



Making Success in Education: What Black Parents Believe About Participation in their Children's Education

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This article examines the role of parent involvement—its meaning and effects—among a determined group of African American parents. We focus on some of the characteristics of involvement of a subset of African American parents in a larger program designed to enhance the math and science course selection of middle and high school students. As one of several factors related to school success, our findings confirm the centrality of parent participation and its implications among members of a historically marginalized group.

Keywords: African American, parent involvement, educational equity

The academic performance of African American¹ students in K-12 schooling has rightly received broad attention in both the research community and public policy circles because of the tremendous negative effects low educational achievement has on the scope and quality of future opportunities. We enter this broad discussion through a narrow examination of the role of parent involvement—its meaning and effects.²

More important, we describe the agency of a set of African American parents who defy mainstream stereotypes of passivity and inactiveness. We argue that the actions of such parents provide a more complete picture of the range of parent involvement of minorities, and that education and social policy and practice are the better for considering such outcomes. Even if our evidence and arguments are tempered by the limited sample size in this study, these parents are not anomalies. In fact, the assertive agency of these parents is consistent with research and policy debates regarding the level and quality of African American parent participation in education. Our findings reflect the need to rethink how African American parents experience and manage barriers that they will certainly face due to racial

and social class status, and perhaps consider the legacy of the relatively weaker connections historically between African American parents and the educational system.

Education focused research shows that parent participation is one of several factors that contribute to the academic success of African American public school students (Epstein, 1995, 2001; Gutman & McLoyd, 2000). Other factors include school dynamics, family and community structures, social class, gender, race and ethnicity (Barbarin, McCandies, Coleman, & Hill, 2005; Diamond & Gomez, 2004; Epstein, 2001; Mickelson, 2003b; Ogbu, 2008). As such, our focus on parent involvement is not intended to imply that it is the most important factor in African American children's success in school. However, our findings confirm the centrality of parent participation among members of a historically marginalized group (Barton, Drake, Gustavo, St. Louis, & Magnia, 2004; Kim, 2002; Jeynes, 2005; Waggoner & Griffith, 1998).

This article focuses on some of the characteristics of involvement of a subset of African American parents in a program designed to enhance the math and science course

selection of middle and high school students. Called the Math/Science Equity Program (MSEP), we developed and implemented a university-community partnership that offered knowledge- and skills-based workshops to African American parents of students in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (Mickelson, Cousins, Velasco, & Williams, 2011). MSEP's specific purpose was to empower greater parental involvement in children's education through enhancing and supplementing the knowledge, skills, and strategies parents can employ to more successfully manage children's educational careers in public schools.

The subset of parents from which we draw our data were part of a "follow-up" component for MSEP graduates. Drawing upon qualitative data we collected, in this article we describe several dynamic characteristics of involvement that were common across parents of middle and high school children in select schools in Charlotte, NC. These data focus on beliefs about parent involvement, how parents act on their beliefs, the barriers they face or perceive regarding involvement in their children's education, and how they manage these barriers in order to promote their children's education. Although our small sample limits how far we may generalize our results, our findings reinforce the current body of knowledge concerning parent involvement. In sum, we found that these parents "make success" in their children's schooling by asserting themselves in persistent, constructive, and creative ways to ensure educational success no matter the obstacles.

Findings from our study are consistent with prior research on African American parental involvement. We find that middle class African American parents are as engaged in their child's schooling as comparable white parents when they have access to school officials, information about their child's curriculum, and when they feel invited to engage in their child's school and capable of doing so. Access, curriculum information, and comfort in school relations were three of several dimensions the project we describe in this article focused on in its workshops for African American parents.

Additional findings undergird the central findings above and include the following: African American parents perceive a need to be actively involved in their child's schooling; they anticipate barriers, but try, nonetheless, to be involved and work to overcome them; and the barriers they do perceive are in terms of relations with schools in which they do not feel invited or heard, and in terms of their own limited resources such as time available to assist their child and support from spouses/ partners.

Our findings also support previous research on "ecologies of parental engagement" which describes how parents "engage in a very personal way in their children's education by authoring personal spaces" (Barton et al., 2004, p. 11). Our findings are consistent with a growing body of evidence that challenges accepted stereotypes of African American parents as disinterested and uninvolved in their children's education. Finally, our findings identify

characteristics that social and educational programs need to nurture and cultivate in parents who are not adequately involved in their child's education.

The article proceeds by framing this study within the parent involvement literature. This will be followed by a description of the MSEP; a description of the methodology for the component of the MSEP study from which data for this article were drawn beginning with a brief description of the historical and contemporary context of education in Charlotte, NC.; and by presenting findings from 14 completed follow-up interviews. The final section will discuss the implications of our findings and directions for future research.

Parent Involvement

The necessity and importance of parent involvement in the educational outcomes of children has been debated in both historical and contemporary terms (Anguiano, 2004; Heystek, 2003; Hiatt-Michael, 2001; Jeynes, 2003). Yet, there is little doubt about the positive influence of parent involvement on children's educational outcomes and the overall effectiveness of schools (Huang & Mason, 2008; O'Bryan et al., 2006; Redding, Langdon, Myer & Sheley, 2004). However, just how parents should be involved or what in particular parents should do to influence their children's education are central issues in the debates (Barbarin et al., 2005; Barton et al., 2004; Yap & Enoki, 2001). Specifically, what remains unclear is how parents' perceptions and beliefs about education and their own human agency or station in life influence their participation in their children's education at home or in school.

Previous research has identified key aspects of parent participation in schooling, including beliefs and perceptions that are pertinent to our study. Parents tend to get involved more when they feel welcomed and their traditions and contributions are respected (Brandon, 2007; Mapp, 2003; McKay, Atkins, Hawkins, Brown, & Lynn, 2003), but they are discouraged from involvement when they feel inadequate or feel they do not understand how schools work (Brandon, 2007; Johnson, 2001; Lawson, 2003). Institutional responses count, as well. For example, school personnel's responses to parents' attempt to become involved may encourage or discourage them. Lareau and Horvat (1999) refer to this phenomenon as moments of inclusion and moments of exclusion.

Various demographic factors predict parental involvement. Parents are more involved if their children are girls as compared to boys; with fathers generally less involved than mothers (Nord, Brimhall & West, 1997; Sui-Chi & Willms, 1996).

Mothers in single parent households are slightly more involved in their children's education than fathers (Nord, Brimhall, & West 1997; Sui-Chi & Willms, 1996; Suizzo, Robinson, & Pahlke, 2008). Parents' socioeconomic status and racial and ethnic identity—separately or combined—influence their magnitude and

type of involvement (Diamond & Gomez, 2004; Gutman & McLoyd, 2000; Hanafin & Lynch, 2002; Kim, 2002).

Magnitude of involvement is influenced by parents' ability to form beneficial partnerships with teachers and other school officials (Epstein, 2001; Lawson, 2003; Waggoner & Griffith, 1998). However, the ability to form such partnerships is shaped by parents' social and cultural capital, which are in turn influenced by their social class status (Barton et al., 2004; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Lareau, 2003), and the overall health of parent-school-community relations in a given school (Epstein, 2001; Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, & Hernandez, 2003). African American parents often face barriers to involvement because of overt racism among school staff, prior negative contact with school staff, isolation, and the lack of activity networks (Barton et al., 2004; Brandon, 2007; McKay et al., 2003).

Generally, there is little disagreement about the importance of parent involvement in a child's education, but there is disagreement over the level and quality of African American parent involvement compared to the involvement of non-African American parents—largely White parents (Brandon, 2007; Huang & Mason, 2008; Jaynes, 2005; McKay et al., 2003; O'Bryan, Braddock, & Dawkins, 2006). The research is not clear as to whether African American parents are less involved or if their involvement is merely different from the white, middle-class norms.

One key factor that may contribute to the lack of clarity in this body of research is the weaker connections between African American parents and the educational system. Not unlike White parents, some African American parent involvement tends to be influenced by affiliation or relationships with school staff, a sense of power to influence their children's learning, and by the belief that educational success can provide opportunities and personal success for their children (Huang & Mason, 2008; Tyler, Boykin, Miller & Hurley, 2006). Indeed, connections for African American parents are compromised when they encounter "personal, cultural, and structural barriers that may cause them to be isolated or alienated from the school system" (Brandon, 2007, p. 116; see also Huang & Mason, 2008). Finally, educators who do not respect parenting styles that differ significantly from those practiced by middle-class White parents may communicate their disapproval and alienate parents (Ferguson, 2001; Lareau, 1987, 2003; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Thompson, 2003; Tyler et al., 2006).

In sum, for both African American and non-African American parents, involvement in education is never straightforward—especially with respect to the thorny issues of race. We agree with Barton et al. (2004) that the important hows and whys should be added to the question of what parents do to engage in their children's education. Understanding how and why African American and other parents are involved, and examining what they do

during their involvement, especially in the face of barriers to their participation, can dramatically improve our understanding of parent involvement and increase the effectiveness of schools and educational programs.

The Math Science Equity Program

MSEP Project Background

Between 2002 and 2005, a university-community partnership called the Math/Science Equity Program (MSEP) was implemented to increase African American parental involvement in high school math and science course selections in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (Cousins et al., 2008; Mickelson et al., 2011). Based at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte and funded by a grant from the National Science Foundation, MSEP's goal was to increase the enrollment of African American students in higher-level math and science courses and, by doing so, contribute to reducing the race gap in academic achievement and attainment. MSEP was designed and implemented as a series of community-based parent enrichment workshops. These workshops developed parents' knowledge, skills, strategies, and social networks and created capacities for future collaborations among parents. The findings we report in this article come from follow-up interviews with parents who graduated from our Math/Science Equity Program workshops.

The Math/Science Equity Program's Workshops

The heart of our university-community collaboration was the Math/Science Equity Program's HOME (Helping Ourselves Mold Education) Workshops. MSEP's approach centered on parental empowerment workshops where participants received information about the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School system's high school math and science course sequences and the sequence's relationship to postsecondary education and professional careers.

HOME workshops' content and processes were developed in conjunction with multiple community groups, educators, and parents. Throughout the design and implementation process, the researcher-activist team from UNCC worked intimately with a Community Advisory Council (CAC) on the goals, content, scope, curricula, recruitment, and evaluation components of the project. For example, at the suggestion of our CAC we developed the acronym HOME (Helping Ourselves Mold Education) as a user-friendly name for MSEP's parent workshops, the first phase of our project. We used the phrase "HOME workshops" in our interactions with community groups rather than the Math/Science Equity Program, because the latter seems too officious.³

The MSEP team presented the complete set of HOME workshops in a six-week format. Weekly sessions were roughly two and one-half hours in length. Workshops were considered "enrichment sessions" that built upon extant parental knowledge and skills. Parents who attended learned about their educational rights under the North Carolina constitution. They engaged in hands-on math and science activities and participated in role-playing designed

to equip them for effectively managing their children's educational careers. Community organizations such as the public libraries, parks and recreation department, several churches, and a number of non-profit organizations collaborated with MSEP by providing space, publicity, personnel, and expertise.

What began as childcare and educational enrichment activities for participants' children became a parallel children's math and science program once the children started to request an opportunity to do the same kinds of "fun" hands-on math and science that their parents were doing. The children's program became so popular, a number of parents attended the enrichment sessions merely because their children wanted to attend the children's program!

Workshop sites varied in order to maximize convenience for parents. They include the UNC Charlotte campus, community recreation centers, public schools, public libraries, and local churches. All parent participants and their children shared a meal with the MSEP team during HOME workshops. We provided transportation on an as-needed basis. We established a website at <http://www.msep.uncc.edu> and developed a project newsletter, "Letters From HOME," that we mailed out every two months. Several parent graduates of the workshops worked in conjunction with MSEP staff to develop an autonomous parent organization to succeed the workshops as a source of ongoing leadership training, networking, and information.

MSEP was designed as a quasi-experiment. Therefore, we selected three high schools and their feeder middle schools to receive MSEP workshops. We then matched these treatment high schools with three others that served as our control sites. Only parents of students who attended our treatment schools were eligible to participate in workshops. We expected parents who attended workshops would become more involved in their children's course selection, more of their children would enroll in high-level math and science courses, and the increases in high-level math and science enrollments among African American students attending our treatment schools would exceed increases in enrollments in our control schools.

Our team of researcher-activists collaborated with several community organizations including the public schools, libraries, parks and recreation department, several churches, and a number of non-profit organizations in the development and implementation of our program. MSEP workshops provided parents with hands-on experiences with science (biology, chemistry, physics) and mathematics (geometry and algebra). The interactive curricula involved parents in math and science course sequences, selection activities; information about curricular tracking, parental educational rights, social networking, and strategies for effectively engaging teachers, administrators, and adolescent children in the math and science course selection process.

Impact of MSEP on Parents

Moreover, the vast majority of participants in MSEP reported that their participation in the program had positive effects on their capacities to become effectively involved in their children's education. All MSEP participants completed post tests before departing from the program on the last day of their session; they discussed their reactions to the program with MSEP staff (who took extensive field notes), and a subset of completers were interviewed following the completion of the workshop phase of the project. Across all data collection methods (posttest surveys, informal observations and discussions, and follow-up interviews), the research team learned that parents were affected positively and deeply by MSEP's program. They gained invaluable information that previously they did not have or if they were exposed to it, they did not understand (e.g., the course selection process).

Furthermore, some parents were moved to tears of anger that the school system had not effectively communicated this vital information to them. Posttest surveys indicated that the preponderance of parents learned new information, were likely to use it in their own interactions with school staff, and were likely to share it with friends. Parents also indicated that MSEP developed their skills of directly asking school officials for information, or asserting their legal rights as parents to request certain course-level placements.

The subsample of participants who agreed to a follow up interview consisted of parents who, like others just described, believed that (1) MSEP had provided them with a set of discrete interpersonal skills for navigating the school bureaucracy, and (2) they learned about the pleasures and importance of science and mathematics for their children in CMS secondary schools. Thus, the parents whose interviews are reported in this study, while self-selected, are similar to all MSEP parents in one crucial dimension: they had a positive experience with the program.

Methods and Procedures

Education and Race in Charlotte

In order to understand the implications of MSEP in the Charlotte community, we summarize the important educational context of Charlotte, NC and consequently the experiences of the parents who live and school their children there. Like most metropolises in the United States, CMS (which includes the city of Charlotte, North Carolina as well as several smaller cities and all unincorporated areas of surrounding Mecklenburg County) is a dynamic and complex system. Emblematic of the New South, the city is economically prosperous and culturally vibrant. It is the national headquarters of Bank of America, a professional football and basketball team, and has a growing multiethnic, well-educated adult population.

Until 1998, CMS was a majority White district.

By December 2005, soon after MSEP's first workshops began,⁴ the student population of CMS had changed dramatically (Mickelson, Smith, & Southworth, 2009). Of the 126,903 students enrolled in the school system in 2005, 43% were African American, 37% White, 12% Hispanic, 4% Asian, and 3% Native American and multiracial. Increasing numbers of schools have more than 75% of students eligible for free or reduced price lunch.

Charlotte is and has been plagued by inequities based in race, ethnicity, and class status that reach into most sectors of the city; including stark differences between private and public schooling, and central city, inner ring suburbs, and outer ring suburbs (Douglas, 1995; Smith, 2004; U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). From roughly 1975 to 2002, the CMS district operated under court orders to desegregate (Smith, 2004; Swann v. Charlotte, 1971). In 2002, the district was declared unitary and subsequently employed a race-neutral residential based pupil assignment plan. However, the neighborhood school-based assignment plan, in conjunction with rapid demographic change in Mecklenburg County and residential segregation, have resulted in rapid resegregation of the district by race and social class (Mickelson, 2003a; Mickelson & Southworth, 2005). Consequently, CMS faces the same academic and social challenges that many other urban school systems face when their schools have concentrated poverty and racially isolated schools.

Follow-up Interviews with MSEP Parent Graduates

The data for this article were gathered from a subset of 14 parents, more fully described below, who were part of a "follow-up" component of MSEP graduates in the MSEP study. Our follow-up interviews had two primary purposes: (1) to ascertain the extent to which parents increased particular knowledge and skills by their participation in MSEP, and (2) to develop in-depth qualitative case-histories of parents to assist MSEP in

understanding issues of particular significance regarding the participation of African Americans in education and schooling. The focus of this article is on parents' beliefs and perceptions about the education system as part of parent participation, in the broader context of social class, race/ ethnicity.⁵

Follow-up interviews with parent graduates of MSEP (HOME and Teen Summit workshops) were conducted in parents' homes and lasted between 1 and 3 hours. Research assistants who had worked with the parents in the workshops contacted them initially by telephone to schedule an interview. Letters and post cards were sent to parents who did not respond to phone calls or who did not have a phone. All family members, especially parents and guardians in the household, were invited to participate in the interview. Interviews were scheduled at a time and location of the parent's choosing. We offered a modest stipend of \$20 to participants. Interviews were tape recorded if the parent consented, and in most instances, interviews were conducted by two research assistants (one to ask questions and the other to take notes or record contextual observations).

Sample

To reiterate, the data for this article derive from a subsample of parents who participated in the MSEP. That is, approximately 100 parents participated in MSEP workshops (either HOME or Teen Summit workshops) during the two years that the workshops were conducted. Of these parents, 77 completed one of the two workshop programs. All 77 graduates were contacted for follow-up interviews. Twenty-five semi-structured interviews were conducted and of these, 14 interviews provided the researchers with data relevant to the questions that guide this article. The findings presented in this article consequently derive from the subsample of 14 interviews among the 25 follow-up interviews the MSEP conducted.

Table 1

Education of Parents (N = 22)

Education	Women	Men
Some High School		1
High School Diploma		2
Some College	5	1
Associates Degree	4	1
Bachelors Degree	3	3
Not Reported	2	

Table 2

Occupations of Parents (N = 22)

Occupation	Women	Men
Bus Driver	1	
Customer Service	1	
Day Care Provider/ Owner	2	
Electrician		1
Federal Government		1
Health System Buyer	1	
Landscaping Company		1
Nursing Assistant	1	
Postal Service Clerk	1	
Real Estate Agent	1	
Sales		1
Secretary/ Administrative Asst.	2	
Airline Sky Cap		1
Stock Clerk		1
Telecommunication Specialist	1	
Transportation		1
Truck Driver		1
Not reported	3	

Tables 1 and 2 present the educational and occupational status of 14 parents and their spouses. Of the 14 parents we interviewed, 12 were women and two were men, 8 were married, and 6 were single parents who were divorced or never married. Because we report on the demographics of spouses who did not participate in the interviews, we report 22 responses under educational status and 22 responses under occupational status. Tables 1 and 2 are integrated into our discussion of findings in which we specifically address the beliefs and attitudes of the parents.

Given our limited sample, we do not assume a correlation of any significance among gender, marital

status, education, or occupation and the categories of beliefs and perceptions we explore in this article. The predominance of mothers (12) over fathers (2) in our interview sample is noteworthy in the context of research that suggests the general tendency for mothers to assume greater responsibility for child rearing activities, including those pertaining to school (Nord, Brimhall, & West 1997; Sui-Chi & Willms, 1996; Suizzo, Robinson, & Pahlke, 2008).

We speculate that the small number of MSEP graduates willing to be interviewed may be related to parents' lifestyle (work schedules that did not permit flexibility), changes of address related to the high

residential mobility of low-income families (16.5% of households in N.C changed residence between 2004-05 compared to the highest mobility status in the nation in Arizona at 21%; US Census Bureau, 2005-2007), and perhaps emotional fatigue associated with participating in extended educational programs such as MSEP. The low response rate for follow-up interviews means our findings are not generalizable to the entire group of parent participants, a weakness we recognize.

Data Analysis

Although we reviewed the nine substantive follow-up questions we asked to investigate what use parents made of workshop content, this article and analysis focus on three questions that tap more generally into beliefs, actions, perceptions, and barriers. In other words, our analysis attempted to uncover parents' fundamental sense of their personal and historical experiences with regard to their child's education, in contrast to the specific influences of their participation in the MSEP workshops. We chose to focus on the more general issues rather than MSEP-specific responses because our interests lie in the more theoretical aspects of parental involvement.

For this article, we use data from an analysis of parent responses to the following three questions:

1. What role should a parent play in their child's education?
2. What role do you play in your child's education?
3. What barriers have you faced that prevent you from participating in your child's education?⁶

Our analysis of the interviews was guided by grounded theory. We analyzed the interview responses to the three questions above by using a content analysis to identify the themes and categories we report here (Bernard, 2002; Maxwell, 1996). Our approach was inductive in that we closely analyzed the interview responses to identify and code emerging themes and categories, rather than being led to them deductively by a set of hypotheses we sought to confirm or theories we sought to explore. Finally, we analyzed the themes and categories in terms of extant theories of parent participation in schooling.

Findings

We divided parents' responses into subcategories based on thoroughness and completeness in relation to the three questions we sought to answer. Although our interest is parents' more general beliefs and perceptions about involvement in education, it became clear that these MSEP graduates' experiences with HOME workshops may have influenced their responses to the three core questions we posed. Their responses, nonetheless, indicate well-developed preexisting beliefs about education, and high levels of motivation and active involvement. Indeed, their very participation in the workshops suggests the a priori nature of their beliefs about parent participation. In addition to self-selecting for the workshops, consider the following points revealed in their responses: their motivation is influenced by their own successes, limitations and struggles in life and education; they are keenly aware of the

connections between educational achievement and their children's future success; they are aware of the social and academic needs of children based not just on variations in personality, but also on social and psychological development for pre-adolescent and adolescent children; and several of them have developed savvy and sophisticated judgment about education in a way that anticipates barriers, overcomes barriers, or refuses to yield to them.

Category I: Parent Beliefs⁷

We begin with parent responses to the question: What role should a parent play in their child's education? Our analysis focuses on three categories of responses: (1) Beliefs about the academic activities a parent should do at home, including social, behavioral, psychological activities; (2) Beliefs about participation at school; and (3) Beliefs about participation in a general, all encompassing way. Few parents limit their involvement to just one of the domains of involvement. Several parents convert the general question of a parent's role to the personalized question of their role. In other instances, parents address both.

Beliefs about the academic activities a parent should do at home. Mrs. Warner has a daughter in 8th grade. She believes her role is to:

[do] homework with [my daughter], stay in touch with teachers, monitor [her] progress, and let 'um [the school] know that I'm involved. We read together and, you know, we try to make sure that she knows that if she has questions, I'm involved and if I can't help her I'll try to get her tutoring.

Ms. Zachary works for the postal service and has a 13-year-old son in 8th grade and a 20-year-old son in college. She is an assertive single parent who always made her voice heard in the workshops. Referring to her 13-year-old son, she said:

I graduated from high school but never finished college cause I went and had my oldest child but I always wanted to go back to school. [My] biggest role is that I know better than anybody else about my child; for math I'mma push him; look in their book bags 2 to 3 times a week; make sure they have their homework; taking them to different events; introducing him to different aspects of life and everything else.

Mrs. Landers is a nursing assistant with a 15-year-old son in 10th grade, a 14-year-old son in 8th grade, a nine-year-old son in 3rd grade, and a five-year-old daughter in pre-K. Her husband has some high school and works as a stock clerk in a department store. Believing in a more measured approach, Mrs. Landers identified her role as:

more like, more so as a teacher. Just make sure they're getting the classes they should. I used to

try to check their homework, but since they got older I try to basically check their grades . . . and encourage them; if they need tutors [I tell them] don't be ashamed. I let them know how important their grades are.

The parents above perhaps epitomize "best practices" of parent involvement although the parents can be categorized as working class based on education and occupation. That is, they emphasize self-awareness, knowledge of child development, and differentiated roles they may need to play as parents to foster the academic success of their child.

Beliefs about participation at school. Mrs. Franklin has a 14-year-old son in 9th grade. She is married, has a BA degree and works as a real estate agent while her husband, who has a 2-year degree, works for the federal government. Her views indicate a blurring of the boundaries between school and home. She said her role is as:

Very supportive. Never negative. [Parents should] make themselves available to the child and also to the school staff and anybody involved in his education; parents should have an open mind and participate, make themselves present in the system so they will know that you are concerned about your children. They (parents) should be ready and willing to do that and that's what I do.

Mrs. Clark embraces the role of parent advocate for her child. She has an 11-year-old daughter in 6th grade and a seven-year-old daughter in 2nd grade. She is married, has a 2-year degree and operates her own childcare center while her husband, who is a high school graduate, drives a truck. She said:

[Parents should play] a major role. More like cheerleaders as well as their advisor, being is because most of the time kids just want somebody to listen to them, someone encouraging them to do the right thing.

Mrs. Clark's and Mrs. Franklin's comments suggest they see themselves as advocates and motivators. This may be based not only on the individual characteristics of their children, but also because of their knowledge and experience regarding the tendency of many African American children to become discouraged and disengaged from schooling (Cousins, 1999; Ogbu, 2008)—a point often made in the MSEP workshops.

Beliefs about participation in a general, all encompassing way. Mrs. Jayson is married, has 3 years of college and works as a telecommunication specialist; her husband has a BA degree and is self-employed in the transportation business. They have a 13-year-old son in 8th

grade and a 10-year-old son in 4th grade. Mrs. Jayson said she believes parents should be involved:

from every aspect. If we leave it up to the average kid, which is probably most kids, they would probably take the easiest classes they can and as few as they can. We gotta be there guiding the ship.

Mr. Peters is married and attended college. His wife is his son's stepmother. Mr. Peters is a skycap for an airline. Peters and his wife have a 15-year-old son in 11th grade and they brought along their son's 15-year-old friend to the workshop. He began his interview by saying simply that a parent's role should be: "Very big. Very big." We believe Mr. Peters' statement, which is about his actions as much as his beliefs, makes a point that would be affirmed by all these parents:

I've been telling him [my son] lately I was a kid once too and didn't have anybody to try and plan for me, so I'm the grown-up, I've got to make sure that you get what you need, not what you want. Later you get what you want when you get to [your] senior [year]. You can relax a little bit 'cause that next year you're going to college. So let's get all these things out of the way now but let me plan it. Personally I want my son to be everything that he can be and I'mma get him there. That's my goal.

Summary

The centerpieces of interviewees' beliefs about a parents' role in their child's education include assertiveness, advocacy, emotional support, encouragement, and motivation. Indeed, parent responses also revealed how they use their own experiences—their successes (college education and self-employment, for example), limitations and struggles (e.g. lack of personal success in education and life)—as a context for their beliefs. They also used their experiences as road maps to guide their children. These findings begin the process of identifying what parents believe about their involvement so that we can couple beliefs with actions for a more complete picture of what parent believe and how they act on their beliefs in terms of parent involvement in education.

Category II: Parent Actions

We now discuss responses to the second question: "What role do you play in your child's education?" From the outset, it is clear that parent responses to the first question overlap considerably with this question. They include responses that address (1) visits to the school in general, availability to the school, and talking to the teachers and administrators; (2) talking to, motivating, and/or monitoring the child in terms of academics and social/ attitudinal/ behavioral actions; and (3) supplementing

the child's schooling with additional social and academic resources.

Visits to the school in general. In her response to the first question, Mrs. Franklin stated that she believed parents should be very supportive, never negative. Continuing this line of thinking, she responded by saying:

...that's what I do. Everybody at West Meck [High School], most of all his teachers, they are very familiar with me cause I'm there. I make myself available to them and they can call me anytime of the day if they have any problems.

Comments from other parents follow along similar lines.

Ms. Marvin is a single parent with 14-year-old son in 8th grade, a 12-year-old daughter in 7th grade, and a 9-year-old son in 3rd grade. She has some college and earns a living as a bus driver.

I talk to teachers. I make sure as a parent that I do stay on top of whatever he's doing. You know...I ask the teachers to also make sure that they call me, you know, if it's a problem and they know... no hesitation whatsoever.

Again, social class status and race may be markers for the types and degrees of parent involvement, but much lies below the surface of such indicators in the case of Mrs. Franklin and Ms. Marvin. Even if these parents did not get involved as they indicate above, they seem to know the importance and effects of being involved, even to the point of facilitating open parent-teacher communication, an important variable in classroom outcomes (Brandon, 2007). The comments continue.

Discussing, motivating, and monitoring the child's academics, attitudes, and actions. Emphasizing the collaborative nature of her actions, which helps her acknowledge her limitations and improve her own education, Mrs. Franklin said:

I learn along with him. When he has homework to do, reading, I ask him to read to me and I sit there and listen. I let him do his work then I go and check it and make sure if he doesn't understand it, and if I can't help him, then I seek help.

Ms. Warner says she does the same thing and more:

I do homework with her. I stay in contact with her teachers via email and also get updates, you know, how she's progressing in school and, we read together and you know, we try to make sure that she knows that if she has questions, I'm involved,

and if, if I can't help her, I try to get her tutoring.

Ms. Delaine identified differences between parental involvement in high school and middle school. She argues for broad involvement in education at both levels. Like many parents in the study, she is a single parent. She has a 2-year degree and works in customer service. Her 15-year-old daughter is in 10th grade, her seven-year-old daughter is in 2nd grade, and her five-year-old daughter is in kindergarten.

I do a little bit of everything. But it changes in middle and high school because they feel a little bit embarrassed about parents being around...see[ing] for yourself what's going on, and share[ing] with your child that you're doing those things. And then after a while that little attitude about "Oh well, I don't want you up there cause it's embarrassing," it kind of changes because they start liking it. I do it all. I'm seeing about, you know, her grades and stuff and she comes back and tells me about things that's going on with people.

The comments above indicate thoughtfulness, lack of isolation, and some of the attributes of social and cultural capital related to successful parent engagement and educational success (Barton et al., 2004; Diamond & Gomez, 2004; Lareau & Horvat, 1999). As we will see, these characteristics supplement and support the use of social and academic resources and activity networks by these parents for the education success of their children.

Supplementing the child's schooling with additional social and academic resources. Many parents specifically emphasized the supplemental aspects of their involvement with their children's education. Ms. Zachary said:

I try to do as much as possible...something that would interest him and things that we wouldn't normally be exposed to. just to have fun...or make it fun."

Mrs. Landers reported:

I try to make sure that I see what they are doing. I check their grades, used to check their homework. Encourage them if they need tutors, don't be ashamed to get a tutor. [I] just try to encourage them about how important their grades are.

And Mrs. Burton described her actions as:

I just try to supplement her education with giving her materials that are a little challenging for her,

with community service projects that we do.

Summary

We see again assertive and active engagement in school, supportive and collaborative engagement at home, and direct and indirect attempts to supplement schooling via constructive activities, learning materials that are fun, and community service—all parts of the “ecologies” of engagement of successful parent involvement (Barton et al., 2004).

Nonetheless, just as the beliefs and life experiences of these parents underlie their fundamental everyday actions on behalf of their children (i.e., engagement with teachers and schools, use of activity networks and related resources, and high levels of motivation and awareness to be involved as parents), their actions support and perhaps reinforce their fundamental beliefs. It is therefore important that we link or distinguish the mutual and disparate roles of beliefs and actions, particularly in the lives of African Americans who claim high degrees of belief in education but have comparatively low educational outcomes (Mapp, 2003; Mickelson, 1990).

Category III: Perceived Barriers to Involvement

This section reports parents’ responses to the question: What barriers have you faced that prevent you from participating in your child’s education?⁸ This third question concerns perceived relationship between parents’ beliefs about involvement and their actions. We found responses fell into four categories: (1) No barriers/ Will not allow any, (2) Work schedules; (3) Single parenting, and (4) School related issues (academic subjects and classroom management).

No barriers/ Will not allow any. Responses in this category suggest parents may have had barriers or problems in the past but they have found ways to overcome them. Asked if she perceived any barriers, Mrs. Franklin said “Not so far.” Similarly Mrs. Burton replied “There aren’t any.” Ms. Gerard elaborated that she found:

None. I can talk to the teachers and principals and they can talk to me, so no problems.

It was common in the workshops for parents to describe distrustful, strained, or non-existent relations with teachers and school administrators. Perhaps Ms. Gerard either anticipated such relations or has experienced them and has worked to resolve them. Nevertheless, Mrs. Jayson’s response to the question about barriers was to say:

None. I won’t allow it to be a barrier. But what would be ideal for me is if I was home when he got home from school, then I know he’s not on the phone, not watching BET (Black Entertainment Television).

This first set of responses perhaps suggests where they look for barriers—being able to talk to teachers and

administrators, child management and supervision. When added to the comments below regarding work schedule, single parenting, and the quality of classroom management, it is safe to say that “not allowing barriers,” (a question of selective perception) as Mrs. Jayson says, or “no barriers so far,” according to Mrs. Franklin, does not preclude their existence.

Work schedule & Single parenting. Three single parents discussed barriers to participating that were related to work schedule and or single parenting. Ms. Delaine said:

I’m a single parent and have to try to get off sometimes and can’t participate with them in some things. But I have my father and mother to help also.

Mrs. Warner said:

I travel for work sometimes so I’m not available to help her with homework and stuff, but my husband tries to pick that up and my next door neighbor owns a tutoring center, so she’s gonna help.

Ms. Zachary, who is a single parent, identified her barrier as her job. She developed an effective strategy to staying involved:

I email teachers and send them notes.

Academics and classroom management. Like many American parents, at times MSEP graduates faced the situation where their own stock of knowledge was insufficient for helping their children with homework. With respect to academics, Mrs. Landers said sometimes her child has academic questions about subjects with which she was not familiar.

But I’ll try to find the answer to them. Basically, like I visited the library and found out they have tutoring and I try to encourage them to go to tutoring and sign them up for stuff like that.

Another parent, Mrs. Clark, said some parts of Algebra were a barrier before she attended Teen Summit:

Now before—whew (signaling the difficulty of it). And he (Brian Williams, the workshop director and instructor) broke it down to the point that I really, really understood that. So I don’t have any problems now.

Mr. Peters described concerns regarding behaviors in his son’s classroom:

We’ve come across some big challenges already and we met them about my son’s performance and one instance in the classroom where they had a

substitute teacher who left the classroom unsupervised and one bigger boy was bullying my son and others by trying to get them to not read their books. But I checked into it, told him [you] have to protect yourself.

Summary

As noted earlier, while parent responses to our interviews suggest they encountered few to any barriers to involvement in their children's education, during MSEP workshops many of the other 80 or so parent participants actually cited numerous barriers to their involvement in schools.

Nonetheless, on their face, the barriers or concerns expressed above seem relatively ordinary and anticipated in the broader spectrum of academic problems African American children and their parents face. And it is highly likely that the overall assertiveness, activeness, and optimism of this set of parents has either limited what they perceive as a barrier, as Mrs. Jayson's response indicates, and or that they have already dealt with perceived barriers. Otherwise, it is noteworthy to recognize the challenges on the time single parents had available to assist their children compared to married couples in which husbands were involved. We also recognize the impact of work schedules. But the fact that parents called upon the support of extended family, neighbors and the resources of community libraries to assist them in meeting the challenges they faced speaks to their supportive networks, lack of social isolation, and available stock of social and cultural capital in the ecology of successful parent involvement.

Discussion

The sociopolitical, socioeconomic and sociocultural contexts of education in the US and in particular in Charlotte, NC are relatively significant in their impact on African Americans students and their parents (McKay et al., 2003; Smith, 2004). African American parents can manage and mediate the effects of these contexts, but they cannot escape them. In what follows we discuss the questions and issues raised in this article, what remains unclear and unanswered, and what might future research and educational practice examine.

We began by presenting the responses of parents to overlapping questions about their beliefs and their actions regarding participation in their child's education. All of the parents involved in the study believed in active involvement and their actions were consistent with their beliefs. They believe involvement should include the classroom, teachers, monitoring progress, reading with their child, and exposing them to different aspects of life, among other things (see similar findings in McKay et al., 2003).

The responses of the 14 parents who participated in the MSEP follow-up interviews also suggest that actions should be (and were) pragmatic and grounded in the realities of their lives and life experiences. Parents recognized the push and pull on children of TV,

developmental issues, the absence of structure, academic support and resources, motivation and other forms of social support and resources. On the other hand, parents appropriated in varying degrees the social and cultural capital they had available to generate resources to manage these circumstances (Barton et al., 2004; Lareau & Horvat, 1999). Parents addressed school relations, acquired academic resources (or planned to) such as tutoring, and engaged social support by enlisting the help of extended family and neighbors. Though these parents differed in the amount of social capital they possessed (married, lower middle class parents compared to single working class parents, for example), they did not appear to vary in willingness to use it. They all held to an ethic of involvement, and exercised the will and motivation to overcome barriers they perceived.

Likewise, the limited evidence we found about the influence of social class standing—for example, parents with less flexible jobs were not able to, in their view, provide adequate supervision for their child—ended up taking us in a different direction probably based on the a priori high level of motivation among parents in our sample (Diamond & Gomez, 2004; Gutman & McLoyd, 2000; Hanafin & Lynch, 2002; Kim, 2002). That is, we found no strong differences in parent perception and involvement based on differences in education and occupation—all of which varied slightly among our parents. Most participants were working class or lower middle class. Indeed, working class single parents were just as likely to be involved, generate resources, and express high levels of motivation as their middle class, college educated counterparts. However, our small self-selected sample limits our generalization on these points beyond our parents.

Parent responses suggest that mothers were more involved than fathers even in married couples. Single mothers did not indicate any involvement on the part of their child's father (Greif, Hrabowski, & Maton, 2000; Nord, Brimhall, & West, 1997; Sui-Chi & Willms, 1996). We found only one case in which parent involvement may have been inhibited by feelings of personal inadequacy (parent did not understand algebra; see Johnson, 2001; Lawson, 2003), but several cases in which parents did not allow inadequacy in resources or their social class status to discourage or limit their involvement in their child's educational endeavors (Diamond & Gomez, 2004; Gutman & McLoyd, 2000; Hanafin & Lynch, 2002; Kim, 2002; Lareau & Horvat, 1999). These findings are consistent with the work of other scholars who report a complex array of critical factors that interact with family structure to influence children's academic achievement (Barbarin et al., 2005; Greif et al., 2000).

Our respondents reported mostly positive relations with their children's schools in as much as they reported being successfully involved and only one school-related problem (a parent reported his son was being bullied in class due to the inadequate supervision of a substitute

teacher). However, we need to situate this relatively positive relationship alongside parent responses that asserted the necessity of being available to the school, having an open mind, and being present to demonstrate concern for one's child. Related research suggests our interviewees' experiences were strikingly at odds with the experiences of many parents of color (Ferguson, 2001; Lareau & Horvat, 1999).

On the whole, our parents were likely to get involved in their child's education even if they felt unwelcomed and that their cultural traditions were not respected (Mapp, 2003). This does not contradict research findings that suggest that connections between African American parents and the educational system tend to be weak (Brandon, 2007; Huang & Mason, 2008). The parents we interviewed demonstrated that they would not let feelings of inadequacy or weak relations with schools stand in their way; they were prepared, nonetheless, to take actions that helped their child succeed. Again, due to the self-selection and size of our sample, these responses cannot be generalized to other African American parents in the population at large nor to other parents who completed our workshops. Still, to move to the next point in the discussion, we cannot minimize the finding that a parent's ethic and will to participate in their children's education "to make success" by trumping barriers whether they are real or merely perceived.

Turning now to the last responses from our parents, we note they perceived or said they experienced no barriers and would not allow any. But they also said that work schedules, being a single parent, lack of familiarity with some academic subject matter and classroom supervision were concerns for them. The key here may be "not allowing barriers," nor feelings of inadequacy or weak relations with schools, stand in their way. Another key may be that their motivation, resources, and past successes in overcoming barriers influenced their overall perception of the existence of barriers in the first place. These are parents whose own truncated educational, occupational and social achievements motivated and equipped them to assist their children to do better.

Conclusion

We completed a two-year university-community collaborative project designed to empower African American parents to become more involved in their adolescent children's math and science course selections and placements. We collected a subsample of data from interviews with 14 parents who graduated from MSEP's HOME or Teen Summit workshops. The interviews revealed that (a) parents see a need to be actively involved; (b) try to be involved although they face barriers; (c) barriers occur in terms of parents' own resources such as available time to assist their children, support from a spouse or partner, and in terms of school relations; and (d) parents anticipate barriers but respond creatively to them. The bottom line is that these parents believed they were

responsible for "making success" in the educational careers of their children.

Parents were highly motivated and aware of the various factors interacting in their children's lives; they were involved at home and at school; they took into consideration numerous ways of being involved, from providing pep talks to tutoring to more structure at home; parents anticipated obstacles to their participation and acted successfully to address them, and they were not deterred by obstacles and therefore perhaps did not consider them barriers in the traditional sense of the word. In sum, parents acted and felt the need to make success where success did not exist or where success was threatened.

Our workshops and interviews confirmed what we believe are the empowering and self-affirming effects on parents of being creatively and progressively involved in their child's education (Barton et al., 2004). Indeed, this is understandable for parents whose belief systems tie their own success to their children's success, despite the social, psychological, and emotional vulnerability and risk a parent and child may be exposed to by these sensitive interdependencies.

Still, although our findings confirmed the overall importance of parent involvement in education, they are limited in their generalizability because of the unique sample we interviewed. For these reasons, our findings are more suggestive than definitive.

Moreover, our findings should be examined in the context of research involving a larger sample of African American and non-African American parents. Such research, qualitative or quantitative, can pursue the questions we asked and explore the outcomes in terms of relationships among parents' race and ethnicity, social class, gender, social and cultural capital, parent-school relations and the existence and perception of barriers.

As one example, our sample of parents leans toward working- to lower middle class status, with class status defined in terms of education and occupation (Diamond & Gomez, 2004; McGrath & Kuriloff, 1999; Rowan-Kenyon, Bell, & Perna, 2008). Implicit in our findings are similarities among the characteristics of parent involvement of middle-class African American parents and our sample, as well as middle-class white parents and our sample: high levels of motivation; assertiveness in relations with schools; proactive and assertive in a child's school

activities at home, and the like. These class distinctions are important to highlight when examining the effects of race and ethnicity on academic performance (Crozier, 2001).

Nonetheless, in the realm of educational policy and practice, it would serve us well to know if our findings are an anomaly or, instead, representative of an incipient trend among African American parents. If it is the latter, then educational and social policy and practice should capitalize on these findings for the betterment of schools, families, and society at large.

In conclusion, we must continue to shape the affirming and empowering role of parent involvement into questions to be researched and findings to be translated into policy and practice. We believe our study operates within this framework and the MSEP was our attempt to translate this ethic into practice. MSEP was based on research which suggested that African American parents are as engaged in their child's schooling as comparable white parents when they have access to school officials, information about their child's curriculum, and when they feel invited to engage in their child's school and capable of doing so. The findings in this article point in a similar direction.

¹African American and Black are used interchangeably throughout the article.

²For a comprehensive case study of African American parent involvement, see Tough's (2008) analysis of Geoffrey Canada's project in Harlem, NY. Tough describes the connections between parent involvement and a child's schooling outcomes, the challenges of getting parents involved, the types of involvement parents may be expected to practice in urban environments with high rates of poverty, crime, and single parents, and also the conviction of parents and educators that education be provided to all children.

³After the first year, the six week HOME Workshops were reconfigured and condensed into a two-week version renamed Teen Summit. See (Mickelson, Cousins, Williams & Velasco, 2011) for details.

⁴Our description of CMS focuses on the years 2002-2005 during when MSEP was implemented.

⁵In addition to these primary purposes, we hoped the interviews would reinforce, sustain, and expand the knowledge, skills and strategies parents developed in the workshops, and support their efforts to build and sustain networks.

⁶In hindsight, if asked differently (What barriers have you faced in participating in your child's education? versus what we asked, "What barriers have you faced that prevent you from participating in your child's education?"), parent responses may have included just as many barriers as they presented in the workshops.

⁷Pseudonyms are used for all parents.

⁸See Note 7.

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