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Teaching practices and strategies to involve inner-city parents at home and in the school

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ABSTRACT

Few studies have observed what teachers actually do in the classroom to encourage parental involvement in their children's education. Over the school year, the various teaching practices and strategies of two teachers in an inner-city elementary school that has had public recognition in its efforts to involve parents were gathered through interviews and observations. The five main teaching practices and strategies to engage parents are practicing parent outreach, establishing relationships with the parents, creating a positive classroom climate, teaching to involve parents, and making the community–school connection. This study offers insights into teachers' classroom practices that are connected to various specific strategies to involve parents.

Parents' involvement in their children's education has been suggested as a way of increasing school effectiveness worldwide. In the U.S.A., parental involvement improves children's academic achievement (Epstein, 1991; Hill & Craft, 2003; Miedel & Reynolds, 1999; Stevenson & Baker, 1987) and reduces disruptive behaviors (Domina, 2005; Sheldon & Epstein, 2002). In the United Kingdom, parental involvement at home and in school is among the factors thought to improve children's affective and academic performance (Muijs, Harris, Chapman, Stoll, & Russ, 2004; Reynolds, Muijs, & Treharne, 2003). Research conducted in the 1980s and 1990s searching for variables related to differences in parental involvement focused on deficiencies of parents (Edwards & Warin, 1999). Single parents are less likely to assist their children at home (Fantuzzo, Tighe, & Childs, 2000) and at school (Grolnick, Benjet, Kurowski, & Apostoleris, 1997; Kohl, Lengua, & McMahon, 2000). Parents with low socioeconomic status (SES) are also less likely to assist their children with their studies at home (Domina, 2005; Lareau, 1987) and at school (Domina, 2005; Grolnick et al., 1997; Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Brissie, 1987; Lareau, 1987). However, in the 21st century, influenced by Epstein's research of the 1980s and 1990s, many studies in the U.S. (e.g., Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Kim, 2009), U.K. (e. g., Edwards & Warin, 1999; Tett, 2001), and Canada (e. g., Deslandes & Bertrand, 2005; Li, 2003, 2006) have begun to critically examine previous work and to move the focus from deficiencies of parents to increasing parental involvement through school leadership.

Although parental characteristics may prevent parents from participating in their children's education at home and at school, the practices of teachers and schools to involve these parents also influence their level of involvement (Barton, Drake, Perez, Louis, & George, 2004; Desimone, Finn-Stevenson, & Henrich, 2000; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 1987, 2005; Seitsinger, Felner, Brand, & Burns, 2008; Sheldon & Epstein, 2002; Walker, Wilkins, Dallaire, Sandler, & Hoover-Dempsey, 2005). In particular, parents' perception of teachers' specific invitations to become involved better predicts parents' involvement behaviors than schools' general invitations can (Walker et al., 2005). Parental participation in school, including participation by minority parents, increases when teachers demonstrate more receptive and supportive attitudes toward parental participation at school and actually reach out to parents to bring them into the school (Desimone et al., 2000; Deslandes & Bertrand, 2005; Epstein, 1984, 1986; Kohl et al., 2000). Studies have also shown that parents are more involved at home when they perceive teachers' efforts to reach out to them (Grolnick et al., 1997; Kohl et al., 2000; Watkins, 1997).

Although the importance of teachers' leadership in initiating minority parental involvement has been studied, the characteristics of teachers who make such efforts have received little attention.

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While the most studied characteristics of teachers are their attitudes toward and perceptions of parents as well as the importance of parental involvement, the variance in their general teaching practices has been studied less frequently (Kim, 2009). Garcia (2004) stated that teachers who are efficacious in their parental involvement practices also perceive themselves as being efficacious in their teaching practices. What remains unknown are the kinds of general teaching practices that teachers who engage in specific parental involvement activities, such as sending notes home, asking for volunteers, holding conferences, or assigning homework, show in the classroom. It has been reported that teachers who try to involve parents in their children's education use culturally relevant teaching materials in their instruction (Moosa, Karabenick, & Adams, 2001) and adopt more child-centered teaching approaches (Corter & Pelletier, 1995).

Because parental involvement in their children's education is a product of the interrelationship between individual barriers and school barriers (Barton et al., 2004; Epstein, 1987; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Kerbow & Bernhardt, 1993; Peña, 2000), it is necessary to improve teachers' practices as well as identify parental obstacles to involvement in their children's education. However, it may be more effective to focus on improving teacher practices rather than on parental variables because schools have more resources than parents in terms of educated teachers, established in-service programs, and funding for programs (Moles, 1993). Improving school practices to encourage active parental participation may be less of a challenge than improving the demographic status of low-SES and single parents would be (Pryor, 2001).

A recent literature review on school improvement reported that, "Achieving parental involvement is one the most difficult areas of school improvement in economically disadvantaged areas" (Muijs et al., 2004, p. 164). One of the reasons for the difficulty may be related to the lack of pre- (Becker & Epstein, 1982; Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Graue & Brown, 2003) and in-service education (Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Jones, & Reed, 2002) for teachers on ways to initiate and practice parental involvement in the classroom. As a result, many teachers have reported a lack of relevant knowledge and have experienced uncertainty regarding ways to encourage parent involvement (Dauber & Epstein, 1993; Epstein, 1991; Henderson, 1987; Krasnow, 1990; Lightfoot, 1978; Department of Education, 1994).

Therefore, research that documents a detailed account of successful teachers' general teaching practices and specific strategies regarding how they develop connections with parents and encourage parental involvement can be beneficial for teachers who would like to replicate and adapt some of these teaching practices and strategies themselves. Teachers' efforts to initiate and support parental involvement are even more critical in poor communities because disadvantaged parents are eager to receive help from their children's educators (Moles, 1993) and view teachers as a vital source of information regarding what their children are learning at school (Moles, 1993).

This study explores how two teachers in an inner-city elementary school that has received public recognition for its educational efforts successfully involved African American parents in the academic efforts of their children. Special attention is given to the teachers' general teaching practices that can be linked to their specific parental involvement strategies. Few studies have observed and explored what teachers actually do in the classroom to encourage parental involvement in their children's education (Seitsinger et al., 2008). Most studies have used questionnaires to capture teachers' relevant actions, whereas few studies have observed and interviewed teachers to learn about their parental involvement practices in the classroom.

Furthermore, minority parents' reports of teachers' parental involvement practices have not presented positive images of the teachers (e.g., DeMoss & Vaughn, 2000; Drummond & Stipek, 2004; Smrekar & Cohen-Vogel, 2001; Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006; Tett, 2001). Therefore, this study capturing teachers' efforts toward initiating parental involvement may contribute to the body of research on the relationship among teachers' initiation of parent involvement practices, their general teaching practices, and subsequent parental involvement by adding descriptive data from a field study as well as presenting positive images of teachers. The Pygmalion effect (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1992) may take effect when parents view teachers as contributing agents rather than insensitive authorities. With an expectation of positive results, more teachers may join in the effort to improve their practices to involve parents in their children's education.

1. Definition of parental involvement and theoretical perspectives

There has been no consensus on a definition of parental involvement (Seitsinger et al., 2008), possibly because the definition depends on who is asked to provide it. It has been reported that parents and teachers have distinct views on the meaning of parental involvement. Teachers in high-performing Hispanic schools defined parental involvement as parents' participation in formal school activities, such as school events, meetings, workshops, governance activities, and working as teachers' aides, tutors, and school advocates. However, parents in the same study considered parental involvement to mean their participation in informal activities at home, such as checking homework assignments, reading to their children, listening to their children read, getting tutorial help, providing nurturance, instilling cultural values, talking with their children, and sending them to school fed, clean, and rested. Both teachers and parents may thus have limited views on what constitutes parental involvement (Scribner, Young, & Pedroza, 1999).

Even though this study was performed from the perspective of teachers who appear to have a limited definition of parental involvement, this study used the definition of parental involvement conceptualized by Epstein (1995) to compensate the limited views. Epstein defined parental involvement as having six components: participating in parenting (Type 1); communicating with teachers and schools (Type 2); volunteering at school (Type 3); helping children learn at home (Type 4); participating in decision making at school (Type 5); and collaborating with the community (Type 6). In the same article, she proposed ways for teachers to help parents participate in each type of involvement. The effectiveness of each type of parental involvement has been supported by various studies that have connected it to students' academic, emotional, and behavioral outcomes.

Epstein (1995) defined parents' participation in parenting (Type 1) as their establishment of a home environment that supports their children as students. Teachers can help parents to establish this type of parental involvement by providing workshops on parenting and child rearing; organizing training for parents, such as GED preparation, opportunities for college credit, and family literacy training; assisting in locating family support programs that improve health and nutrition; and doing home visits. Researchers have reported that parents who are involved in this type of parental involvement have children with better gains on reading and math standardized tests (Norwood, Atkinson, Tellez, & Saldana, 1997) and fewer disruptive behaviors (Sheldon & Epstein, 2002) than children whose parents are not involved.

Communicating with teachers and schools (Type 2) can be defined as having effective forms of school-to-home and home-to-school communication about school programs and children's