

Reflections and Directions on Research Related to Family-Community Involvement in Schooling

Diana B. Hiatt-Michael

Abstract

S. Redding noted the many challenges facing research and researchers in family-school-community involvement, and he presented a call to “rally the troops” to respond to a series of concerns. The issue of control over defining the role of schools should be a shared enterprise among the family, the school, and the community, with the individual child as the center. This paper presents reflections on past developments providing the background and reasoning for contemporary practice of family-school involvement across America. The paper provides analyses of research and thought in order to present four recommendations for future directions in development and research for family-school-community involvement programs. The first two recommendations focus on *explicitly* incorporating family-community involvement knowledge, skills, and values into preservice teacher and administrator licensing programs and studying the resulting effects on aspects of these programs. These recommendations are crucial to implementation of family and community involvement practices as the teacher and the principal serve as key agents for positive family and community involvement in schools. The third recommendation promotes studying the effects of family involvement in character/civic education on student outcomes. The fourth recommendation encourages research on the effects of tying community organizations, including health and social agencies, with the school. Each of these recommendations should serve to point out areas where family-school-community involvement research would be both timely and fruitful.

Key Words: parent involvement, educational research, teacher preservice education, administrator certification programs, civic education, character education, community schools

The Tension for Control

In some countries currently, and 200 years ago in the United States, parent involvement in children's schooling would not be considered a topic worthy of scientific scrutiny (Hiatt-Michael, 2001a). Parents assumed control of children's schooling. In some countries currently, and 60 years ago in the United States, the popular opinion was that the school should direct children's academic endeavors.

This tension between parent and school control of academic endeavors dominates popular culture, political propaganda, governmental legislation, professional action, and parental activism (Hiatt-Michael, 2005a). According to contributors to *Promising Practices for Family Involvement in Schooling Across the Continents* (Hiatt-Michael, 2005b), this tension exists around the globe. In West Africa, Gambian elders resist sending their children away from the village to public schools because these elders perceive benefits for family and community support and wonder how government schools will affect the upbringing of their youth. Whereas, in South Africa, parents will arrange for children to leave home and attend a former "White" school so that their children have opportunities for future success in life. In Japan, parents and grandparents may jointly labor to support the school and improve their children's academic opportunities and success. In Scandinavian and American schools, teachers may openly complain about parental disinterest or attempts to control teacher decision making. A recent cover of *Time* titled "What Teachers Hate About Parents" and the accompanying article generated far-ranging lively discussions and published debate (Gibbs, 2005). Phi Delta Kappan's Gallup Poll for 2005 revealed that 58% of those surveyed believe that the schools, not the parents, have the responsibility to close the academic achievement gap between socioeconomic groups (Rose & Gallup, 2005, p. 48).

The Purpose of This Paper

S. Redding noted the many challenges facing research and researchers in family-school-community involvement and presented a call to "rally the troops" to respond to a series of concerns (2005). During the end of the last century, educational researchers compiled a set of research findings on the positive effects of family involvement in public schools. However, many of these findings appear to remain in academia or shelved documents, not in public practice.

This paper will present reflections on past developments, providing the background and reasoning for contemporary practice of family-school involvement across the United States of America. The paper provides analyses of research and thought in order to present four recommendations for future directions in development and research for family-school-community involvement programs.

Reflections on Past and Present Conditions

Emerging Research on Family-School-Community Involvement

The importance of family involvement connected to student achievement was placed in the forefront of U.S. public policy by a large research study that was a direct response to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Coleman, 1966). This national survey was commissioned to focus on problems related to academic achievement by children from lower socioeconomic homes or “disadvantaged” homes. This data provided the evidence on which federal legislation was crafted. This report noted significant differences among student academic achievement across socioeconomic levels—namely, children from middle and upper class families had higher GPAs and higher graduation rates from high school and college. In 1966, Coleman’s report to U.S. Department of Education, known commonly as the Coleman Report, provided results from a series of data analyses from this national survey. Findings revealed that the effect of outside school factors on student academic achievement was greater than inside school factors. This significant finding led to dialogue on the merits of parent involvement in schooling and connected that dialogue to future political action and educational research. The Coleman Report sparked my own professional interest into research and educational practice on family involvement issues.

Federal legislation during the following decade focused on ways to level the academic playing field between advantaged and disadvantaged children, providing additional funds for educational programs aimed at schools with significant numbers of academically underachieving children. Head Start and Title I led the way; however, both were supported by many other programs that appeared and have since disappeared from educational vernacular. Research methods moved beyond analyses of demographic and survey data to include observational methods and interviews.

Little by little, from this emerging research into educational practice and student academic achievement, educators and legislators began to note the educational advantage of parent involvement. The efforts of Davies, an influential educator and researcher of parent involvement, promoted the development of

organized activity on family-community involvement throughout the United States and beyond. In 1973, he founded the Institute for Responsive Education (2005), a forerunner of contemporary associations involved in research and practice in family and community involvement. Davis, Shipman, Moles, and others met at the American Educational Research Association (AERA) meeting and formed the Special Interest Group (SIG) Parents as Educators (V. Shipman, personal communication, December 19, 2005). This group, later renamed as the Family-School-Community Partnership SIG to incorporate the emerging wider scope of family-community involvement, has continued to connect researchers and educators. Beginning in 2001, members of the group created practitioner-friendly monographs supported by research.

In the 1980s at John Hopkins, Joyce Epstein brought together research and researchers with practice and practitioners through the National Network of Partnership Schools. Her models—"Overlapping Spheres of Influence" and "Six Types of Parent Involvement"—continue to influence research and practice across the country and elsewhere (Simon & Epstein, 2001). Redding (2005) and the Academic Development Institute in Lincoln, Illinois, have provided a series of activities promoting parent involvement and, since 1991, have expanded the influence of research with a scholarly journal to disseminate research findings across the nation.

A summary of research literature on parent involvement across cultures, school types, and geographic area confirms the importance of parent involvement (Epstein, 2001; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Teachers' and principals' efforts to involve families promote higher student attendance rates, lower suspension and expulsion rates, higher graduation rates, more accurate diagnosis of students for educational placement, higher satisfaction with the school, student improved goal-setting and pride in school work, and most notably, higher academic achievement in reading and math.

Challenges Faced by Families

Family composition, size, leadership, diversity, type of work, hours of work, and communication patterns have been changing during the past century, especially since 1960 (Meyers, 2005). Families are smaller, divorce has increased the number of families headed by a single parent, immigration across the globe has altered the diversity of most countries, more mothers and fathers share family leadership, more jobs exist in cubicles with social interaction occurring through technology, hours of work have lengthened and diversified throughout the day, and, increasingly, more parents are employed in different patterns of work hours. Meyers shared that a greater number of Americans in 2005 report that they work more than 100 hours a week, an increase from prior years.

The 24/7 demand for service has increased positions for both semi-skilled and skilled workers at all hours. Some parents must be away from the home because their employment is nationally or, more likely, internationally based, with their services needed after standard work hours to accommodate the business needs in various time zones around the world.

Challenges Faced by Schools

In the early parent involvement models, educators believed that parents required knowledge and skills to work with their children (V. Shipman, personal communication, December 19, 2005). These early parent programs usually placed educators in the directive and knowledgeable role and parents in the listening and passive role (DiCamillo, 2001). Such programs did not achieve the intended high attendance with parents, and schools subsequently reported frustration with parents (Finders & Lewis, 1994). The 1998 MetLife Survey indicated that dealing with parents is the second most important challenge of teachers (Binns, Steinberg, & Amorosi, 1998). Met Life's 1,035 telephone surveys of middle and high school teachers revealed that 86% desired more parent involvement. This percentage increases to 97% for teachers working in communities with an estimated median income of less than \$15,000 annually. Teachers in urban areas are more concerned that parents are not as involved in their children's education or responsive to their children's school-related challenges. However, these teachers believe that parent involvement should be one-way communication, namely that parents should respond to the teachers' requests. The teachers perceive that they are professionals with the accurate knowledge and that they should inform parents. The 1998 Met Life Survey indicated that teachers are slightly more favorable toward parents than they reported in the previous Met Life Survey in the 1980s.

Considered Directions for Future Research on Family Involvement

The challenges noted above as faced by families and schools forced this author to consider which areas of research might be the most fruitful to reveal promising practices for family-school-community involvement. The considered areas of research may be categorized into four main issues: teacher preparation issues, site administrator preparation issues, character/civic education issues, and school-community connections issues. In the remainder of this paper, these four issues are discussed and four recommendations are made to address these issues.

Teacher Preparation Issues

The Theoretical Importance of Instruction on Parent Involvement

Teacher preparation programs and on-site cultural norms have maintained the knowledge-distance gap between teachers and parents (Davies & Johnson, 1996; Epstein, 2001). Studies have cited teachers' concerns about dealing with angry parents, lack of knowledge about working with parents, and departure from the teaching profession because of serious parent interaction issues (Black, 2001; Kirschenbaum, 2001; McEwan, 1998).

Beginning teaching experiences should be positive ones, building on the natural enthusiasm that comes with a new job and its challenges. Goodlad (1991) reported on a major study of teacher preparation programs indicating that these programs tend to send teachers into the work force only partially prepared for the reality of the task. Current remarks by L. S. Shulman, President of the Carnegie Foundation for Advancement of Teaching (personal communication, October, 2005), underscore Goodlad's findings for the present situation of new teachers.

Mary Johnson, President of Parent U-Turn in Los Angeles (personal communication, March 7, 2006), strongly believes that educating teachers to work with parents and the community must occur during their preparation program. New teachers must possess basic skills and understanding to deal with the diversity of families within the school community. University preparation programs should not expect over-burdened schools to handle such an essential teacher education component. Incoming teachers should be prepared to effectively work with children whose families may be very different from that of the new teacher.

Davies and Johnson's (1996) study revealed that the traditional social distance in teacher-parent relationships is due to teacher resistance and fear of the unknown. How can this fear and resistance be alleviated? Findings from studies on the brain and learning processes indicate to educators the power of the emotions in learning and action (Kosik, 2005). The Harvard Family Research Project reminded teacher educators that teachers need professional development experiences that prepare them for the task of parent interaction, just as they need preparation in subject matter and teaching skills (Shartrand, Weiss, Kreider, & Lopez, 1997). The major emphasis in teacher preparation programs is on the technical aspects of professional performance, not the deeply interpersonal aspects of their task. Such interpersonal aspects include empathy, communication, and in-depth knowledge of the lives of the families in which their students dwell outside the classroom. Research and popular articles

accentuate the problems faced by beginning teachers working with children and families of diverse cultures (Martinez, Rodriguez, Perez, & Torio, 2005; McDermott & Rothenberg, 2000). This literature reveals that teachers' major complaint is that parents do not seem interested. This parental disinterest is indicated by low attendance at back to school nights, open houses, and parent conferences.

The Impact of Teachers' Attitudes and Interactions with Families

According to Levin's study, as reported in Kuykendall (1992), the apparent disinterest that teachers perceive in parents might be attributed to teachers' negative attitudes toward students and their families. His study suggests that teacher expectations include a hidden standard that all parents should behave in a certain manner. Levin's research findings note that teachers with negative attitudes toward students contribute to their failure. In contrast, Kirst, Haertel, and Reardon's (2005) recent survey of principals suggests that teachers with high expectations for urban students can positively affect their students' academic achievement.

Teachers' assessments of children can be altered if they reach out to families and the community (R. Garcia-Ramos, Professor of Education, personal communication, April, 2006). Factors that put students at risk for not graduating from high school are poor attendance, behavior problems, low academic achievement, and low socioeconomic status (Karweit, Madden, & Slavin, 1989). Schools working with families can direct their efforts to dealing with the first three of these risk factors and, in the process, may affect the latter.

Epstein's (2001) synthesis of research studies, reiterated at AERA Annual Meeting in 2006, suggests that practicing teachers who are provided with knowledge and skills to apply culturally appropriate practices report positive outcomes for parent involvement. This synthesis of a series of well-designed studies lays a strong foundation for the merits of parent involvement and school achievement. How and where in the lifelong professional knowledge and skill acquisition should this information be acquired by teachers?

Recommendation 1: My first recommendation is that researchers and professional educators should team together to provide a parent involvement component in all preservice teacher preparation programs and that researchers should provide the data on the outcomes of such activities.

I argue that teachers and administrators should enter their new positions with a positive mindset for the merits of parent involvement and having acquired essential adult communication skills. The development of a set of basic

course content and skills for positive parent involvement should be assigned to preservice teacher preparation. Support for this position is found in an assessment by Katz and Bauch (1999) of graduates from teacher education programs at Peabody College, Vanderbilt University, which indicated that beginning teachers felt prepared and engaged in a diverse number of parent involvement practices because they had received parent involvement training in their courses. Similarly, Deslandes and Lemieux (2005) reported student teachers' positive responses to content of a new parent involvement course in the Quebec teacher education program.

The Current Lack of Parent Involvement Components

Although almost all states have parent involvement as part of a required standard for licensure, and the topic is part of the No Child Left Behind Act (U.S. Department of Education, 2001), this particular standard continues to receive little attention in preservice training (Epstein, 2001; Harris & Jacobson, 2005; Hiatt-Michael, 2001c; Lynn, 1997). Few teacher preparation programs beyond early childhood and special education include any significant coursework or activity on parent involvement issues (Epstein, 2001; Hiatt-Michael, 2001a). Lynn noted that parent conferencing is reported to be in most teacher preparation programs, but the specific activity, values, and knowledge in parent conferencing across these teacher preparation programs is unknown. For example, teacher preparation in family involvement issues in California are not considered until teachers are on the job. Even then, only schools that have adopted the Beginning Teacher Support Activities (BTSA) program are expected to address such issues. Thus, most new teachers have experienced situations with parents that they were unprepared to resolve in a positive manner before specific on-the-job training.

For preservice programs within the populous state of California, faced with the highest proportion of new immigrants and English language learners, the California Teaching Performance Expectation (TPE) includes one sentence (within TPE 11 Social Environment) that mentions that teachers should know how "to establish rapport with all students and their families" (State of California, 2005). This sentence is placed in the middle of a TPE that receives little professional attention within academically oriented courses. Thus California teachers may enter their first classrooms without any knowledge or experience regarding dealing with families, especially those with cultures different from their own.

Repeated studies call for teacher preparation in parent involvement as a recommendation, but the actual implementation of parent involvement at the preservice level is provided only in "lip service." Cattani (2002) poignantly argues

that teachers should have preservice education on family-school-community involvement issues so that beginning teachers understand other people's children, especially those who may be from a culture different from their own. Information regarding the positive effects of parent involvement does not seem to be included in preservice teacher and administrator programs leading to professional licenses. Instead, the existing resources and funds support family involvement training within the school, district, or local site.

Models for family involvement courses and modules do exist, but such offerings are few across the country (Epstein, 2001; J. Epstein, personal communication, September 16, 2005; Hiatt-Michael, 2001b, 2005; H. Kreider, personal communication, December, 2005). The Institute for Responsive Education, the National Network of Partnership Schools, and Partnership for Family Involvement in Education within the U.S. Department of Education financially support and coordinate a wide array of activities for teachers and administrators working at school sites. These organizations could offer much-needed guidance for the development of research-validated parent involvement components for all teacher preparation programs.

The Current Lack of Research on Effectiveness of Parent Involvement Components

One of my primary concerns is the lack of research on the effects of teacher preparation in parental involvement. Attitudes toward the practice of teaching are formed during early professional training, but little research has addressed how teacher education programs affect beginning teachers' learning and practice (Floden, 2001). Further research on the effects on student teachers of parent involvement training in teacher education programs, beside the two studies noted above, appears nonexistent based on a review of ERIC literature (Education Resources Information Center database), as well as program offerings at AERA Annual Meetings in 2004, 2005, and 2006.

Specific Research Aims

Since a few model programs do exist, attention should be provided to research (a) the specific content of those courses, and (b) the effect that the content has on practices of beginning teachers. An important beginning is to design and implement studies to ascertain the specific content of existing parent involvement activity within preservice teacher education programs. Questions to be raised include the identification of specific activities. A collection of course outlines might provide a rudimentary basis and then be followed by in-depth interviews with the teaching faculty and student teachers. For example, one important research question would be the following: What is

considered to be part of educating preservice teachers about parent conferencing? Parent conferencing is selected because teacher education programs report parent conferencing as the most prevalent parent involvement activity in any preservice program. How much time is devoted to this activity? How is the content provided? What skills are the preservice teachers expected to acquire? Where does the activity take place—in a school or in a college classroom? How are the preservice teachers assessed on their behavior in teacher conferencing? How is follow-up provided for student teacher concerns? From such a study, researchers might be able to suggest generic elements of parent conferencing, the effect on student teachers, and concerns of faculty.

A host of other studies in preservice teacher education becomes apparent. Other important aspects of family involvement, such as making home visits, understanding the culture of the students' community, working with family liaisons, preparing classroom newsletters, and so forth, are critical components. Each of these family involvement practices should be examined as carefully as parent conferencing. For example, how do preservice teachers acquire an understanding of the importance of reaching out to parents and effective ways to connect with the parents at their particular site? Reaching out to parents is a highly effective approach to parent involvement and to increased parental satisfaction with schools (Johnstone & Hiatt, 1997). However, reaching-out techniques need to match the cultural expectations of the parent populations (Hiatt-Michael, in press).

Even in the school district of the Johnstone-Hiatt study, many teachers remain resistant to parent involvement beyond the obligatory parent conference and open house (T. R. Johnstone, personal communication, February, 2006). Johnstone, Assistant School District Superintendent, along with C. Ferguson, Program Associate, Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (personal communication, September, 2005) argues that preservice programs should build the foundation for positive communication, collaboration, and mutual understanding. Beginning teachers should be able to operate in a proactive manner with parents and guardians, reaching out with home visits, using weekly newsletters, and utilizing parent liaisons. However, other than reports from grant projects indicating the value of these practices, it appears there is no comprehensive research tightly connecting teacher education on family involvement to on-site behavior with parents and students, attitudes towards parents, job satisfaction, and student achievement. Although "the complexity of the educational system often makes...effects difficult to identify, the demands for evidence will encourage investigators to contrive research designs that will deliver" (Floden, 2001, p. 14).

Site Administrator Issues

The Importance of Preservice Instruction on Administrative Support for Family-School Involvement

The teacher sets the climate for parent involvement in the classroom, but the principal establishes the tone for parent and community involvement at the school site. Principals are the key component connecting schools to the community (Cunningham, 2002; Cushman, 1992; North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, n.d.). Cunningham reports that the National Association of Elementary School Principals encourages principals to emphasize to teachers that parent involvement is a high priority. Findings from numerous studies report that the principal serves as the key to unlocking the door between parents and the school (Johnstone & Hiatt, 1997). The tone of partnership and collaboration is established by the willingness of site administrators to reach out to families and the community, listen to and address their concerns, and share decision making with them. Parents also comment on the school principal as the individual who opens or closes the door to teacher and school relationships. The principal is the site-based administrator who is central to faculty selection, development of school-based discipline programs, support for community activities, and connecting community agencies with the school. Many classrooms are staffed by temporary teachers, filling in for ill teachers or teachers on leave. The principal becomes the resource to attune the practices of these temporary teachers to the practices and policies of the school. Most states include collaboration with families and the community as one of the requirements or standards for a preliminary administration license. The Coalition of Essential Schools cites that one of the four essential elements of school design is the connection of the school with the surrounding community (Simon, n.d.).

The Impact of Administrators' Attitudes and Interactions with Families

Principal turnover at schools and principal apathy are cited as barriers to school-community involvement (Davis, 2005). The data suggest that principals often remain for a limited time period at one site and may not have the time or the inclination to develop the human relationship aspect of family and community involvement while on the job, which highlights the need for prior training in this area. F. Dell'Olio, Director of Administrative Programs at Loyola Marymount University (personal communication, February, 2006), observed that new principals appear intimidated by community representatives

and challenges posed by families. A new principal who is faced with concerned and maybe angry parents would be daunted and intimidated without both the knowledge and the skill to successfully develop a dialogue between the school's constituents and the professional community within the school. According to W. Mallory, Director of Research, National Community Education Association (NCEA; personal communication, December, 2005), site administrators responding to the 2005 MetLife survey indicated that educating teachers to work with families is not part of their already over-burdened role.

Recommendation 2: My second recommendation for the direction of future research on family involvement is that researchers and professional educators should team together to provide a family-community involvement component within administrator preliminary credential programs and that researchers should provide the data on the outcomes of such activities. Such data would reveal the gap between existing preservice education for administrators and desired preservice education for administrators of any public or private school.

The Current Lack of Instruction on Family-Community Involvement in Administrator Licensing Programs

As a state that educates a large number of school site administrators, California includes a family-school component in its state standards. California Professional Standards for Education Leaders is organized into six standards (Association of California School Administrators, 2005), one of which states:

A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by...

Standard 4: Collaborating with families and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources.

4.1 Collaborate to incorporate the perspectives of families and community members.

4.2 Establish and manage linkage between the site and the larger community context.

4.3 Engage and coordinate support from agencies outside the school.

However, this standard receives little to no attention in many approved programs for administrators (L. Purrington, Director, Educational Leadership Academy, personal communication, December, 2005). According to W. Mallory (personal communication, December, 2005), this situation appears to be common within other states.

Development and teaching of courses with a licensing/certification for site administrators appears to be sporadic and dependent upon individual dedicated faculty. A query placed on their website received a reply that one California program affiliated with Coalition of Essential Schools did include a course on working with the community as part of the preliminary administrative credential. L. Shumow, Professor at Northern Illinois University, reported that the Illinois standards for administrators include skills and competence in working with families and communities (ISBE, 2006). Each administrative certification program must be state approved so that it must address the standard in some way; she periodically teaches a course to school administrators that addressed the standard (personal communication, January 26, 2006). This course is part of the Educational Specialist Degree leading toward General Administrative Certification. J. Keller, Dean, College of Education, North Texas University, noted that all candidates for the administrative credential in Texas are to complete an educational component on family-school-community partnerships as part of their program; her college offers an online module.

Florida recently passed legislation titled *Family and School Partnership in Student Achievement Act* (Florida Senate, 2005). This legislation describes desired actions of principals and teachers on-the-job and does not address certification/licensing requirements. Recent legislation in Arkansas and other states contains a similar focus, supporting the federal policy of No Child Left Behind (National Education Association, 2005a).

The Current Lack of Research on Effectiveness of Parent Involvement Components

Research on the content of family-community involvement issues in administrator preparation programs appears even more limited than that of teacher preparation programs, based upon a review of ERIC literature, AERA annual meetings, online resources, and telephone interviews by the author.

Specific Research Aims

An initial research study would be to assess administrative training programs across the country to determine if and how working with families and the community are included in principal preservice educational programs. Other studies might include telephone interviews with randomly selected principals to assess (a) their knowledge of their families and the community, (b) methods they utilize to obtain such information, (c) challenges they face working with families and communities, (d) allocation of their time and resources to such professional activity, and (e) any perceived benefits or problems resulting from such involvement.

Character and Civic Education Issues

The Importance of Character and Civic Education

Although separately identified, the educational purpose of character and civic education programs are intertwined. Character and civic education initiatives comprise topics that bring together families, the school, and the community. Character education addresses the underlying moral and ethical dimensions of students' social and civic actions. Civic education within the United States is interpreted as the study and application of a government utilizing democratic processes.

Schools are the only institution that law requires children to attend through the passage and enforcement of compulsory education acts. Therefore schools acting *in locus parentis* should examine their moral obligations to the total development of students. Both the 1996 and 2000 Gallup polls, recent polls that included survey questions on the purpose of public education, revealed that the most important purpose of the public school is to prepare students to become responsible citizens (Rose & Gallup). This is consistent with an initial piece of American legislation on education in 1642 known as the Satan Deluder Act, which addressed a community's concern about literacy for all their children (Hiatt-Michael, 2001a). Schools in towns with 50 or more inhabitants were required to hire a teacher so that children would acquire reading skills in order to read the Bible, understand community laws, and learn a trade.

The concern for civic and character education has been promoted by major educational leaders and maintained in educational legislation throughout American public school history. Horace Mann in the 19th Century advocated that character development was as important as academics in schools. Ralph Tyler, John Goodlad, and James Comer may be cited as major advocates for character development in the 20th Century. Civic and character education is included in two of the 1918 *Seven Cardinal Principles* (Sherer, n.d.) and in the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act. In addition, one of the six goals of the U.S. Department of Education is to "promote strong character and citizenship among our nation's youth" (U. S. Department of Education, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c). According to U. S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings, "education at its best should expand the mind and build character" (U.S. Department of Education, 2005a, ¶ 13).

The Impact of Character/Civic Education

The strength of families, the local community, and ultimately the nation are measured by the character attributes and actions of its citizens. In an ERIC Digest publication, Otten (2002) notes that those character education programs

deemed successful reported fewer disciplinary referrals for behavior, increased attendance at school, fewer student dropouts, and higher scores on standardized tests. On the other hand, the neglect of character education is painfully apparent in many schools. Reports of students' diminished sense of self-worth as well as community problems with adolescents may result from not attending to character. Silberman, as reported in Kuykendall (1992), informed the nation that 95% of Black children report high self-esteem in preschool, 20% by grade 5, and only 5% in high school. On an annual basis, Gallup polls reveal that drugs and abuse and lack of discipline are major challenges facing schools. Other major concerns include violent acts by students, anti-social behavior, lack of respect for peers and adults, students' sense of alienation, and increased reports of student depression.

Recommendation 3: My third recommendation for the direction of future research is to include family involvement instruction along with implementation of character development programs and civic education in schools.

A variety of character/civic education funded programs exist across the United States, but few include parental involvement. A review of technical reports of federally supported programs from the 1990s to present revealed only two that included parent involvement as a program descriptor.

Borquist and Schmidgall (1997) implemented a middle school curriculum that utilized cooperative learning, a community/school service project, and a conflict resolution program. They based their program upon a needs assessment of local concerns and a literature review of possible solutions. Post-assessment results revealed a reduction in number and severity of discipline problems among the classrooms that participated in the curriculum.

Duer, Parisi, and Valintis (2002) used similar action research at three junior high and senior high sites in the Midwest. Their intervention included student identification of social morals and values, activities to foster empathy and self-discipline, parent involvement in this educational program, and class activities that promoted student responsibility for problem-solving and conflict resolution. Similar to the other study, the program created awareness of character education among students and their families, improved student levels of respect and responsibility, and reduced misbehaviors reported at school.

The Current Need for Parent Involvement in Effective Character/Civic Education

These two important aims of public education, namely, civic education and character education, receive limited time and attention in most public

school classrooms. The licensing standards across the country generated by the No Child Left Behind Act have forced the central aim of education for student teachers, beginning teachers, master teachers, and school administrators toward an exclusive focus on standards and testing. Educators such as Ned Noddings, Jonathan Kozal, and Larry Cuban have eloquently argued that schools are directed to a small and often insignificant set of skills that can be accurately tested. An increasing number of parents are concerned about the lack of moral behavior at schools and decide to homeschool their children. While character education may flourish in these situations, such parental decisions removes their children from the civic purpose of public education.

Specific Research Aims

Our task as practitioners and researchers is to develop appropriate connections and practices and then carefully study the effects of these connections and practices. A beginning is to include family components in character and civic education programs and to assess what actually occurs. Yet, few studies are reported that connect character development and family involvement. The component of family involvement and its impact is essentially missing from the research data collected on these programs.

Any vision for future research on families and schooling must address the fundamental concern, “What are schools for?” Connecting families and schools should be directed to the purposes for public education in America. Are we asking the right questions and studying the most critical element of family, school, and community partnerships? The variables of parenting that affect a child’s moral actions should be added to the research designs of character and civic education programs. Some suggested variables are time either parent or guardian communicates with the students, establishing rules at home, consistency of discipline, goal-setting, parents’ modeling desired behavior, and parent participation in character or civic education programs at the school. Epstein’s “Overlapping Spheres of Influence” may serve as a guide to organize research variables (see Simon & Epstein, 2001).

Feynman (1998) reminded scientific researchers that science may only provide findings or evidence. Determining what actions should be taken on the basis of that evidence is a moral judgment. Therefore, as both practitioners and researchers on families, schools, and community partnerships, we are called to practice and study those elements that we believe will provide valued information for moral decision making. Scientific inquiry reveals “What do we know?”—a knowledge question—but does not address “What should I do?”—a moral question. Character education is a shared responsibility between schools and families. Since character education assumes that certain values are good

and others less desirable, the question arises regarding whose values should be included in these programs. If administrators and teachers openly communicate with the families within their school site, such dialogue should result in values agreed upon by both the home and school. The U.S. Department of Education website suggests ways that parents might assist teachers and schools to build character and responsible future citizens (U.S. Department of Education, 2005a, 2005c). How parents and schools interpret these may also be a starting point for research. A resource for researchers is the Character Education and Civic Engagement Technical Assistance Center, connecting programs across the country.

School-Community Issues

The Importance of Connecting Schools to Local Needs

The concept of school-linked services grew out of the progressive education movement over 100 years ago (Blank, 2003; Chavkin, 2003). Since compulsory education laws mean that children are required to attend public schools, improvement in health care for immigrant, urban, and migrant children should be connected to schools. Jane Addams Hull House may be considered an early blend of social service and schooling. In Europe, social services such as health and dental care were located within public schools during that period and remain so to the present. During the Great Depression, Charles Mott Foundation attempted to create schools that served as the social center of the community. In the 1970s, the Community School Act signaled the beginning of government interest in the concept. The development of federal support for after-school programs in the late 1990s brought needed financial support for further development of the community school concept.

Markavey and Blank, leaders in the Coalition of Community Schools within the Institute for Educational Leadership, describe the community school concept as follows:

A community school is not just another program being imposed on a school. It embodies a way of thinking and acting that recognizes the historic central role of schools in our communities—and the power of working together for a common good. Educating our children, yes, but also strengthening our families and communities so that, in turn, they can help make our schools even stronger and our children even more successful. (as cited in Blank, Melaville, & Shah, 2003, p. 1)

Since their inception, school-linked services have promoted systematic educational reform more completely than any other reform program (Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1997).

The Impact of Schools That Meet Current Societal Needs

Community groups bring a vast wealth of resources within the confines of the school site creating school-linked programs that provide needed services for families and children. Such community groups include businesses, faith-based institutions, social services, safety and security agencies, cultural groups and museums, legal services, health services, and institutions of higher education. Johnstone and Hiatt (1997) report that the community school serves as a powerful way to bring families into the school. Chavkin (2003) supports the benefits of connecting social agencies to physical school sites. An evaluation of 20 community school initiatives across the United States reports the positive effects of community schools (Blank et al., 2003). The following are four areas in which this research supported school improvement: student learning, family engagement, school effectiveness, and community vitality.

On the other hand, lack of educators' and policymakers' attention to the community results in difficulties for both schools and communities. The self-contained classroom, the content-based department, and the graded school structure foster isolation and independence, not interdependence, of persons, activities, and agencies. School-linked programs require extra skills for site administrators, and this poses a challenge to implementation. Another barrier is that education policy may ignore current social realities. During the 20th Century, public schools evidenced the press of industrialization. This press continues in 21st Century public education in the form of standards and testing for standards. These are procedures created almost 100 years ago to measure production. American schools remain trapped in the procedures of the industrialized society, although other aspects of society appear to have evolved into a more dynamic and differentiated culture. Gates (2005) commented at the National Education Summit on High School:

By obsolete, I mean that our high schools—even when they're working exactly as designed—cannot teach our kids what they need to know today. Training the workforce of tomorrow with the high schools of today is like trying to teach kids about today's computers on a 50-year-old mainframe. It's the wrong tool for the times. Our high schools were designed 50 years ago to meet the needs of another age. Until we design them to meet the needs of the 21st century, we will keep limiting—even ruining—the lives of millions of Americans every year. (¶ 12-15)

One example of ignoring current social realities is that the changing demographics of families and communities are seldom considered by schools that operate within a structure and system established in the 1800s. Educators' expectations regarding family involvement in schools must take into account

these changes in the diversity of families. These changing demographics affect every part of American, not simply ports of entry or border towns (Girard, 2005). Waves of immigration that had been more confined to larger cities are now spreading to numerous pockets in rural and suburban areas. Approximately 5.5 million English language learners (ELL) are enrolled in public schools, a change from 2 million in 1993 (Girard, 2005). Schools cite dealing with ELL families as a rising challenge.

Recommendation 4: My fourth recommendation for the direction of future research is to study the effects of connecting community agencies with the school on family involvement issues and student educational outcomes.

Although important advances have been made in recent years toward effective family-school-community partnerships, there remain significant challenges to this movement. Mallory (of National Community Education Association) reports that public education is fragmented and agencies are separated into silos (personal communication, December, 2005). One agency knows little about the activities of another. Legislatures pass distinct laws and these laws lead to separate policy initiatives. Each policy initiative creates an agency to implement the initiative. Thus, educators and researchers must jump across the silos of government and social agencies in order to connect their services to school sites.

Mallory also noted a paucity of research on community schools. The mission of NCEA is “to provide leadership” among educators and serve as an advocate for parent and community involvement in public education. However, Mallory remarks that community school reports are filled with statements of the merits of the community school and school-linked services but sparse in supporting empirical evidence. Current data on community schools consists primarily of such self-reports. He strongly recommends the need for gathering more rigorous data from these community school initiatives.

Educational researchers interested in family-community issues may locate promising research sites in almost every locality. For example, 38 states and Washington, DC offer state-funded prekindergarten programs, primarily utilizing community-based settings (Schmuacher, Ewen, Hart, & Lombardi, 2005). These prekindergarten programs offer services that benefit single or two-parent working families. These programs offer full day, all-year care, and connections to social agencies. The U.S. Department of Education website (www.ed.gov, under *Offices*) lists two initiatives that connect schools with the community: The Safe Schools/Healthy Students Initiative and the U. S. Department of Education Mentoring Resource Center. NCEA and Coalition for

Community Schools possess resources and sites for potential study. Programs funded by government grants may serve as exemplars for program development and adoption. Research data could reveal the factors and activities that lead to a program's desired outcomes.

Summary

The issue of control over defining the role of schools should be a shared enterprise among the family, the school, and the community, with the individual child as the center. This shared control is depicted in the popular research model "Overlapping Spheres of Influence" developed by J. Epstein (Simon & Epstein, 2001).

Based upon historical review of parent involvement research and contemporary demographic information about students, families, and school communities, the author recommends four areas for future research in parent involvement. The first two recommendations focus on incorporating family and community involvement knowledge, skills, and values into preservice teacher and administrator licensing programs and studying the effects of aspects of these programs. Although research has supported the benefits of family involvement, the kind and degree of family and community involvement is determined by teachers and administrators at each school site. The teacher and the principal serve as key agents for positive family and community involvement in schools.

The third recommendation encourages studying the effects of family and community involvement in character/civic education on student outcomes. Such research may involve student academic achievement, affective factors, use of drugs, incidents of negative behavior, and school stability. The fourth recommendation encourages research on the effects of tying community organizations, including health and social agencies, with the school. The past century fostered standardization and testing to micro-standards—values of the industrialized society. In a society with instant, multi-modes of communication and increasing global or macro-level thinking, the task of this century should promote development of human skills to improve the quality of human communication. Research should be undertaken that examines the effects of bridging the gaps among human relationships to improve the quality of life. Each of these recommendations should serve to point out areas where family-school-community involvement research would be both timely and fruitful.

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Diana Hiatt-Michael is a professor of education at Pepperdine University and is a researcher and author in the areas of curriculum, instruction, adult learning, and family-school-community partnerships. She is also the editor of the Family-School-Community Partnership Monograph Series, published by Information Age. Correspondence concerning this article may be addressed to Dr. Hiatt-Michael at GSEP, Pepperdine University, 6100 Center Dr., Los Angeles, CA, 90045, or e-mail dmichael@pepperdine.edu.