Family Involvement for Adolescents in a Community Poetry Workshop: Influences of Parent Roles and Life Context Variables

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Abstract

While adolescents benefit from the involvement of caring adults who participate in their schooling experiences, their families' participation in school events decreases incrementally as they progress through their education. There is still much to be understood about how to develop supportive relationships that encourage families to contribute and support students' literacy learning as they progress through school. This article describes how eighth grade students' attitudes and ideas about their families played a strong role in influencing involvement within a poetry program developed and funded as a way to involve families in the school. Using qualitative ethnographic research methods, data collection consisted of classroom and poetry coffeehouse observations and focus group interviews. Findings indicate that two different factors, the students' perceptions of parents' roles in school and the life contexts of the families, affected the way students encouraged family participation for this poetry program. Insights from students in this study provide important considerations regarding parent involvement in a family literacy program. To bridge connections between home and school, it is important to listen carefully to young adults and community members to meet the needs of adolescent students.

Key Words: adolescents, parents, families, family, involvement, literacy, learning, poetry, junior high schools, roles, life, context, students' perceptions, participation, adolescence, influences, community partnerships, collaboration

Introduction

The ringing bell signals the end of second period in the junior high, and after a few minutes, the students walk in to Ms. Martin's eighth grade English classroom from the hallway. As they find their seats, Theo walks into the classroom with his boombox and a folder with copies of music lyrics for the students to read. Theo is a community member from a local nonprofit who is teaching poetry in this classroom. Students and their families attend coffeehouse-style poetry nights in a program designed to encourage family participation in the school. After setting down his equipment, Theo walks around the room, talking about a football game with a few of the boys, asking one girl if her parents were going to the church event coming up that weekend. Theo leans over to Shantee, who had been absent on the day he taught his poetry writing workshop last week.

"We missed you last week," he tells her.

"I had a funeral to go to," Shantee tells him.

"Well, I want you to know that I missed you!" He replies.

Theo hands out some of their poems from last week with notes to the students about their writing. The students take their poetry and begin looking over his comments, rereading what they wrote. While they are looking over their work, Theo greets them and begins talking about the upcoming coffeehouse and anthology.

"Okay, there are two more sessions between now and the coffeehouse. You might need to do some work over the weekend. Who took the time to show your work to a mentor or guardian?" Theo looks a bit disappointed as he surveys the room and finds that only four students raise their hand. "To those of you who admitted that you didn't show your parents, I appreciate the honesty. However, you can't not give your parents an opportunity to write with you and then wonder why they don't get involved."

This vignette occurred during a poetry program in an eighth grade English classroom designed to create connections among families, community members, students, and teachers. While adolescents are developing independence as they move towards adulthood, research demonstrates that family involvement is still important for children at this age (Nurmi, 2004). It is important to note that adolescents benefit from caring adults that participate in their education, yet family involvement decreases incrementally as children move beyond elementary school (Deslandes & Cloutier, 2002). There are two intertwined and, in some ways, competing factors that affect family literacy for adolescent students. First, adolescents' view of literacy reflects their personal and

social development, which is characterized by an increase in independence and autonomy. Secondly, family participation is particularly relevant during the adolescent years, despite the fact the students are becoming more self-reliant.

Adolescents often discourage their families from participating in school events because they have become increasingly peer-oriented, more independent, and their relationships have changed in many ways (Walker, Wilkins, Dallaire, Sandler, & Hoover-Dempsey, 2005). Much of the research on family involvement is presented from the adult's perspective (see, e.g., Auerbach, 2007; Epstein, 1996), and there is very little research that describes how adolescent students perceive and affect their own families' involvement in their own words. In this article, I describe how adolescent students' relationships with their families played a strong role in influencing involvement in a family poetry program.

Related Research

Families have a significant impact on children's development at any age. During the adolescent years, the family plays a strong role in how children define their life goals and interpret their personal experiences (Nurmi, 2004). Mentorship from caring adults can lead to increased student achievement, motivation, and self-esteem while having a positive impact on behavior and attendance in school (Cassity & Harris, 2000; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Thompson, 2003). While most of the literature and current research on family involvement addresses children in the early grades, it is important to consider how families impact student learning when their children reach adolescence. Unfortunately, there is a misperception that as children develop their autonomy, they need less adult guidance and involvement. For instance, Gonzalez-DeHass and Willems (2003) found that family involvement significantly impacts future goals and decisions for high school students.

Studies have demonstrated that adolescents often want their families to be involved, but the school practices and family events must support their self-perceptions and independence (Deslandes & Cloutier, 2002) as well as be accessible and relevant to their needs (Schmidt, 2000). Many adolescent children have increased responsibilities at home and make more decisions about their daily lives; we know that in many cases, adolescents take responsibility and broker relationships between their school and family (McGrew-Zoubi, 1998). Due to their increased autonomy, students can have a strong influence in the relationships between their families and school. Specifically, adolescent students often have more influence in communicating about events and encouraging the participation of their caregivers. As a result, there is still much to be understood about how to develop supportive relationships that encourage

families to contribute and support students' literacy learning at this age (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995, 1997; Walker et al., 2005). Activities that are designed to promote involvement should be developmentally appropriate and different than the activities that were encouraged in elementary school (Deslandes & Cloutier, 2002). In addition, they should address the social component of involvement by creating environments where families feel welcomed (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

Parent participation is affected by many factors, including: educational and financial resources, motivation and beliefs that parents can help their child succeed at school, time constraints, and relationships or policies promoted by the schools (Green, Walker, Hoover-Dempsey, & Sandler, 2007; Swap, 1993; Walker et al., 2005). The ways that involvement is defined reflects the inequities of society, cultural variances, educational experiences, and economic opportunities of families (Green et al., 2007). It has been found that some families define involvement as interactions within the home context, such as discussing educational experiences, goals, or achievements with their children. These behind the scenes supports have been described as "invisible strategies" (Auerbach, 2007) and can be very important for adolescents' social and emotional development as well as the attainment of their future goals (Lareau, 2000; Lareau & Horvat, 1999). For adolescents, support "from the sidelines" can be a significant factor in how students understand and view the world. In Auerbach's study (2007), she described and analyzed some of the ways parents are involved in their children's schooling and found that some of the most significant work may not be perceived by teachers and school administrators. Guidance from adults that occurs outside of school has been found to be a strong determinant of good grades and positive life choices (Falbo, Lein, & Amador, 2001; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Woolley & Grogan-Kaylor, 2006).

Involvement is often further complicated for parents of color who may feel alienated from schools by cultural and racial issues; past experiences may have resulted in feelings of mistrust in educational contexts (Kuperminc, Darnell, & Alvarez-Jimenez, 2008). In a study conducted by Johnson (2003) where she administered a questionnaire to 129 African American parents, she found that more than half of the families felt that racism existed in their child's school district and that 30% reported that their children had experienced racism at school. Johnson (2003) believes that, "In order to improve parents' and guardians' satisfaction with the public school system and to improve relations with them, educators must improve the racial climate in schools. This means that both individualized and institutional forms of racism must be addressed" (p. 18). It is important for schools and families to work together and develop methods for communicating in order to support students (Ingram, Wolfe, &

Liberman, 2007). It often takes an intentional approach for educators to reach out to families who have different cultural or linguistic backgrounds than their own (Colombo, 2006).

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (Green et al., 2007; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995, 1997; Walker et al., 2005) describe three primary sources of motivation for parents to be involved: (1) beliefs about parenting roles and efficacy for supporting children in school; (2) the way that parents perceive invitations for the school from both their children and others; and (3) life context variables such as parents' skills and knowledge as well as the time and energy that they have for involvement. Through conversations and observations with adolescent students, I examined how students perceive these points within a literacy program that was developed to encourage families to participate in various ways at the school. The question my research attempts to answer is: How do adolescent students' attitudes, actions, and feelings affect their families' participation in a poetry program designed to improve family involvement?

The Classroom

This research took place in an eighth grade English classroom in an urban public junior high school, Douglas Johnson Junior High (all names and locations in this article have been changed to pseudonyms), which is located in a major metropolitan city in the Northeastern part of the United States. The school is located in a neighborhood where 97% of the school population qualified for free or reduced lunch. Of the 22 students in the classroom, 17 were African American, 1 was Asian, and 4 were Hispanic; 9 were male, and 13 were female. The teacher was a White woman in her second year of teaching. The poetry program was designed to provide families with a variety of opportunities to become involved in their children's school experiences.

English instruction in this classroom was a balance of skills instruction and service-based projects; Pamela was the classroom teacher, and her collaboration with Theo was one of several projects that linked the students' classroom learning to experiences within the community. Pamela was accountable to testing objectives and curriculum standards, and there was pressure to focus on skills and rote memorization for standardized tests. However, she integrated projects that fostered experiential learning in the community. Students explored racial tensions in the community through interviews, focused on the customs and traditions of family members in reports, wrote autobiographies, and created portraits of community members. The projects focused on understanding community members of different races, learning about the customs and traditions of people in their community, and encouraging students to use their families as resources to develop stories and ideas. One of Pamela's main

initiatives was to improve family involvement because, "That's a negative thing about our school. We don't have enough partners, and we don't have enough people involved."

The Poetry Program and Community Poet

The poetry program began because Pamela was looking for a way to connect students' learning in the classroom to the events, history, and people of the community. She heard about the idea of evening poetry coffeehouses and thought it might motivate students to write and speak while also promoting family involvement. A community based nonprofit organization, Urban Voices in Education (UVE), was involved in designing the poetry program and introduced Pamela to a community poet named Theo. UVE secured grant money from the Ford Foundation to improve parent involvement, and they used the funds to pay Theo a stipend for two years. Pamela arranged to "loop" with her students and teach them for both their seventh and eighth grade years so both she and Theo could continue their involvement with the same students.

Theo, the community poet, was an African American male in his mid-30s who taught poetry to youth in out-of-school settings. He was the director of teen programs at a nonprofit organization called Janet's Kitchen, which was located two blocks from the school. Janet's Kitchen was designed to provide low income and homeless people of the city with support through various programs. Part of his job was to coordinate an afterschool program for teenagers of the community to go to "hang out" and receive homework assistance. Due to Theo's role in the community center, he had relationships with students at Douglas Johnson Middle School, and he knew many of the families from the community. Having an opportunity to work within the classroom provided another connection between his programs and the children at Douglas Johnson Junior High School. His involvement in the school prompted many students to begin attending his afterschool programs.

The poetry writing workshops lasted approximately 45 minutes once a week. Theo designed his lessons based on topics he believed were relevant to the students. He often used songs as a model for the poetry workshops he conducted. In a typical lesson, he would distribute copies of the lyrics, play the songs, and teach a writing lesson that related to the song either thematically or stylistically. His instruction usually lasted about 15 minutes, and then students were encouraged to move to a comfortable place to collaborate together and write poetry. As students wrote and read, Pamela and Theo would circulate through the classroom providing further mentorship and guidance. The workshop concluded with an opportunity for students to read their poetry to the class.

During the school year, three evening poetry coffeehouses were held as part of the program, and on average, ten students attended with six family

members. Within the class, 12 out of the 21 students (six boys and six girls) participated in the evening coffeehouses across the school year. Eight of the 12 participating students invited a guest to come; six students brought family members to the coffeehouses, and two students brought another caring adult or friend to attend. In addition, there were many community members in attendance that either knew about the program through UVE or were friends of teachers and students.

Pamela assumed most of the responsibility for organizing the coffeehouses. She recruited the school art teacher to design flyers in both Spanish and English, and she let students decorate to make the room look more comfortable and inviting. Pamela distributed the flyers, bought snacks with her own money and solicited donations for pizza, and met students early to set up the classroom. Pamela explained, "We were so happy with the parent turnout the first year. In a weird way, it did achieve [parent involvement], but it never increased." Explaining that "studies show that parent involvement helps," she looked forward to encouraging participation in her classroom. However, Pamela knew about the backgrounds of many of the students and recognized that it was unrealistic to expect them to bring their families to the coffeehouses. Understanding that parents experienced barriers to participation, she realized that not all of the families could participate in school events. Transportation, time, and financial resources have been cited as major factors that affect a parent's ability to participate (Cassity & Harris, 2000); Pamela was well aware that these factors impeded the participation of her students' families.

Because the program was funded by a grant to promote family involvement, the teacher, poet, and community leader often discussed and evaluated how many families were coming to the coffeeshops. Theo and Pamela tried to encourage students to get their families involved because they realized that funding for the poetry program might depend on how many adults showed up for the coffeehouses. During one coffeehouse, Pamela wondered aloud if the students were showing the flyers advertising the coffeehouse to their parents. She made an announcement to the people in attendance, questioning whether parents were receiving information about the events: "We never know how much information you have. We don't know who gets flyers and information that we want you to have." Hypothesizing that parents were not coming to the coffeehouses because the students did not distribute the flyers or invitations to the events, Pamela identified the problem of communication between students and their families as being a barrier to coffeehouse attendance.

Both Pamela and Theo deemed the program a success because the students improved their writing over the school year and also they responded well to the opportunities to work with various caring adults who were involved in the

program. Elaine, the grant administrator from UVE, felt differently about the program's success and wanted to see increased numbers of parents come out. Some of the coffeehouses did not have the level of attendance that Elaine was hoping to see; therefore, she began to question her support of the program. It was in this context that I organized student focus groups designed to explore and discuss students' feelings and experiences regarding family involvement in their education, particularly as it related to this program.

Data Collection and Analysis

This research is part of a larger ethnographic study that documented many aspects of the poetry program, including the literacy learning that occurred in this classroom as a result of the partnership between the community poet, the teacher, and the students (Wiseman, 2007). I became familiar with the program during the first year of its implementation and visited the classroom while the students were in seventh grade. However, my role as a researcher documenting this program began during its second year, while the students were in eighth grade. This article focuses specifically on the students' perceptions of their families' involvement and also juxtaposes some of the ideas and beliefs behind the program. My research utilizes a broadly qualitative and descriptive approach (Maxwell, 2005). As a researcher and former teacher, I was both a participant and an observer with this classroom, using ethnographic techniques of participant observation and descriptive analysis to document the poetry program and the classroom interactions (Creswell, 2008). I attended poetry workshops, regular English class sessions, field trips during the school day and after school, poetry events, and I also met participants for interviews and member checks in the community. Interviews were conducted with Theo, Pamela, and Elaine. Data for this article were generated from observations, interviews, out-of-school poetry events, focus groups, and collections of poetry written by students.

I became involved in this poetry program because of my interest in learning opportunities that connected literacy practices of the community with classroom learning. My role evolved from observing and taking notes to working with small groups, assisting students, and discussing their writing and experiences. In addition, I held focus groups with several groups of students to discuss topics related to their experiences within the poetry workshops. My rationale for interviewing students in groups is that they are often more comfortable speaking with their peers, and the interactions among the students enhance the conversations (Kruger & Casey, 2009). From January to May, five students participated in a focus group that met during lunchtime for approximately 45 minutes each session for a total of 4 sessions. The focus group

included two Hispanic boys and three African American girls. These students represented a range of parent involvement and relationships, writing abilities, and experiences outside of school. The students in this group were selected with the help of the community poet and classroom teacher; they felt that this was a group of students that would accurately reflect the experiences of this particular class. In addition, another group of 5 students met with me for one session for a focus group that addressed parent involvement and poetry writing. I used primarily open-ended questions such as, "Tell me about your family participation in the poetry coffeehouses," or "Tell me about the poetry you wrote today," and from there, I moderated the discussion while students discussed their ideas and thoughts (Seidman, 2006). At times, Pamela and Theo suggested discussion topics for the focus groups based on their observations and interactions with the students.

Classroom lessons and individual and group interviews were audiotaped and transcribed for analysis. Themes were established inductively and data were used to generate theory (Glaser & Strauss, 2009). My own identity as a researcher affected my understanding of this classroom. I am a former classroom teacher who has worked and lived in diverse urban and suburban settings. In addition, I am White and middle class and not from this school community. My goal was to create a story of this classroom that represented students' experiences in a way that was sensitive to their knowledge and understanding; therefore, member checks and peer debriefings were a significant aspect of my research and were conducted with students throughout my data collection and analysis. Special attention was given to the experiences and perceptions of the participants. Furthermore, the students in the recurring focus group provided me with validity checks and also read through significant parts of my data analysis to provide verification.

Poetry in the Classroom: Students' Views on Family Involvement

Students expressed varying levels of comfort sharing their poetry and also described different types of relationships with their families. Although most of the students did not hesitate to express their feelings and emotions to the class, some students were resistant to invite their family to a venue where they read poetry from class workshops. Findings of this study demonstrate that students took an important role in determining whether their families should be a part of the poetry program. Two factors that influenced involvement included the students' perceptions of their families' roles in school and the life contexts of the families (Green et al., 2007; Walker et al., 2005). The first finding reflects the students' beliefs about their parents' roles within the school as revealed by

describing and analyzing the different levels of comfort that students had with their families coming. The second finding reflects life context variables and how they affected family participation. In the next section, I will describe how these two different factors affected family participation in this poetry program.

Students' Beliefs About Parents' Roles

Students' relationships with their families, their confidence in their poetry writing, and the topics they wrote about influenced whether they shared their poetry with their families. While several students found that their families' participation was a source of strength and support, some students did not have a relationship with their families that encouraged them to share the personal topics that they wrote about during the poetry workshop.

The students in this classroom who experienced the most involvement in the poetry coffeehouses were comfortable sharing their writing and used their writing as a way to communicate with their families. Sherie and Ashley were two students who enjoyed sharing with their families and had parents participate at the coffeehouses. Sherie's father and grandmother attended two of the three coffeehouses, and she told a focus group that her grandmother and father "worked hard to come to the coffeehouse," and this was both encouraging and important for Sherie. She explained, "It feels good to have support. And they're always saying to do your best at everything. And when you do your best, you've got someone there to encourage you." Sherie was comfortable sharing her life experiences with her family and her classmates. She described poetry as a way to communicate what she was thinking, and it was an important mode of expression and communication for her.

Ashley also told the focus group that she enjoyed having her mom come to the coffeehouses, and she often shared her poetry with her whole family at home. "I do it regularly [share poetry]," she explained to the focus group, "and they kind of give me pointers on how to improve my work. I practice that way." Theo described Ashley as having strong family participation in her education and indicated that the coffeehouses did not change the support she already had, that it just gave her another avenue for communication. Theo explained, "We just gave her an outlet that tapped into something. But the nature of the relationship was already in place. We didn't create that for them." Both Sherie and Ashley wrote poetry regularly and described their writing as a comfortable medium that increased communication. The participation and involvement in the poetry program extended their families' support and guidance.

Taniqua and Terrence described different familial relationships from Sherie and Ashley, and they also had different experiences with their families' participation. They did not tell their parents about the coffeehouses and felt

uncomfortable sharing poetry with their families. During the first year that the poetry workshop was implemented, Taniqua did not read any of her poetry out loud. Describing herself as "shy" and "reserved," she explained to a focus group that she was initially anxious about getting up in front of the class. During her eighth grade year, she gradually became more comfortable sharing her written ideas with peers, but she was still not comfortable reading poetry to her parents. The teacher and I both noted how she began to open up and share her poetry as a result of her increasing confidence and the encouragement of her peers. Despite her increased confidence with classmates, she explained how she worried about making mistakes in front of her mother because, "...what would happen to me when I got home? Would she say something good about me? What if I mess up?"

Participation was affected by the nature of the relationships that students had with their caregivers. Terrence lived with his father and expressed that while his relationship with his father was supportive in certain ways, he felt uncomfortable sharing his feelings with him. Although Terrence expressed an interest in attending the coffeehouses, he explained that he did not attend because he worked in his father's store in the evenings. When I asked Terrence about inviting his father to the coffeehouse, he expressed that he was uncomfortable asking him.

> I keep trying to tell my father [about his poetry], but then I have to tell him that I need to make more changes. I be scared. We close, like about lending some money or something, but I still love my father. But I am more close with my mother than my father.

Terrence's response illuminates one aspect of the program that might discourage students from encouraging their families' attendance. The poetry writing created a space for students to explore serious topics; yet the serious topics caused Terrence to exclude his father, because he could not share his feelings with his father in the way he could share with other students in the class.

Taniqua and Terrence were uncomfortable involving their family in this type of venue because the nature of the parent–child relationship made it difficult to share such personal topics. They both reflected sentiments of other students in this class who tended to rely on support from peers. Specifically, the goal of the poetry program was not consistent with the way these students interacted with their families. For some students, there was a direct relationship between their desire to involve their families, their choice to share their poetry, and their perceptions of the roles of their families; these three factors affected whether they provided information on the evening coffeehouses to their families. In focus groups, the comfort level between child and parent was

the most discussed topic about parent involvement when I asked about factors that led to their family's participation. It was clear that involvement in this type of program was contingent on a relationship where children were comfortable sharing personal topics with their families.

Life Context Variables

Illustrating that family involvement is linked to the "broader inequities that affect students" (Auerbach, 2007, p. 251), some students said that their families did not come to the coffeehouses because their life circumstances prevented their attendance. These students often attended the events on their own, even choosing to bring another friend or caring adult instead of family. Hector, Carlos, and Desiree were students who did not invite their parents because of busy schedules or stress at home. During the school year, none of their family members attended the evening coffeehouses, yet these students attended each of the coffeehouses. In the focus groups, they explained that they had intentionally kept information about the coffeehouse from their families because they perceived their mothers, in particular, as overwhelmed.

Hector shared his poetry with his mother at home, but he was concerned about burdening her already overloaded schedule with extra activities. Therefore, he did not invite her to the evening coffeehouses. During a focus group session, Hector described how he assumed responsibilities in order to alleviate his mom's obligations, such as earning money for his own clothes. Pamela, the classroom teacher, actually confirmed these observations, stating that Hector was quite involved in the raising of his nephew and that he had many responsibilities at home. It was apparent that his mother was involved in his life, and they had a relationship where he shared his writing with her. However, he recognized her hardship as a single mom working to provide for her family. Therefore, Hector took on a protective role; she was not informed of the coffeehouses, and he chose to attend alone or with his girlfriend. He attended all of the scheduled coffeehouses and was enthusiastic about performing his poetry among his peers and reading his poetry to his mother at home.

Hector was not the only student who did not inform his mother about the coffeehouse because he thought she was too busy. Carlos was also hesitant to ask his mother to attend school functions because she worked at nights. When I asked him if he wanted his mother to come to the coffeehouse, he responded that he had not asked her because "…she works nights, and I feel like she is supporting me. She does her job to support us." Carlos did encourage his mother's participation in a project initiated by the classroom in which they created a community mural featuring interviews and painted portraits of people in the neighborhood. She was interviewed, and her portrait was painted on the

side of the school. Carlos was selective in choosing the activities that he encouraged his mother to participate in based on what time of day they occurred and how busy his mom was at the time.

Desiree was another student who did not tell her mother about the coffeehouses or poetry because she thought that her mother was too busy and stressed. In a focus group, Desiree explained,

> It's not the fact that she's lazy. She's stressed out. I know that's the best time to write…And then she's busy, and when she's home, I'm not home. When she does get home, my mother sleeps. There's not time to explain it to her.

Desiree reflects the concern that students have when they see their parents working hard and holding down several jobs. Indicating that it was hard to communicate with her mother because of her mom's busy schedule, she also recognizes her own responsibility for providing her mother with information about school events. Despite the fact that the teacher employed various methods such as phone calls or letters sent via postal mail, Desiree's comments allude to the idea that parents may not receive information about the coffeehouses because their children are making decisions not to extend invitations. Desiree acknowledged that she was a main factor in the contact between her mother and the school.

Hector, Carlos, and Desiree had determined that their parents had too many responsibilities in their daily life to attend the coffeehouses. Certainly, family demands also affect whether a parent could attend a particular school function. These students illustrate how adolescents can act as gatekeepers, and they were deliberate in portraying their mothers in a positive light and in explaining their rationale for not inviting these family members to the coffeehouse.

Expanded Views of Parent Involvement

An important aspect of this poetry program was the collaboration between the community member, teacher, students, and families. Understanding Theo's perspective provided a different way of thinking about how involvement is structured and evaluated in this program. In the coffeehouse and poetry workshop, both Theo and Pamela emphasized the importance of providing support for students and recognized that many factors had to be in place in order for the families to attend the coffeehouse. The parents have to be able to come in the evenings, have the energy to attend the event, and be willing to write and to participate in a school activity. As the school year progressed, it was apparent that this goal could not be achieved for all students. Once Elaine, the administrator of the grant, began to question whether the program was a success,

Theo's response reflected the tension between the adults involved in the project. Theo expressed that Elaine may not be in a position to evaluate because she did not have a similar racial identity and was not part of the school community. In one interview, he explained:

> We are not in the position to educate parents. That's not what we do. If I can get a feel of what a student is going through at home and she can talk about it at school, then that's my victory right there.

He thought that adolescence was an important age to receive support from adults, and the poetry program presented a way that family could become involved. However, since he was involved with students outside of the classroom, he recognized the diverse forms of family involvement from his knowledge of family interactions outside of school. This was the case with Hector, who made a recording with Theo by converting some of his poetry into lyrics and then performing them at a recording studio. Theo knew from his interactions with Hector that his mom was involved even though she did not attend the coffeehouse. He explained how:

> We [Theo and Hector] made that song together in the studio, and then he had me drive him straight home. I asked if he wanted to stop and get something to eat or go hang out, and he said that he wanted to go straight home. He said, "I want my mother to hear this. All I want is for my mom to see that I have talent." So, how offended would he [Hector] be if he knew that some people did not consider his mother as involved?

Theo explained that it was important to consider involvement from the students' perspective. He explained that poetry could be one way to bridge communication between children and important adults in their lives, but that there were other methods of involvement. As the program was evaluated and Elaine realized that the involvement was not improving from a quantitative standpoint, Theo suggested that family involvement be expanded to include adult mentoring, particularly with willing community members who were attending the poetry coffeehouses.

This suggestion of expanding involvement to community members was a logical one because such partnerships already existed as a result of the program. There were several community members in attendance at the coffeehouses due to the collaboration and interest from different organizations. In addition, we also noticed that some students were initiating invitations for the involvement of community members on their own accord. This was evident when students were given invitations to send to an adult to encourage them to come to a coffeehouse, and we saw that several students chose to invite people outside of their family. David, who was not part of my focus group but participated in

the poetry program, was one student who did this; when asked to address invitations, he thought about it for a while and decided to invite Steven, the art teacher's boyfriend. They had met at a coffeehouse the previous year. Upon receiving the invitation from David, Steven actually took time off work to attend, wrote and performed poetry with the class, and explained aspects of his job to an enthused table of boys before and after the poetry was read.

As the poetry program was evaluated for family participation, it became evident that the nature of the poems and the act of writing were not in alignment with how many students and their families interacted. Furthermore, there were indications that both the teacher and community member could evaluate and understand families because they identified themselves with the local community, yet it was clear that there were many unanswered questions about how to improve family participation.

Educational Significance

Successful parent involvement initiatives change the methods of approaching relationships, increase resources for parents, and gather information from parents as to how to develop relationships (Swap, 1993). It is important to recognize the perspectives of adolescents and the role that they take in influencing and inviting their families to the school. In the focus groups, the students brought up two main points that affected whether they included or excluded their families from participating. First, students were most comfortable encouraging some type of involvement, including reading their poetry to their parents at home, if their relationship supported this type of literacy event. Since the poetry was usually quite personal in nature, the students were affected by whether they shared these types of personal responses with their parents in general. For those students who were comfortable, their experiences with poetry and performance as well as their emotional development were often enhanced by bringing in poetry performance into the relationship they already had with family members. For students who did not have that type of relationship with their parents, they prevented their parents from attending the coffeehouses because they were not comfortable sharing such personal topics. For some students, the poetry workshops were the only places where they could safely express their feelings and explore some of the major experiences they were facing in life while receiving support from peers and adults. However, for other students, involving families in a program where they were encouraged to do important identity work provided them with an opportunity for guidance and mentorship that expanded their modes of communication.

Second, and closely related to the first point, when there was alignment between the literacy event and family's ways of interacting, the students were

more comfortable inviting them to the coffeehouses. Some of the students' families wrote and performed with them; this certainly made it easier to be involved. While none of the students admitted that their parents did not feel comfortable writing and performing, this may have affected whether the parents attended the coffeehouse. This could particularly be the case for families learning English or who had negative associations from their own school experiences. And finally, students' perceptions of their parents' stress level sometimes caused them to keep information about the coffeehouses from the parents. Students played a role in brokering invitations and deciding what to let their parents know about based on perceived responsibilities and duties.

Implications

Overall, this study demonstrates how insights from students and community members provide important considerations regarding parent involvement in a family literacy program. In this particular setting, eighth grade students played an important role in brokering the communication and relationship between home and school. Certainly, as Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995, 1997) have found, invitations to become involved in schools are mitigated by parenting roles, perceptions, and intentions of invitations, as well as life context variables. This research demonstrates how adolescent students interpret these factors through their own understandings and then make decisions that affect the relationships between their family and their school.

Definitions and feelings regarding parent involvement illustrated how perceptions can vary based on experiences, identities, and background. There was much to be learned by simply asking, "What constitutes parent involvement?" or "What were your own experiences with parent involvement?" Because the intent of the program was to increase parent involvement, this topic became a focal point and an evaluative measure in the spring semester of this study. In many ways, the participants' views of how their families should be involved represented a touchstone that reflected the multiple ways of thinking about the participants of this study. The attitudes of the participants of this study also reflected the range of research findings. For instance, it has been found that family involvement can have a positive impact on the growth and development of adolescents (Nurmi, 2004) which implicates the importance of family literacy programs such as this poetry program. The positive outcomes associated with family involvement motivated the classroom teacher to develop partnerships and support programs that would encourage families to participate. However, by listening to the voices of students and the community member, we see how family support at home can be a significant aspect of support for students. This finding supports research that documents the importance of

"invisible strategies" that happen outside of the school walls and are often not recognized in school settings (Auerbach, 2007; Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

In order to bridge connections between home and school, it is important to listen carefully to young people to understand the most effective and appropriate ways to provide them with support. As students mature, they can take a stronger role to facilitate or block communication between home and school. Since students affect how their families are involved, our understanding of family literacy programs would improve if we involved more voices in designing programs. These students have insider information about their families' schedules, types of activities they would participate in, and activities that would be conducive to family participation. If school programs were designed more collaboratively between adults and youth, increased student ownership might increase the participation of their families. More research regarding the attitudes and experiences of adolescents and how their families affect their schooling is necessary for understanding how to design programs that have an impact on student and family literacy.

Theo's questioning of the administrator's evaluation, which he felt was limited due to her identification as a White woman from another neighborhood, warrants further exploration. His perspective was that her understanding was limited because she was an "outsider" in many ways. While Theo and Pamela had lots of input into how the program was designed and executed, the grant administrator held quite a bit of power since she was responsible for the budget. The program was collaborative, and Theo provided an important perspective because he was an African American and had relationships with many of the families outside of the school. The perceived difference in control and insider status represented a tension that was affected by cultural identity and power.

In the same vein, the limits of this study are affected by my own identity and how that was perceived in this classroom community. While students articulated during focus groups that there were issues with racism in the schools, they never openly described how issues of racism, attitudes about the schools, or issues with language discrimination might affect their family's participation in this poetry program. This represents a possible limitation of my own role and how it was perceived by the students. Would students discuss issues of race, language, and identity more with someone whom they perceived as part of their community? Or would students have discussed issues of race, language, and identity differently with someone whom they might perceive as more connected to their own culture or background? This program was innovative in that it was built on collaboration among community members, teachers, students, and families. However, my suggestion is to increase collaboration with community members even further so that research is conducted

and analyzed collaboratively. Despite the fact that I conducted member checks, I was still presenting my interpretations to students and community members, and it was clear that there were some complexities and gaps regarding program design and evaluation that were affected by race, class, and cultural identity. Further research to understand collaborative relationships among schools, communities, and families is necessary for better understanding and representation of children and their families in educational research.

While this study illustrates how students' attitudes and experiences affect family participation, more research is needed to learn about family involvement for adolescents. Specifically, exploring this topic from the families' perspective would provide important insight as to why they did or did not participate in the coffeehouses. A more expansive view of involvement might be the key to creating supportive mentoring programs for adolescents. Also, further investigations about the impact of culture and gender on participation in school events would provide important understandings about why some families are involved. As we continue to learn about the factors that support family literacy at the adolescent level, we also need to develop our understanding of how to connect and build on the ways of learning that also have been shown to positively impact students' growth and development. To bridge connections between home and school, it is important to listen carefully to adolescents and community members to expand our thinking and understand what strategies can provide them with support.

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