that students can play in school–family partnerships. While we speculate that most of the findings from these older studies remain true today, future replications and adaptations of these studies are warranted to investigate today's adolescents' beliefs about their roles and voice in school–family partnerships.

First, many adolescents are willing and eager to participate in school–family partnerships. Surveying students, teachers, and parents from six high schools in Maryland, Connors and Epstein (1994) found that students wanted their

schools to consider them "active and willing partners in school–family-community connections" whose opinions and concerns were heard and addressed (p. 18). Over half of the adolescents surveyed reported that their voices were not being heard by the adults in their schools, and many wanted to be more involved in the decision-making and problem-solving processes for their own education. Connors and Epstein (1994) argued that by engaging students in school–family partnerships, school personnel and families would demonstrate to students that the adults around them genuinely care and are willing to treat them as autonomous, responsible, and proactive contributors to these partnerships. A study by Ramirez (2002) revealed that over 75% of high school students surveyed, being aware of the limited interactions between their teachers and families, indicated an interest in participating in parent–teacher conferences and playing a more active role in school processes.

Second, each adolescent can potentially play a central and active role in the unique partnership between their own family and school. The field of special education offers great examples of ways to effectively engage students as drivers of their own learning and development. According to the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (and as later reauthorized), students with disabilities are mandated to participate in Individualized Educational Program (IEP) meetings when appropriate (Barnard-Brak & Lechtenberger, 2010). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) 1997 Amendments further required that IEP meetings where transition services are discussed must involve students aged 14 years and older (Barnard-Brak & Lechtenberger, 2010). Research suggests that students experience a number of benefits by actively engaging in their own IEP meetings, including: (a) a better understanding of the IEP processes and their purposes (Martin et al., 2004); (b) higher motivation and greater ability to pursue and achieve goals (Benz et al., 2000); (c) more positive feelings about the IEP processes (Martin et al., 2006); (d) improved engagement and leadership in their own IEP meetings (Martin et al., 2006); (e) improved self-determination skills, "a combination of skills, knowledge, and beliefs that enable a person to engage in goal-directed, self-regulated, autonomous behavior" (Field et al., 1998, p. 2); (f) improved academic achievement (Barnard-Brak & Lechtenberger, 2010); and (g) better post-school outcomes (Stodden & Conway, 2002). Thus, when designing partnership strategies aimed at elevating students' roles, schools can benefit from consulting the well-established special education research on practices around student voice.

Third, adolescents can be invited and inspired to serve as a bridge between their families and school, helping the two sides to better understand the values, beliefs, norms, and cultures of each other and to become more effective

partners in supporting the adolescents' education (Mitra, 2006). According to Mitra (2006), students are "in a unique position to teach schools how to become more 'family-like' and to help their families become more 'school-like' because students experience both cultures every day" (p. 465). It is important to caution that there are limits to some student roles that bridge family and school. Students should under no circumstances be asked to act as an interpreter or translator for school–family communication. While this may happen in an informal sense at home, schools "may not rely on or ask students, siblings, friends, or untrained school staff to translate or interpret for parents" (U.S. Department of Justice & U.S. Department of Education, 2015, p. 1). Besides legal protections, Shen and colleagues (2022) found in their meta-analytic review that frequent language brokering—translating and interpreting for their families—is mildly associated with problematic family relationships and adolescents' increased stress and socioemotional problems.

Student-Led Parent–Teacher Conferences

One existing example of students taking a central, active role in school–family partnerships is student-led parent–teacher conferences. Believing in adolescents' potential for helping their schools to develop productive and comprehensive school–family–community partnerships, Connors and Epstein (1994) called on schools to reexamine traditional models of school–family interactions, including parent–teacher conferences, and explore intentional, innovative ways to actively and strategically engage students in these processes. They found that 70% of the high school students surveyed wanted to participate in parent–teacher conferences (Connors & Epstein, 1994). Similarly, Ramirez (2002) found that most high school students surveyed in their study believed that students should be included in parent–teacher conferences. In this section, we describe research on student-led parent–teacher conferences. It is worth noting that most peer-reviewed articles on this topic were published over 20 years ago, with most of them published in the 1990s. Future research is needed to understand how student-led conferences or parent–teacher conferences in general have changed over the past few decades (particularly since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic) and assess the effects of such conferences on students in today's schools. Moreover, most articles on student-led conferences were published in practitioner journals and written by educators who used a loose or informal research design, sometimes relying on anecdotal narratives. While these articles provide important, accessible insights into student-led conferences, rigorous longitudinal and experimental studies, as well as high-quality qualitative inquiries, are needed to examine the short-term and long-term impacts of student-led conferences.

What Are Student-Led Conferences?

Unlike traditional parent–teacher conferences, when parents meet individually with their child's teachers to discuss the students' progress and challenges without the presence of the student, in a student-led conference, the student, instead of the teacher, is the main speaker and reports to their parents their recent academic performance (Little & Allan, 1989). Preparing for such conferences often involves the student (a) organizing a portfolio of recent projects or assignments with the teacher's help; (b) preparing a short presentation on their recent progress, accomplishments, and goals; and (c) rehearsing the presentation with a teacher or a classmate (Little & Allan, 1989). It is helpful for schools to organize parent workshops to prepare parents for effectively asking students questions and providing feedback to students in the most appropriate and constructive way during a student-led conference (Tuinstra & Hiatt-Michael, 2004).

What Has Research Said About Student-Led Conferences?

Although schools across the country have been holding student-led conferences for some time, empirical studies examining the effects and effectiveness of such conferences are scarce, and many are out-of-date and may not reflect current practices. As one of the few studies on this topic that looked at more than one school, Tuinstra and Hiatt-Michael (2004) examined student-led conferences in 30 classrooms in four middle schools across California, Oregon, Texas, and Washington, covering a sample of 524 students and their parents. By conducting focused and open-ended interviews with school administrators and teachers, observing conferences, and surveying students and parents, Tuinstra and Hiatt-Michael (2004) found that such conferences were associated with higher math and reading scores on state tests, reduced disciplinary issues, lower stress about parent–teacher conferences among teachers, increased parent participation in the conferences, and improved self-confidence and focus among students. According to Tuinstra and Hiatt-Michael, both parents and teachers tended to prefer student-led conferences over traditional meeting formats.

Surveying parents after hosting student-led conferences with sixth graders and their parents, Guyton and Fielstein (1989) found that such conferences helped parents better understand children's performance, encouraged student–parent communication on schoolwork, pushed students to take ownership over and responsibility for their learning, increased students' academic performance, and gave parents extra enjoyable time with their children. In general, the extant literature on student-led conferences suggests that this student-centered format is welcomed by parents, teachers, and students; linked to quality school–family and parent–child communication and improved student outcomes; and aligned with adolescents' developmental needs for independence,

autonomy, and responsibility (Borba & Olvera, 2001; Conderman, 1998; Hackmann et al., 1998; Tuinstra & Hiatt-Michael, 2004).

Recommendations for School Administrators and Teachers

According to Connors and Epstein (1994), schools should provide opportunities for students to evaluate whether and how school–family–community partnerships are helping students achieve their personal and educational goals. Practices that elevate student voice need to meet adolescents' increased needs for independence and autonomy while preparing them for the responsibility and accountability that come with growing independence. In this section, we recommend concrete strategies to engage students in parental involvement and school–family partnership practices and programs. These recommendations are not to be used as a checklist; instead, they are broad ideas that administrators and educators can adapt to the unique circumstances and student populations of a specific district or school. It is recommended that schools use a variety of strategies to include and respond to the voices of all students (Mager & Nowak, 2012). Relying solely on a few strategies may lead to a disproportionate focus on a group of enthusiastic or privileged students, creating or affirming existing elites (Mager & Nowak, 2012; Rudduck, 2007). Regardless of which strategies are used, the bottom line is that schools should strive to create conditions where students' voices are taken seriously and have a real impact on improving school–family partnerships (Rudduck & McIntyre, 2007; Wilson, 2009).

Recommendation #1: Students as a Source of Feedback

Understanding and being responsive to student voice is crucial (Kahne et al., 2022). As discussed in earlier sections, how students perceive and experience parental involvement has significant implications for academic and social–emotional outcomes (Vasquez et al., 2016). Schools and districts can adopt strategies to gauge student perceptions as an important source of feedback on the existing parental involvement practices or programs. For example, schools can survey or interview students at least once every school year about their opinions on the ways in which the school and their families have been collaborating and communicating (Levin, 2000). Events such as breakfasts with the principal (Epstein, 1995) create a more direct and informal setting where administrators can hear students' thoughts on how the school and their families can become more effective partners. To gather more individualized feedback, schools can solicit students' ideas about how their families and teachers can best support them during IEP meetings, student–parent–teacher conferences, or early-in-

the-year writing assignments. Most importantly, administrators and teachers should reflect on and implement students' recommendations, with students actively engaged in the design, implementation, and evaluation processes.

Recommendation #2: Students as Decision-Makers and Problem-Solvers

Besides listening to students' voices, schools should create opportunities for students to become key decision-makers and problem-solvers in school–family partnerships (Epstein, 1995). Epstein (1995) recommends including at least two students on the school–family partnership action team. Student representatives should be invited on panels to share with administrators, teachers, parents, and community partners their opinions on the relationship and interactions between their school and their families (Epstein, 1995). Schools should encourage students to form large student councils and organize their own discussions of changes to include input from as many students as possible (Levin, 2000). Ryan and colleagues (2018) point out that incorporating student voice in schools' planning efforts can lead to changes and improvements that appeal to students who are disengaged and likely to drop out. Schools should implement students' ideas in recognizable ways in the school's policies, programs, and practices and highlight students' contributions to the school's decision-making so that students see how their voices are heard.

Mitra (2006) cautioned that supporting student–adult collaboration requires individual and collective capacity building. Students need to be equipped with necessary skills, such as communication, problem-solving, public speaking, and planning skills, in order to become effective partners with adults (Mitra, 2006). Therefore, schools should be intentional about teaching and scaffolding students to practice partnership skills so that both the students and the adults can benefit from the students' increased responsibility and contribution to the partnership (Levin, 2000). For example, Bachman et al. (2021) recommended teachers partner with parents to set healthy boundaries and engage in positive interactions with their adolescents so that students can foster a developmentally appropriate sense of autonomy and perceive that the adults care about them.

Recommendation #3: Students as a Bridge Between School and Family

Having spent a significant amount of time in both the home and school, adolescents in particular are well-positioned to support collaborations between families and schools. Mitra (2006) described a talent night that a school organized for students to demonstrate their skills and talents and attract parents to the school. Students can help with designing, naming, and promoting school

events in ways that are appropriate and appealing to families based on their own families' values, cultures, beliefs, and routines (Mitra, 2006). Hoover-Dempsey and colleagues (2005) suggested that invitations from students are more likely to appeal to parents' wishes to be responsive to their child and to support their child in succeeding in school.

Teachers and administrators are encouraged to take the initiative to learn from students about their families' and communities' cultures, histories, and life experiences, with which teachers can enhance school–family partnerships by designing culturally relevant curricula that draw upon families' funds of knowledge (González et al., 1995; Moll et al., 1990). To create two-way communication, students can also help their families better understand school policies and culture. These strategies could be especially helpful for students and families in minoritized communities because the values and beliefs of these families may be culturally incongruent with most U.S. schools' White, Eurocentric, and middle-class value system (Mitra, 2006).

Recommendations for Future Research

Our review of existing research revealed several directions for future research. First, there is a gap between student voice research and research on parental involvement and school–family partnerships (Mitra, 2006). Future research can fill in this gap by exploring different strategies to elevate student voice in school–family partnerships and examine the impacts and effectiveness of such strategies. Second, building on the previous finding that students are interested in playing a more active role in school–family interactions (Connors & Epstein, 1994; Ramirez, 2002), future research should replicate the studies to gain up-to-date insights and include interviews and focus groups with students, teachers, parents, and school and district administrators to explore practical strategies for schools and districts to support students in playing such roles and making positive impacts. Finally, more rigorous and systemic research, including experimental studies, is needed to determine the qualities and effectiveness of student-led parent–teacher conferences in today's post-COVID, digital era.

Conclusion

Dr. Joyce Epstein, a leading scholar on school–family–community partnerships, highlights that "students are the main actors in their education, development, and success in school" (1995, p. 82). According to Epstein (1995), school–family–community partnerships should "locate students at the center" and "engage, guide, energize, and motivate students to produce their

own successes" (p. 82). In this essay, we discussed how students' perceptions of parental involvement differ from parents' perceptions and highlighted the association between students' psychological experiences with parental involvement and student outcomes. After establishing that students' perceptions of the quality of parental involvement are especially important, we offered a rationale for schools and districts to attend to student voice as a potential engine for improving school–family partnerships. As an example, we discussed research on student-led parent–teacher conferences, a common example of students being active participants in school–family interactions. Then, we provide three recommendations for school and district leaders to develop practices and programs that empower students to have significant impacts on school–family partnerships, unlocking ideas and solutions that are culturally relevant, impactful, and refreshing. Finally, we discuss potential directions researchers can take to expand and extend the knowledge basis of this topic.

Endnotes

[1]We acknowledge the existence of other similar terms, including "parental engagement," "family involvement," and "family engagement." Discussing the distinctions among these terms is beyond the scope of this article.

[2]In this essay, we use the term "parent" instead of "family" because the former has been used more widely in existing research articles on the concerned topics. We use the term "parent" loosely to represent any adult family members, guardians, or caregivers that play an essential role in a child's education and development.

[3]In this essay, we use the term "adolescents" to refer to an approximate age range of middle and high school students who are, on average, aged 12 to 18.

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