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Parental Involvement in Urban Schools

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Parent Involvement in Urban Schools

Introduction

Parental involvement continues to decline in urban schools, and engagement is critical to closing educational gaps. This literature review explores the perceptions of elementary school leaders and teachers and, as a result, parent experiences relating to promoting parental involvement in urban school districts. Epstein's Theory of Overlapping Spheres of Influence guides this study. The theory focuses on family, school, and community, with the child at the sphere's core (Epstein, 2011). For this study, research will examine family and school. The research examines the barriers that hinder effective parental involvement in urban communities. It also analyzes the association between parental involvement and principal leadership, the experiences of parents, and how principals and teachers perceive and define parental involvement.

Parent involvement is considered multidimensional and identified as home-based involvement, school based-involvement, and home-school communication (Ogg & Anthony, 2020). Current research argues that parental involvement is the core of a successful student (Newman et al., 2019). Families and schools are the foundation for children to build academic, behavioral, and social-emotional skills (Smith et al., 2021). When strong partnerships do not exist between home and school, children will likely have negative academic, social, and behavioral experiences.

Research Findings

Epstein's theory suggests that educators provide family-like schools, families create school-like homes, and communities encourage school-like opportunities and family-like services (Newman et al., 2019). The lack of one to meet the expectations of the other creates

tension between the school and the parent. Schools can not provide all the support that students need without a strong partnership with parents (Newman et al., 2019). The theory assumes that there is a mutual interest and influence of families and schools that can be promoted by school programs and policies as well as the action and attitudes of the school staff (Epstein, 2011).

Schools and homes are two critical environments that simultaneously impact children.

Partnerships between parents and teachers significantly affect student achievement (Flores & Kyere, 2020). Although they have differences, they also share valuable similarities where each overlap, i.e., goals, responsibilities, and influences that impact the child's learning and development. The maximum overlap of schools and families happens when they operate as true partners with intentionality and frequent and clear communication between parents and teachers. The sphere will always overlap because the family maintains a level of functions and practices independent of the school or teachers, and the school has practices separate from the families.

Further research supports that the greater overlap of family and school, the greater the benefit to student success. Teachers are a direct connection of information to parents. When communication and collaborative activities are limited, the boundaries that divide family and school are reinforced. When there is an increase in communication, teachers build relationships that focus on parents' concerns and students' needs, which positively impacts the child's success. Parents acknowledge teachers who intentionally include the family in the child's education for their efforts (Epstein, 2011). The greater the overlap in the sphere of influence between parents, students, and teachers, the more significant the impact on the child's developmental timeline.

Parental involvement remains a topic of debate within education. In one of former President Obama's speeches at the White House (2009) he stated that the responsibility for children's education must begin at home with parents. Parent involvement and the need to

increase it among low-income and minority parents have become critical to addressing the achievement gap (Marschall & Shah, 2020). Studies of parental involvement practices at home and school consistently produce positive relationships between academic and behavioral outcomes and decrease chronic absenteeism (Newman et al., 2019). The term for parental involvement can vary; some practitioners refer to it as *parent engagement*, *parent involvement*, and *family engagement*. Parent involvement and parent engagement will be used for this literature review. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2023), *parent involvement* in schools is defined as parents and school staff working together to support and improve the development of children.

There are six types of parental involvement: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with the community (VanValkenburgh et al., 2021). Epstein defines parental involvement and recognizes the role of parents in the home, i.e., supporting educational efforts and providing an environment where education is supported. Home and school both play an integral part in the child's development. The partnership between school and home is critical as the parent is the child's first teacher and offers one-on-one academic support; the teacher can offer a one-to-twenty ratio at school. According to Anthonyrai & Sasikala (2019), student achievement in school is not directly related to income or social status. However, the extent that the child's family creates a home environment that encourages learning, expresses high expectations for achievement and becomes involved in their children's education at school and in the community.

Many schools use the six types of parental involvement as a guide to meet the academic achievement goals of students and meet the goals of families and schools. According to (Newman et al. (2019), the six types of parental involvement are defined as:

- Parenting: refers to helping families with child-rearing skills and establishing a home setting that supports children as students at each age and grade level.
- Communicating: refers to communicating with families about student progress through school-to-home and home-to-school communication.
- Volunteering: refers to involving families as volunteers to support students and school programs.
- Learning at home: refers to learning activities at home, including reading to children at home.
- Decision-making: refers to including parents as leaders through school councils and committees.
- Collaborating with the community: refers to community resources that benefit families (Newman et al., 2019, p. 87).

Research suggests that a positive home-school partnership positively impacts child outcomes, such as increased positive performance, social competence, and student motivation (Newman et al., 2019). Schools are finding more ways to support home-school partnerships to provide ways for parents and staff to work together towards the same goals. Sloper, Knussen, Turner, and Cunningham (1991) have identified four levels of parental involvement to connect home and school (Anthonyraj & Sasikala, 2019):

- Transmission of information through written communication and direct and indirect teacher-parent contact.
- Parental participation in fundraising and involvement with parent groups such as PTOs.
- Active parents in the classroom assisting with activities utilized at home

- Parent-professional partnerships in which parents are actively involved in activities in school as well as planning of the curriculum (Anthonyraj & Sasikala, n.d., p. 90).

African American families' low participation in their children's education has become a controversial topic (Cayak, 2021). Schools use several methods to support parent engagement; however, not all strategies are successful (Newman et al., 2019). Several barriers plague parents with students attending urban schools, and parents' perceptions shape their beliefs about their role within their child's school. Some parents believe they have limited skills or knowledge to assist their children with learning, access to activities, limited time, and the perception of the invitations they receive that are designed to encourage their involvement (Newman et al., 2019). Although invitations are designed to encourage involvement, some invitations can be seen as condescending, leaving parents to feel that schools see themselves as superior vs. as collaborative partners. On the other hand, according to Posey-Maddox & Haley-Lock (2020) when positive parent-teacher relationships exist, specific invitations from teachers are more influential on parent involvement. These factors influence a parent's experience and how and if they engage in their child's school.

Research must consider factors likely to impact students when exploring parent involvement within urban schools. Studies have determined that the influence of student race and socioeconomic status impact family engagement. Family involvement is significantly lower for students of color or students receiving free/reduced lunch (Smith et al., 2021). Studies argue that parents in low-income urban communities are more likely to be perceived as uninvolved or disengaged than middle-class parents. Although limited resources impact families from low-income communities, it should not be assumed that this group of parents does not desire to engage with their child's education.

Low rates of parental involvement among low-income, minority families are partially attributed to barriers that come from a lack of cultural similarities or understanding between schools and families (Li et al., 2021). For instance, low-income families report that they do not feel welcome in their child's school, which negative experiences or interactions with school staff might explain. A small amount of research suggests that when parents and teachers share commonalities, such as race and language, there is a greater likelihood that parents will attend school-based events. One of the most critical components of engaging low-income urban families is building relationships and intentionally understanding their experiences and the barriers they face. White educators have been found to hold negative assumptions about the lives of families of color and working-class families (Posey-Maddox & Haley-Lock, 2020). Generalized assumptions and the complexities of parents who face barriers such as a lack of flexible work schedules, consistent childcare, or transportation often cause them to be overlooked and undervalued by teachers and school leadership.

Although schools try to create family engagement initiatives, sometimes their efforts fall short and further highlight the disconnection among families (Li et al., 2021). Lack of cultural awareness on the part of school staff contributes to barriers that minoritized families experience and these experiences discourage parents from participating in school events. Furthermore, school staff might have assumptions about the involvement of low-income parents in children's learning, which may affect how they recognize the culture of urban families involved in their child's education (Li et al., 2021). One study revealed that while a school principal was proud of the parent engagement activities organized, parents felt confused about the purpose and what their role was in the activity. When planning ways to engage families, leadership must

understand the population of students and their families, have clear goals, and be intentional about organizing meaningful interactions.

Li et al., (2021) conducted a study guided by Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological theory of human development, commonly used to guide parent engagement research. The theory defines parent engagement in terms of microsystem interactions, such as those between a child and their immediate environment, such as their family or their school, and mesosystem interactions between two microsystems, such as the family and school (Gross et al., 2022). Ultimately the theory examines the role of culture in the relationship between home and school. *Culture* is defined as the beliefs and practices shared by individuals that are part of their everyday life at home and school (Li et al., 2021). Findings from the study show that when teachers and parents share similar demographic characteristics such as race or gender, they likely share similar experiences that lend themselves to ways to support students' development and address barriers they might encounter in meeting their goals.

Parents of color who have experienced educational inequality related to race might be watchful for teachers' potentially negative expectations of their children's academic ability and monitor or intervene to shield them from racial discrimination (Posey-Maddox & Haley-Lock, 2020). Minority teachers are instrumental in recognizing and addressing cultural differences that manifest in parent attitudes and behaviors that can be misunderstood (Marschall & Shah, 2020). Minority teachers might foster greater trust and a better understanding of culture, which can lead to programs designed to address barriers that hinder parent participation. Understanding culture allows teachers to apply culturally sensitive strategies and cultivate relationships with families, and as a result, families feel authentically understood by their child's teacher.

Inequality relating to educational outcomes for students of color remains substantial and is referred to as this generation's biggest civil rights issue (Marschall & Shah, 2020). For example, the average Black-White achievement gap in reading and math has shrunk by roughly nine percentage points since 1992 (Marschall & Shah, 2020). According to Bogenschneider & Johnson (2018) 1 in 3 parents in this country is disengaged from their child's school. Minority students are behind academically partly because their parents are not or cannot be there for them in the same ways as parents of students who are achieving higher levels (Marschall & Shah, 2020). In order to change poor school performance and close the educational gap, one of the most significant problems that must be addressed is the high levels of disengaged parents. The lack of engaged parents is associated with academic difficulties and low school achievement (Bogenschneider & Johnson, 2018). One of the ways that parents can partner in closing achievement gaps is by ensuring their children attend school, providing reading materials and opportunities to learn outside of school, and limiting excessive television and electronic device screen time (Bogenschneider & Johnson, 2018). Providing learning activities outside of school can challenge working parents regarding time and work schedules.

Women's increasing participation in the workforce and the rising of gender equality are one of the remarkable social-cultural changes that have taken place in the last few decades (Matos, 2018). Dual-Earner families are modern working-class families where both parents are working or that include a single working parent that faces challenges in participating in school-based or extra-curricular activities and events (Marschall & Shah, 2020). Most parents are preoccupied with working to meet financial needs to care for the family and need more time and energy to manage work and family responsibilities. As a result, most parents neglect significant emotional, physical, and psychological needs, which leads to emotional crises (Anthonyraj &

Sasikala, n.d.). These barriers are more prevalent within African American and Latino communities and contribute to lower involvement (Marschall & Shah, 2020). When students experience emotional crises, they are more likely to experience a negative impact on academic achievement.

Teachers and parents recognize principals' roles in promoting family engagement and perceive principals' attitudes, communication, and leadership practices as critical components of effective partnerships between families and schools (Smith et al., 2021). Effective principals are often described as knowing community power structures, maintaining positive relationships with parents, and cultivating conditions to achieve school cohesiveness in instructional programs, goals, and academic standards. Principals can establish a school climate and culture that creates positive parental involvement, and principals must be able to facilitate partnerships between multiple stakeholders at the school level, including school staff, district staff, and, to some extent, school boards (Keetanjaly, 2019). Not only should principals recognize barriers associated with parental involvement, but they must also develop meaningful opportunities for engaging parents. Principals can promote parental engagement in various ways, including setting school policies, communicating clear expectations to school staff, and establishing a school culture for promoting family engagement (Keetanjaly, 2019). They can also sponsor professional development opportunities to support teachers and staff in understanding and overcoming cultural differences and other barriers to parent involvement (Marschall & Shah, 2020). School leadership remains critical in cultivating a positive parent engagement culture.

School principals are critical in engaging parents and supporting children to thrive academically. Epstein and peers (2011) identified principal support toward building positive partnerships with parents as a strong indicator of a school's ability to advance parent outreach

(Flores & Kyere, 2020). Too often, school leaders engage parents in one-way communication vs. two-way, and as a result, schools are seen as hierarchical and holders of power while parents are viewed as lacking abilities. One-way communication with parents is rooted in a deficit way of thinking that dominates parent engagement practices negatively (Flores & Kyere, 2020). Rather than "fixing parents and families," schools need to build the "dual capacity of school staff while developing effective partnerships in support of student achievement" (Kelty & Wakabayashi, 2020). Some leaders assume that parents do not have value in contributing to their child's education or school culture.

Flores & Kyere (2020) conducted a study on principal leadership roles in parent engagement. The study consisted of participants in an urban school located in the Northeast. One principal was a K-8 charter school's CEO, and four were elementary school principals. School leaders range in age from 30s to late 40s. Five had worked in education for over ten years, ranging from 3-7 years in leadership roles. Four of the five principals were black, and the fifth identified as white. Three of the participants from the study were female, and two were males. The five urban schools ranged in the number of students from 260-900, predominantly students of color and low-income (Flores & Kyere, 2020).

The results of the study indicate that principals must prioritize efforts that cultivate genuine and trusting relationships with families (Flores & Kyere, 2020). Principals must be able to self-reflect on their positions as school leaders of an institution designed to provide equitable opportunities for all students. Critical reflection is necessary to interrupt educators' existing negative structural influences in their engagement with racially diverse and lower-income families (Flores & Kyere, 2020). It is also essential that both educators and principals identify the needs of families through nurturing genuine relationships with parents and leveraging those

relationships to develop programs, activities, and services that meet the needs of families. Principals should be aware of the talents and resources that parents bring to the school environment and their needs, which positions parents as collaborators in delivering educational support to children (Flores & Kyere, 2020). In order to empower parents, school leadership can connect families to community resources such as; GED programs, community colleges, or mental health services.

Overall the findings of this study indicate the critical need for school leadership to understand the equity needs of parents and the communities they serve (Flores & Kyere, 2020). Professional development is necessary to support principals in ensuring they have the skills to be creative and innovative in implementing parent engagement activities. School leadership is positioned to impact positive change toward empowering parents and providing a welcoming environment to racially diverse and economically disadvantaged children in urban education. Principals must be equity-oriented leaders who understand the valuable contributions of families and see school-family involvement as a collaborative partnership (Flores & Kyere, 2020). Parents should not be seen as a deficit but rather with a strength perspective and as a resource essential to a transformative school climate.

Too often, parents and educators do not define parent engagement activities in the same ways. Parents might see their engagement as behaviors such as providing assistance with homework, reading to their child, or instilling values of character or expectations of a good education (Gross et al., 2022). Teachers could define *parent engagement* as volunteering in the classroom, chaperoning field trips, and engaging in parent committees or advisory boards (Gross et al., 2022). Failure to truly define parent involvement can lead to low parents' expectations, confused educators, underutilization of school resources, and judgment toward working parents

who do not have the flexibility to attend school events (Gross et al., 2022). For example, if schools view parent attendance at school events as an indicator of parent engagement, it can lead to false conclusions about parents' investment in their child's education. Parent involvement can be defined in various ways and is not a one-size-fits-all, which has limited success and often fails to recognize and respond to the varied circumstances of parents (Posey-Maddox & Haley-Lock, 2020). Educators seeking to create strong relationships with families should start by focusing on parents' access rather than school-centered engagement expectations. This approach empowers teachers and families to intentionally structure engagement opportunities that align with circumstances and meet the child's needs.

The research was conducted on Baltimore City schools to examine how stakeholders define parent engagement in children's learning during pre-kindergarten and kindergarten. Baltimore City Public Schools serves many low-income students and students of color. Close to 65% of Baltimore children reside in single-parent homes, and many students have experienced significant hardships associated with urban poverty (Gross et al., 2022). Studies on parent engagement during early years state that parents play a critical role in creating home environments that support learning and development.

The Baltimore City schools research study used a qualitative descriptive design, which interviewed parents, principals, teachers, and early childhood staff from 16 schools differing in geographic location (Gross et al., 2022). The first of its kind, researchers sought to understand a. How they defined parent engagement and b. What behaviors did they believe were indicative of parents engaged in their child's learning (Gross et al., 2022)? District leadership and community leaders also participated in the study for a total of 63 participants representing six Baltimore City groups; pre-k and kindergarten teachers, principals, other school-based staff, pre-k and

kindergarten teachers, district leaders, and community leaders (Gross et al., 2022). Parents, principals, teachers, and staff each brought a unique perspective to the study.

The study concluded that there needed to be more agreement among participants regarding how to define parent engagement. Responses were centered on parent engagement as a parent responsibility vs. a shared responsibility between home and school (Gross et al., 2022). Researchers for this study also examined how stakeholders view parent engagement. Participants described parent engagement most commonly as home-based activities, school-based activities, parent-teacher/school communication, and parent involvement in decision-making within the school (Gross et al., 2022). Stakeholders differed in what they believed relevant as indicators of parent involvement, highlighting the difficulties of measuring parent engagement. For example, most participants described school-based engagement activities as volunteering in classrooms or field trips as relevant parent engagement indicators. Significantly few parents described attending school events or conferences as being involved. Varied opinions of parent engagement can lead to faulty assumptions about how parents should collaborate in their child's education.

Summary

Epstein's Theory of Overlapping Spheres of Influence is commonly used to study school and district family involvement programs and to understand how well educators and parents interact to support student achievement. Research has shown that when the spheres of family, school, and community overlap, keeping the child at the core, the result is positive student success. When the spheres become disconnected, it results in conflict within the sphere and has adverse outcomes for the child. African American families' low participation in their children's education continues to be controversial. Building genuine relationships is vital to closing cultural barriers. School leadership and teachers must intentionally try to know and understand family

demographics. When educators know their families, they can better engage students with culturally sensitive strategies to promote academic success. Furthermore, principals must establish a school climate that embraces parental involvement purposefully and meaningfully.

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Appendix A

