# Inner-City African American Parental Involvement in Elementary Schools: Getting Beyond Urban Legends of Apathy

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Parental involvement in schools is a national priority for both educators and researchers to promote the successful schooling of contemporary youth. Contemporary parental involvement research has produced some promising findings, but parental involvement efforts with inner-city African Americans are currently limited by problems of research methodology and program foci. Certain research studies do, however, demonstrate that inner-city African American parents have responded positively to parental involvement programs that emphasize themes of empowerment, outreach, and indigenous resources. Based on these three promising themes, the authors propose practical strategies for increasing inner-city African American parental involvement as a means of increasing parental participation and school success among inner-city African American families.

## PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN SCHOOLS: A NATIONAL PRIORITY

Urban school reform efforts coupled with major federal legislation such as the Goals 2000: Educate America Act (1994) and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (2001) have elevated parental involvement in schools to a national priority (Baker, Kesslar-Sklar, Piotrowski, & Parker, 1999; Baker & Soden, 1997). Studies have shown that parental involvement in schools increases the successful academic and behavioral performance of their children in schools

(Henderson & Berla, 1994). In particular, strong parental involvement is positively associated with a child's readiness and success in school, school attendance, positive attitudes toward education, and entry into post-secondary education (Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Henderson & Berla, 1994; Reynolds, Weissberg, & Kasprow, 1992; Stevenson & Baker, 1987; Zellman & Waterman, 1998). Despite limitations in the existing research, parental involvement is currently considered a promising approach for increasing children's successful school performance.

The purpose of this paper is to offer practical strategies for increasing parental involvement in schools with inner-city African American parents. We begin with a review of the existing research on parental involvement, including those interventions involving inner-city African American parents, followed by evidence illustrating how parental involvement efforts by inner-city African Americans may be constrained by providers' perceptions of apathy, and even antagonism, from these parents. Finally, we identify key themes and studies in the literature that illustrate promising practical strategies for increasing parental involvement among inner-city African Americans as well as future areas for research.

## CLASHING CONSTRUCTS IN CONTEMPORARY RESEARCH

Despite the general consensus on its importance, research examining parental involvement in schools has been burdened by conflicting definitions, goals, and methods (Baker & Soden, 1997). In their critical review, Baker and Soden contended that the construct of "parental involvement" has differing definitions across empirical studies that can be categorized into four broad groups. One group of researchers focused on attitudinal components of parental involvement such as parent aspirations for (Soto, 1988, 1989) or expectations of (Crystal, Chen, Fuligni, & Stevenson, 1994; Thompson, Entwisle, Alexander, & Sundias, 1992) their children. A second group of focused on behavioral components of parental involvement such as parental assistance with homework or parental attendance at parent-teacher conferences (Lareau, 1996; Stevenson & Baker, 1987). A third group of researchers focused on general parenting style (Dornbusch, 1991; Dornbusch, Ritter, Leiderman, Roberts, & Fraleigh, 1987) or parent-child interactions (Vickers, 1994). In addition to these three groups, there is a fourth group of researchers who failed to operationalize parental involvement (Keith & Lichtman, 1992). Baker and Soden (1997) concluded that the idiosyncratic definitions and measurement of parental involvement preclude full assessment of the cumulative knowledge of parental involvement. Due to this absence of a consensus definition, this paper employs an inclusive notion of "parental involvement" which consists of any parental attitudes, behaviors, styles, or activities that occur within or outside the school setting to support children's academic and/or behavioral success in their currently enrolled school.

## Contemporary Parental Involvement Research

The limited number of empirical studies on parental involvement with inner-city African Americans is indicative of the relative dearth of rigorous research on parental involvement as a whole. For example, Baker and Soden (1997) reviewed over 200 evaluation studies of parental involvement interventions. Although their analysis confirmed that 145 of these articles could be considered to be somewhat empirical in nature, strong empirical evidence on parental involvement was relatively scarce. The vast majority of these parental involvement evaluation studies consisted of correlational research (71%) with only 2.7% of these studies being true experimental research. Moreover, very few empirical studies have been specifically conducted with inner-city African American parents.

Recent efforts have affirmed Baker and Soden's call for more stringent empirical research on parental involvement. Mattingly, Prislin, McKenzie, Rodriguez, and Kayzar (2002) conducted a meta-analysis of 41 evaluation studies of parental involvement interventions to assess the widespread belief that parental involvement is an effective means of improving student scholastic outcomes. In addition to criticizing the sparse and inconsistent reporting of program data, Mattingly and colleagues reported that available data on the design, methodology, and analysis of parental involvement programs reveals merely modest empirical evidence to support prevailing beliefs that these programs are effective.

Mattingly and colleagues also pointed out that it is difficult to conclude which populations and subgroups are responsive to specific individual strategies or multi-method interventions because few programs report demographic data. For example, 53% of the studies in their literature review reported one or less demographic variables. Of those studies that were conducted with non-White populations, the pooling of diverse ethnic groups (e.g., African American, Latino American, Asian American, and Native American) into one category may have blurred important distinctions in characteristics and responses both among and within each group. Mattingly and colleagues concluded that these knowledge gaps in parental involvement should be addressed by increasing research rigor rather than dismissing the utility of parental involvement. Moreover, an increased research rigor should be tailored to the particular needs of specific children and families to maximize program benefits.

## INNER-CITY AFRICAN AMERICAN PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

Recent studies underscore the apparent importance and influence of parents on the successful academic and behavioral development of inner-city African American children from elementary school through high school (Halle, Kurtz-Costes & Mahoney, 1997; Marcon, 1999; Miliotis, Sesma, & Masten, 1999; Reynolds, et al., 1999; Vondra, 1999). These studies illustrate some positive pre-

liminary results of parental involvement efforts with inner-city African American parents. For example, inner-city African American parents who evidenced higher rates of participation in parent-teacher conferences, home visits by teachers, extended class visits by parents (beyond dropping off or picking up their child), and parental help with class activity had pre-school children who evidenced improved adaptive behaviors and basic school skills (Marcon, 1999). In addition, inner-city African American parents who maintained positive parental beliefs about their children's abilities as well as active parental behaviors to support their children's achievement (e.g., talking to children at home about school, providing reading books at home, etc.) had elementary school age children who achieved positive outcomes in reading and math (Halle et al., 1997). Finally, longitudinal research from pre-school to high school revealed that inner-city African American parents who provided support and motivation for their children often had children who attained successful academic performance and classroom teacher relationships (Vondra, 1999).

Despite the importance of their children's successful schooling, inner-city African American parents generally evidence patterns of low school involvement (Desimone, 1999; Ford, 1995; Ford & Webb, 1994). For example, Desimone analyzed parent and student surveys from the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 and found that African American parents reported lower overall rates of parental involvement across a range of different activities in comparison to their European American counterparts. Moreover, these low reported rates of inner-city African American parental involvement persisted even in selected cases where their children were classified as academically gifted (Ford, 1995; Ford & Webb, 1994). These results suggest that inner-city African American parents may be disinterested in (and possibly hostile to) their children's educational success. Consequently, an "urban legend" of apathy has emerged among disappointed and often frustrated researchers and professionals that inner-city African American parental involvement is an extremely difficult, or even impossible, task.

## Promising Types of Parental Involvement: Beyond "Urban Legends"

Emergent findings suggest that several approaches can be effective in increasing parental involvement among inner-city African American families (DeMoss & Vaughn, 2000; Gutman & Midgley, 2000; Reynolds, Mavrogenes, Bezruczko, & Hagemann, 1996). First, broader frameworks may be necessary to accurately detect and depict inner-city African American parental involvement. For example, DeMoss and Vaughn conducted a phenomenological study of 26 "actively involved" African American parents who participated in school-related activities. The involved parents participated in multiple ways in their own and other children's lives both inside and outside schools (e.g., attending events, monitoring homework, etc.). The researchers concluded that involved parents in predominantly inner-city African American communities have more frequent rates and

diverse types of participation than are commonly detected by or portrayed in the mainstream research.

Increased collaboration among parents and professionals may maximize inner-city African American parental involvement (Cornille, Pestle, & Vanwy, 1999; Geenen, Powers, & Lopes-Vasquez, 2001; Harry, Allen, & McLaughlin, 1995; Lareau, 1996). A longitudinal investigation of inner-city African American parental involvement in special education contradicted initial predictions of low participation (Harry et al., 1995). Contrary to expectations, African American parents in this study made consistent initial efforts to support their children's schooling. Over time, however, school-imposed limitations and barriers to parental participation frustrated these parents and reduced their rates of parental involvement in school. For example, meeting content did not reflect parent concerns, and school personnel were perceived as insensitive and condescending by parents. Thus, inner-city African American parents may be more inclined toward ongoing participation in inclusive parental involvement programs which emphasize contextually-relevant and collaborative approaches toward supporting their children's school success.

## STRATEGIES

Three strategies show promise for increasing the parental involvement of inner-city African American parents: (1) empowerment (Lewis, 1992; Goodson, Swartz, & Millsap, 1991); (2) outreach (Fantuzzo, Davis, & Ginsburg, 1995), and (3) indigenous resources (Floyd & Floyd, 1998). Although rigorous empirical research is required to examine the efficacy of each of these strategies, together they offer a promising foundation for future success with inner-city African American parental involvement. In particular, these strategies summarize the six types of programs identified by Baker and Soden (1997) and place them in the historical and social context of the family. *Empowerment* is defined as approaches that offer parents training or skills that allow them to be more involved in their children's education. *Outreach* is making services more accessible by programs designed to meet parents "where they are" in familiar and comfortable settings in their communities (e.g., beyond school walls in home visits, youth centers, etc.). Finally, *indigenous resources* refer to programs that use existing parent-oriented supports within the family and community settings (e.g., extended family, parent support groups, etc.).

### Empowerment

Mental health interventions aimed at increasing inner-city African American parental involvement often emphasize empowerment through collaboration between parents and service providers (Bell, 1989; Cronin, 1998; Trickett, 1991; Washington, 1985). Empowerment helps individuals to overcome the multiple

obstacles faced by inner-city African American parents including low socioeconomic status and single, young parent stressors (Lewis, 1992). Specifically, parents can be empowered by: a) learning supplemental parental skills; b) utilizing service providers who are sensitive to parental literacy levels; and c) accessing programs that are flexible in serving parental needs (Goodson et al., 1991). Other programs can empower parents by fostering new friendships and social supports while improving parental skills including reading and verbal expression (Hahn & Rado, 1996; Simoni & Adelman, 1993). These methods provide support for parents to increase their participation in their children's education.

Parental involvement programs that promote empowerment acknowledge the strengths of and build rapport with historically disenfranchised inner-city African American parents (Slaughter & Kuehne, 1988). Inner-city parental involvement interventions that promote empowerment have emphasized collaboration between service providers and parents by: (1) training parents for the school readiness of their children and training teachers about concerns, needs, and problems facing inner-city parents (Floyd & Floyd, 1998; Gamer & Mastaby, 1994); (2) preserving home-school relationships by keeping children with the same teacher from kindergarten through 2nd grade (Hampton, Mumford, & Bond, 1998); and (3) providing integrated school-based mental health services that support family needs such as parent-led mutual support groups on community topics such as death, molestation, violence, drugs, safety, and emotional control (Evans & Carter, 1997; Zetlin, Ramos, & Valdez, 1996). In particular, school-based social support groups have been proposed as a promising alternative model for engaging African American parents because they can engender empowerment orientation, motivate educational involvement, reduce institutional alienation, and establish culturally sensitive norms (Calabrese, 1990; Hahn & Rado, 1996; Simoni & Adelman, 1993).

## Outreach

Recent mental health studies have confirmed the effectiveness of parental involvement interventions that include active school outreach (Atkins, Adil, Jackson, McKay, & Bell, 2001; Atkins et al., 1998; Desimone, Finn-Stevenson, & Henrich, 2000). One form of outreach identified as particularly useful is home-based support. Classroom interventions with African American parents that featured home-based reading activities have been positively associated with increases in children's early literacy success (Leslie & Allen, 1999) and parents' educational interest (Hara & Burke, 1998). Several studies have found that outreach which combines home-based parental involvement with school-based interventions is more effective than school-only approaches in promoting students' school success. For example, Heller and Fantuzzo (1993) found that students who received both the parental involvement and reciprocal peer tutoring interventions achieved higher math scores than students in either the "reciprocal peer tutoring only" or control conditions. In addition, Fantuzzo et al. (1995) found that students who received home-based parental involvement (either in isolation

or in combination with school-based reciprocal peer tutoring) attained higher social confidence and mathematical achievement than students who received school-based reciprocal peer tutoring alone.

Another recent program combining school-based and home-based components that has promising preliminary findings is the Positive Attitudes for Learning (PALS) program (Atkins et al., 2001). PALS uses organizational outreach to parents and family members in an effort to increase parental involvement in the educational process. Parents are enlisted as partners with teachers and mental health professionals in educational and mental health interventions to improve students' academic and behavioral performance. Preliminary results suggest that outreach efforts in homes and community agencies have had a positive impact on children's educational performance. Thus, inner-city parental involvement interventions that have an outreach component may increase engagement and effectiveness by linking specific home-based activities with active school-based interventions to achieve specific scholastic objectives.

These types of combined school-home approaches also offer broader roles to parents for developing personal skills and advancing school reform. For example, some combined parental involvement programs stress home-based reading while offering additional parental involvement opportunities such (e.g., after-school programs, home visits, adult literacy events, and field trips which increase children's literacy) (Leslie & Allen, 1999). These types of combined school-home approaches are highly rated by parents for their comprehensive framework and skill development (Landerholm, 1998).

African American parents have responded favorably to parental involvement programs whose combined school-home approach is integrated into a comprehensive urban education model. For example, the Cozi school-wide reform model (Desimone et al., 2000) has four major components: (a) a comprehensive system of school management that coordinates parent and student services; (b) a collaborative parental involvement approach that partners with parents in developing and organizing activities; (c) a child care component that enables parents with small children to attend parent activities; and (d) home visitation that accesses parents who have difficulty attending on-site parent activities. When compared to traditional parental involvement programs in inner-city schools, Cozi schools produced significantly higher levels of parental involvement and positive school climate. The outreach component of the program (e.g., collaborative parental involvement and home visitation) was particularly responsible for the high levels of parental involvement. Consequently, parental involvement models that adopt broad-based outreach strategies for African American parent participation may be viable approaches for inner-city settings.

## Indigenous Resources

Inner-city African American families and communities have indigenous skills and strengths that can be helpful in the education of inner-city African American elementary school students. The identification of these indigenous resources in

the target family and local community is a key in the collaborative process that affirms the value of the child and family. Moreover, these indigenous skills and strengths are available to support and sustain interventions beyond limitations of external programs because they do not struggle with such barriers as time limits of reform initiatives, funding limits of research grants, or personnel limits of staff turnover.

An example of a parental involvement program that taps indigenous resources is the Joining Hands Parental Involvement Program (Floyd & Floyd, 1998). The Joining Hands program attempted to improve parental involvement in inner-city African American children's education by using indigenous resources within the family and community. Parents participated in training for reading readiness programs; improving reading skills; and supporting homework, social skills, and home/school schedules. The training sessions took place in community centers where the parents were already accustomed to attending other activities like GED classes. Program staff suggested that the success of their program was partially due to the use of existing resources within the community that allowed parents to access additional community services such as child care and transportation. Staff also emphasized the need to use nontraditional indigenous resources to improve parental involvement such as "welcome" parties to engage parents at the beginning of the year, and pizza parties for families immediately after parent meetings to increase attendance.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Parental involvement in schools is a national priority for both educators and researchers to promote the successful schooling of contemporary youth. Parental involvement efforts with inner-city African Americans are currently hampered by problems of research methodology (e.g., lack of consensus definition and operationalization) and program foci (e.g., conceptualization, communication, and collaboration). Still, there is emerging evidence that inner-city African American parents may respond positively to parental involvement programs that emphasize themes of empowerment, outreach, and indigenous resources. With the proper empirical examination and development, these three strategies may contribute toward producing successful parental involvement programs for inner-city African American parents.

Future research should build on promising strategies to increase parental involvement of inner-city African American parents. Such research may include:

1. Strengthening standards for the design and methodology of parental involvement programs by operationalizing and empirically validating definitions of parental involvement; systematically documenting and reporting demographic characteristics of participating parent populations; and identifying and refining strategies that work best with inner-city African American parents.

2. Tailoring interventions to the needs and obstacles of specific parent populations including inner-city African Americans by exploring the role of culture and context in designing contextually relevant interventions, and confirming which intervention strategies work with which subgroups of inner-city African American parents, such as single mothers with single or multiple children, parents who are employed or unemployed, grandparents who are middle aged or elderly, or foster parents or other types of legal guardians.

3. Determining implications of parental involvement research for additional inner-city ethnic and linguistic minority populations such as Latinos and non-urban populations such as African Americans in suburban settings; and for additional age groups such as parents of an inner-city minority high school where adolescents' developmental differences may require changing parental roles, program objectives, and outreach strategies.

These and other future efforts in parental involvement research will likely contribute to the development of effective parental involvement programs which will improve the school success and mental health of inner-city African American children and their families.

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