

“We Have a Lot of Sleeping Parents”: Comparing Inner-City and Suburban High School Teachers’ Experiences with Parent Involvement

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Abstract: *Teachers’ experiences with parent involvement were compared at an inner-city high school and a suburban high school. Parent involvement has been described as underutilized by teachers, due to either ideological barriers or cultural biases against parents of lower socio-economic status. A sample of 62 teachers found no significant group differences between teachers at the two schools for either problematic or collaborative parent involvement. There was a significant difference for beliefs about parent competency. Results may suggest that the ideological barrier of a “protective model” for home/school relations devalues parent involvement for teachers. Parent involvement may be further devalued for inner-city teachers, who hold beliefs that parent competence is reduced by socioeconomic challenges.*

Keywords: *Parent involvement, high school teachers, home/school relations, school social work*

INTRODUCTION

Low achievement and graduation rates for children from impoverished households have represented ongoing failures in American education. Some ethnic groups, including African-American and Hispanic/Latino-American families, have been disproportionately represented in these low rates. For example, in 2000, 12% of African American fourth-graders were proficient readers compared to 40% of Caucasian fourth-graders, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (United States Department of Education, n.d.). In 2001, studies of national graduation rates found only 50.2% of African-American students, and 53.2% of Hispanic/Latino students graduated from high school within four years, as compared to 74.9% of white students (Orfield, Losen, Wald, & Swanson, 2004). Overall, these disparities in achievement and graduation rates for students whose families’ socioeconomic status (SES) have included low income, single parent-headed households and various ethnic and minority groups, have resulted in an educational equality ranking for the United States of 21 out of the 24 industrialized nations (Mathis, 2003).

Policy and practice efforts to reduce these achievement and graduation gaps have been primarily school or student-centered (Dynarski & Gleason, 1998; Lehr, Hansen, Sinclair, & Christenson, 2003). School busing was a preeminent example of a large-scale school and student-centered effort. While family-centered efforts appear to receive less interest and action than school, teacher or student-centered interventions, parent involvement has been found to have both direct and indirect effects on student grades and test scores (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jeynes, 2005; Parcel & Dufur, 2001; Seyfried &

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Chung, 2002) and improved behavioral outcomes for regular attendance and cooperation in the classroom (McNeal, 1999).

As children become older and more autonomous, parent involvement is thought to play a lesser role. However, when adolescent students have been studied, although it is mediated by socioeconomic status, supportive parent involvement continues to have direct and indirect effects on academic achievement and adaptive functioning (Bean, Bush, McKenry, & Wilson, 2003; Hill et al., 2004; Voydanoff, 2004). This influence has been capitalized on by interventions like daily home-school report card systems (Chafouleas, Riley-Tillman, & McDougal, 2002), as well as other reinforcement systems that derive their effectiveness from parent involvement (Embry, 2004).

Numerous organizations, including the American Youth Policy Forum (2003), Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA (2004), National Dropout Prevention Centers (n.d.) and the Southwest Educational Developmental Laboratory (2002), have identified parent involvement as a needed resource for schools. However, parent involvement has been underutilized in United States schools (Gonzalez-DeHass & Willems, 2003). Given the research findings on the importance of parent involvement for student success, and the significant achievement and graduation gaps in the United States, it's important to understand what factors limit its use by schools and teachers. Two explanations have been ideological barriers and cultural biases that devalue the importance of parent involvement for teachers (Swap, 1993; Thompson, Warren & Carter, 2004).

Ideological barriers that support negative teacher attitudes about parent involvement have a historical basis. Swap (1993) suggested that underutilization of parent involvement has been a byproduct of the earliest and most traditional form of home-school relations, the "protective model." In Swap's "protective model," school autonomy was privileged by its cultural mission to create opportunity through education for children to achieve beyond their family backgrounds. In essence, the schools' role was to "protect" its students by fostering upward social mobility. The protective school model represented a school organizational culture that operated to minimize home/school communications and to suppress or eliminate conflict with parents by creating strict boundaries between school and home. Educators were charged with the sole responsibility for educating children, and parents were not to interfere or attempt to usurp teachers' authority.

Examples of Swap's "protective model" continue to be found in studies of elementary, middle school, and high school teachers' communication with parents. These studies found communication between teachers and parents was minimal. Teachers did not receive tangible school support for activities that involved communicating with parents (Baker, 1997; DeCastro-Ambrosetti & Cho, 2005). They had not received significant pre-service or professional training that focused on methods for involving parents (Gonzalez-DeHass & Willems, 2003; Greenwood & Hickman, 1991). Their preferred method involved limited communication to support educators through home activities like monitoring homework completion (Bruneau, Ruttan, & Dunlap, 1995). Teachers rarely saw parents at times other than at biannual parent-teacher conferences (Baker, 1997). In a junior high school study, barriers to parent involvement were defined

as a “communication mismatch” (Halsey, 2005). Teachers preferred institutional communication like newsletters, open houses, public announcements and invitations to school-wide events, while parents preferred individual communications that were personal and direct.

While these studies suggested that teachers’ ideological preferences were for limited communication with parents, some studies suggested that negative attitudes towards parent involvement reflected cultural biases and were primarily directed toward lower SES families. Elementary and secondary school teachers were found to be more likely to blame lower SES parents when students performed poorly and to have lowered expectations towards students from lower SES families (Lightfoot, 2004; Nakagawa, 2000; Thompson et al., 2004). Studies also found that when lower SES students underperformed, secondary school teachers believed it was because parents did not value education. However, when teachers and parents worked together, studies found their combined influence increased academic achievement for lower SES students (Gregory & Weinstein, 2004). The compensatory involvement of teachers when parents were uninformed was not found to predict increased achievement for lower SES students.

In summary, parent involvement has been an important, though underutilized resource, which exerts a positive influence on high school students’ academic and adaptive behaviors. However, high school teachers have not been found to support parents’ involvement. One explanation for this has been that the oldest and still prevalent ideological barrier for collaborative home-school relations is a protective model, where communication with parents has been devalued and discouraged. However, some studies have suggested teachers’ limited support of parent involvement results from cultural biases toward lower SES families. The goal of this exploratory study was to further evaluate these explanations for the underutilization of parent influence. To accomplish this goal, high school teachers’ experiences and beliefs about parent involvement at a suburban high school were compared with the experiences and beliefs of teachers at an inner-city high school.

METHODS

Settings and Study Participants

The participants were high school teachers from an inner-city and a suburban high school in the Midwest. The two schools were chosen because they represented maximum variation in the numbers of their students that graduated in four years and that received free and reduced price lunch. Small samples that represent extremes in a condition allow the researcher to discover commonalities that can intersect across a condition or situation (Hoepfl, 1997). At the time of this study, 59% of the inner-city school student body was Caucasian, while 29% was African-American. At the suburban high school 96% of the student body was Caucasian and 1% was African-American. Graduation rates were reported as 48% for the inner-city high school and 88% for the suburban high school for the 2005/2006 school year (Indiana Department of Education, n.d.).

Free and reduced price lunches were used as a proxy measure of SES because eligibility for this benefit is based on family income (Sirin, 2005). Children whose families have income of 130% or less of the Federal poverty guideline as well as those who receive food stamps or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) are eligible for free lunch. Those whose families have incomes from 131% to 185% of the poverty guideline are eligible for reduced-price lunch. During the study period, 921(67%) of the inner-city school's students received free lunch and 208 (14%) received reduced price lunch. At the suburban high school, 93 (4%) of the students received free lunch, while 57 (3%) received reduced-price lunch (Indiana Department of Education, n.d.).

Ninth through twelfth grade teachers at both schools were surveyed during the 2005-2006 school term, through their school's email service. All teachers at each school had an assigned email address. An invitational email was first sent to teachers announcing the forthcoming survey and requesting their participation. It briefly presented the purpose and benefits of the survey and assured confidentiality to respondents. A follow-up email was mailed a week later. The data collection period was one month. At the conclusion of the survey period, 70 surveys had been returned out of total of 221 teachers at both high schools. Eight surveys were excluded from analysis, as two contained large amounts of missing data, and six were completed by administrators and others. The final samples consisted of 62 teachers, 46 from the suburban high school and 16 teachers from the inner-city high school. The overall the teacher demographics at the suburban high school were reported to be 100% white, while at the inner-city high school, 67.3% were identified as white, 30.77% were identified as black and 1.92 % were identified as Hispanic/Latino. In addition, the teacher samples' years of experience teaching were equivalent to the teachers in general at the two schools (Indiana Department of Education, n.d.).

Measures

A self-administered survey was developed for this study from three previously researched surveys. Items were selected from Meyer's (2004) organizational conflict survey, Schaefer and Edgerton's (1979) Teacher Report of Parent Involvement, Short Form; and Ponterotto, Baluch, Greig, and Rivera's (1998) Teacher Multicultural Attitude Survey. Of the items selected from each of these three scales, both wording and response choices were modified to suit this study's survey. The study survey consisted of 26 items describing teacher experiences with parents. These items included experiences with conflict and experiences with collaboration. They also included teacher beliefs about parent competence and non-traditional parent involvement. Teachers were asked to rate their experiences and beliefs about parent involvement on a 5- point scale from (0) "none of the time" to (4) "all of the time."

A factor analysis was conducted to summarize the survey items for the modified teacher experiences with parents scale using principal components analysis with varimax rotation. A total of three factors were extracted from 19 items explaining 56.9% of the variance (see Table 2). Seven items were excluded because of low factor loadings (i.e., less than .40). The first factor, *experiences parents as problems*, consisted of nine items, which accounted for 37.2% of the variance (Cronbach's alpha=.90). This factor included

items that described abusive, forcing, and avoiding parent behaviors. The second factor, *experiences parents as collaborators*, included six items and accounted for 12.5 % of the variance (Cronbach’s $\alpha=.83$). The items in this factor included collaborative behaviors to help teachers understand their student and solve problems. The final factor, *beliefs about parent competency* (for supporting educational goals), consisted of four items, which accounted for 7.2 % of the variance (Cronbach’s $\alpha=.72$). These items primarily concerned supporting and valuing education at home. The second section included background information such as gender, ethnicity, years of teaching, grades taught and courses taught. Face validity was evaluated during questionnaire construction by having two teachers and two administrators at the suburban high school and one teacher and one school social worker at the inner-city high school review the items.

In addition to the self-administered survey, qualitative interviews with two teachers at the inner-city high school were conducted: two teachers from the suburban school declined to participate. Qualitative interviews were used as a supplemental strategy to aid in the interpretation of quantitative survey data results. Teachers who taught special and alternative education students were selected because they have been suggested to have greater involvement with parents (Lake & Billingsley, 2000). An hour-long, semi-structured interview was conducted using an interview guide of open-ended questions to gather information on school policy concerning parent involvement, teacher involvement practices, and teacher recommendations regarding parent involvement. The questions from the interview guide were developed to explore explanations for the underutilization of parent influence from the literature review of parent involvement in secondary schools.

Data Analysis

Independent samples *t*-tests were performed to compare the teachers’ experiences and beliefs about parent involvement at the two high schools. The face-to-face interviews were transcribed and coded to derive themes and patterns from the individual teacher’s narratives. Coding was done concurrently with the quantitative analysis of survey data using a case study approach (Creswell, 1998). This approach was used to compare and contrast the explanations for parent underutilization from the literature review to the teacher practices from the inner-city school and to search for exceptions and disagreements within these explanations.

FINDINGS

School Comparisons

Of the final sample ($N=62$), the majority of respondents at both schools were female and Caucasian, and had been teaching longer than 10 years. Teaching 9th grade was the most frequently reported teaching assignment of survey respondents from both schools. The group differences on gender, years of teaching, and grade taught were not statistically significant (see Table 1). Group differences for ethnicity were statistically significant. Although about 75% of both schools’ teachers identified themselves as being “white,” 11 respondents from the suburban high school identified themselves as “other,” which included Hispanic-American ethnicity, as compared to one respondent at the inner-

city high school. Additionally, three teachers at the inner-city high school identified African-American ethnicity compared to none of the teachers at the suburban school. Table 1 displays demographic information. It is also noted that while 75% of the suburban school teachers identified themselves as “European-American”, state records for the study period showed that 100% of the teachers were “white”. The discrepancy is believed to have resulted from the use of the term “European-American” in the study survey. The 11 teachers who identified themselves as “other” may have elected not to identify themselves as “European-American” as opposed to “white”.

Table 1. Comparison of High School Teachers Based on Background

	Inner-city school (N=16)	Suburban school (N=46)	Test statistics
Gender (female %)	11 (68.8%)	30 (65.2%)	$x^2 = 0.07$
Ethnicity			$x^2 = 10.54^{**}$
European American	12 (75.0%)	35 (76.1%) ^a	
African American	3 (18.8%)	0 (0.0%)	
Other	1 (06.3%)	11 (23.9%)	
<i>Years of teaching</i>			$x^2 = 3.97$
1 to 3 years	1 (06.3%)	4 (09.3%)	
4 to 6	0 (0.0%)	6 (13.1%)	
7 to 9	3 (18.8%)	7 (16.3%)	
10 or more	12 (75.0%)	26 (60.5%)	
<i>Grade taught</i>			$x^2 = 5.59$
9 th grade	7 (43.8%)	14 (30.4%)	
10 th	2 (12.5%)	7 (15.2%)	
11 th	4 (25.0%)	5 (10.9%)	
12 th	0 (0.0%)	9 (19.6%)	
Other	3 (18.8%)	11 (23.9%)	

**p<.01

^a State records showed 100% of teachers at this school were “white” during the study period. The discrepancy in this response category where 11 of the teachers picked “other” may have occurred because these teachers did not identify themselves as “European-American” but as “white”.

Table 2. Factor Item Comparisons

	Factor Loading	Inner-City High School (N=16) Mean (SD)	Suburban High School (N=46) Mean (SD)	t-test (2-tailed)
Factor 1: Experience parents as problems				
1. Expect to get their way	.75	2.63(0.81)	2.54(0.81)	.729
2. Try to overrule my authority	.80	0.88(0.89)	1.07(0.93)	.478
3. Get angry over misunderstandings and work against me	.69	1.06(1.34)	0.86(0.93)	.520
4. Demand special exceptions	.68	1.88(0.86)	2.00(1.10)	.682
5. Seek revenge when dissatisfied	.73	1.69(1.25)	1.30(1.01)	.224
6. Insult, yell or swear	.70	0.69(0.95)	0.42(0.62)	.309
7. Disrespect my role	.73	1.00(1.16)	0.76(0.77)	.352
8. Avoid problem discussions	.60	1.81(0.91)	1.78(0.66)	.889
9. Hold back useful information	.79	1.38(0.96)	1.67(0.82)	.249
Factor 1 Summary Score		13.0(7.07)	12.33(5.75)	0.38
Factor 2: Experience parents as collaborators				
1. Give positive feedback	.59	1.38(1.20)	1.65(0.82)	.310
2. Help me understand my student	.78	1.69(1.14)	1.72(0.83)	.911
3. Appreciate suggestions about activities	.75	1.75(1.13)	2.11(0.82)	.179
4. Provide information to problem-solve	.68	2.00(0.97)	1.98(0.76)	.924
5. Ready to work together	.54	1.69(1.14)	2.09(0.73)	.203
6. Interested in academic progress	.58	1.69(0.95)	2.04(0.76)	.188
Factor 2 Summary Score		10.19(5.58)	11.54(2.98)	-1.23
Factor 3: Beliefs about parent competency				
1. Support education at home***	.68	1.06(0.57)	1.93(0.75)	.000***
2. Help their children to learn**	.69	1.44(0.81)	2.11(0.71)	.007**
3. Parent concerned about education*	-.54	2.31(1.07)	3.06(0.87)	.020*
4. Availability to help	-.68	1.93(1.03)	2.53(1.01)	.062
Factor 3 Summary Score***		6.63(2.96)	9.50(2.21)	-4.09***
Note: Items were rated on a 5-point scale (0=not at all, 1=just a little, 2=some of the time, 3=much of the time, 4=all of the time).				
*p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001				

Table 2 presents mean scores of items on each factor, as well as factor loadings and t-tests for statistically significant differences. For each factor, a summary score was calculated and compared between the two school locations. No statistically significant

group differences were found for the summary scores from two of the three factors: *experiences parents as problems* and *experiences parents as collaborators*. In addition, no statistically significant differences were found for any of the individual items that made up these two factors.

For the summary score for the factor *beliefs about parent competency*, teachers from the suburban school reported significantly stronger beliefs of parent competency than did teachers at the inner-city high school ($t = -4.09, p < .001$). There were also statistically significant differences between teachers from the two schools in all of the individual items making up this factor, except for the item “availability to help” (see Table 2). The effect sizes for the factor *beliefs about parent competency* and its three statistically significant individual items were between .81 and 1.23, all large effects according to Cohen (1988).

Bivariate correlations between study variables were also examined. Teachers who *experience parents as problems* were less likely to *experience parents as collaborators* ($r = -.42, p = .001$) or to hold the *beliefs about parents competency* ($r = -.56, p = .000$). Also, teachers who *experience parents as collaborators* were more likely to hold the *beliefs about parent competency* ($r = .51, p = .000$). Gender of teachers or years of teaching were not significantly correlated with any of the three summary scores.

Themes from Qualitative Interviews

Themes from the qualitative interviews with two teachers at the inner-city high school are consistent with the findings from the survey. Two primary themes were identified: 1) SES limits parent competence; and 2) parent involvement is complementary rather than collaborative to teachers’ efforts. The most frequently reported theme related to teachers’ negative *beliefs about parent competency*. This aspect of the teachers’ narratives mirrored the research of Thompson et al. (2004), as they attributed a lack of competence to parents who deal with various challenges such as poverty, single-parent headed households, and little formalized education. The interviewed teachers described these parents as lacking motivation and energy for supporting basic educational goals like supervising school attendance and homework completion. They also reported these parents as either difficult to contact or unavailable due to lack of interest or resources. Verbatim examples included:

Very few of the teachers will assign homework and without giving time in the class to finish it. Most feel if they take their homework home it will not be done. Not a lot of parents are encouraging their kids to do their homework. You have to realize the population of our kids, many of our parents are single parents. Many are working, one, two jobs, or they have a live-in boyfriend, or girlfriend, that kind of thing.

We have a lot of sleeping parents. Or they say, “we’re coming,” and then you call, and they are in the shower. Or they’ve gone to their Granny’s or something that’s so important that they couldn’t come to the conference.

Teachers also stated parents were helpful when they complemented teachers’ efforts through their actions at home to support work completion, regular attendance and adaptive classroom behavior. Verbatim examples included:

At the high school level, I don’t know that teachers need any more parental involvement other than more parental involvement at home. I guess the high school level teachers would just appreciate the support at home for what they do; making sure the work gets done, making sure they have a phone number that they can reach a parent if there is a problem at school.

Well, the only involvement I have with parents is getting their support to make sure that their kids’ lessons were done and that they get here...their attendance.

A minor theme concerned school competence. Teachers stated that parents have greater difficulty contacting them at the inner-city school, as compared to a suburban school. Related to school competence, teachers also shared a belief that parents at the inner-city school consider the quality of education their children receive to be inferior to that of a suburban high school. Verbatim examples included:

In the suburban high school classrooms, I know teachers do have voice mails [unlike the inner-city classroom], so if I wanted to contact a teacher, I could call and leave a message. Teachers at suburban high schools are far more accessible, if parents do want to have some type of contact with them.

It’s what it is, [an inner-city high school]. They tell their kids that “if we were in the suburbs, you would get a better education. You’d have a better ability to learn. It’s a utopia over there (suburban school system).”

DISCUSSION

This exploratory study compared teachers’ experiences and beliefs about parent involvement at an inner-city high school and at a suburban high school location. High schools were chosen because parent involvement has been thought to be of less importance during this time in a student’s academic career, however, numerous studies have found that it continues to be significantly related to academic achievement and positive adaptive functioning. In the case of lower SES high school students, Gregory and Weinstein (2004) found that teacher and parent collaboration predicted increased achievement.

The two schools chosen for this study represented maximum variation in their percentages of student graduation rates and student eligibility for free and reduced-price lunch. Significant differences in teacher experiences and beliefs would have suggested school location affects the use of parent involvement. However, there were no significant differences between the two school locations for either problematic or collaborative teacher experiences with parent involvement. In other words, although some school cultures may operate to “blame” parents rather than to foster collaborative partnerships, as described by Thompson et al. (2004), in this study, teachers at a suburban and an inner-city school did not display significant differences in their experiences with parent involvement that were either helpful or obstructive. The lack of significant differences in

teacher experiences between the two school locations could suggest that overall, the high school teachers in this study may not see parents as having a role to play at this stage of a student's academic career, regardless of factors like a parent's socioeconomic status. While we did not directly measure the variable of a "protective model" this finding does suggest that home-school communication is limited and as such, adheres to the structure of "protective model" of home-school relations.

However, there were significant differences between the two schools' teachers in their beliefs about parent competency. Qualitative interviews with inner-city teachers offered additional information. Teachers believed a lack of parent competency was a consequence of socioeconomic factors including poverty, single-parent headed households, low parent support for education, parents' lack of education and lack of resources. Additionally, teacher interviews suggested some inner-city parents did not experience the inner-city high school to be as competent as are suburban high schools for providing a good education. Even so, these concerns about school competency were not described to be a contributing factor to the level of parent involvement. If a protective ideological model is in operation for teachers whose work settings are inner-city schools, negative experiences and beliefs about parent competency, as depicted in a teacher's observation, "*We have a lot of sleeping parents,*" can be seen as a further cultural barrier for teacher encouragement of parent involvement.

These findings can have implications for modifying levels of parent involvement to address problems of achievement and graduation gaps. Interviews with inner-city high school teachers suggested several school-based efforts to encourage greater parent involvement, such as offering child-care to improve parents' attendance and participation, providing more invitational family programs, offering parent management training programs, and providing teacher voicemail. However, because in the current study parent involvement is not presumed to play an important role for high school teachers regardless of location, it is unclear who would provide leadership for such efforts within the school. In practice, when students are academically underperforming or adapting poorly at school, the support staff (deans, guidance counselors, psychologists and social workers) intervenes and may operate to increase linkages that enable collaborative parent involvement. When considering leadership necessary to increase collaboration between home and school, these staff members have been identified as a resource whose capacity is currently underutilized. One model that increases the capacity of school student support services has been proposed and supported by The Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA (2002).

Their model highlights the three key components for successful systemic change: (1) teachers, (2) school managers/administrators, and (3) student support services staff. The model advocates for each component to have an equal voice in policy and practice-decision making. Without an equal voice, the capacity of student support service staff to provide comprehensive and collaborative home-school linkages is limited by their marginalized budgetary and policy decision-making roles within school systems.

This study had several limitations. Although maximum variation was used to increase the generalizability of this study's findings, there were several other limitations for

generalizability. This study did not randomly select schools or their teachers for inclusion. Additionally, survey response rates were low: 40% response rate for suburban high school and 15% response rate for inner-city school. These low response rates may not have captured the total spectrum of teachers. The especially lower response rate from the inner-city school teachers might have been affected by an external factor. During the survey period, teachers at the inner-city school were facing staff cut-backs as a consequence of declining enrollment. This may have reduced teacher interest and motivation for completing surveys. Although qualitative interviews provided additional information, the external circumstances in school may be an important factor affecting their response rates or even their attitudes toward this issue.

Finally, the survey instrument was developed based on previous studies and may not capture other important information to measure teacher experiences and beliefs about parent involvement. We did not ask for other important factors that may influence their attitudes and beliefs such as frequency of parent contact, nature of contact, or method of contact.

A further limitation was this study's use of free and reduced-price lunch as a proxy measure of SES. Sirin (2005) notes “ecological fallacy” may result when between-school aggregated measures that proxy SES are used to interpret within-school differences. Therefore, follow-up study that also collects individual SES information from parents would be recommended. Additionally, a follow-up study could benefit by including parent perceptions about involvement. This survey only represented teachers' perception. In order to have a more accurate picture of parent-teacher relations, it would be important to examine parents' perceptions and experience with teachers regarding parent involvement.

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